

On Moral Understanding

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Abstract

I provide an explanation of moral understanding. I begin by describing decisions, especially moral ones. I detail ways in which deviations from an ideal of decision-making occur. I link deviations to characteristic critical judgments, e.g. being cavalier, banal, courageous, etc. Moral judgments are among these and carry a particular personal gravity. The question I entertain in following chapters is: how do they carry this gravity?

In answering the question, I try “external” accounts of moral understanding. I distinguish between the ideas of a person and a life. The idea of a life essayed is of a network of relations to others. The character of those relations, e.g. friendship, is the object of our understanding of ourselves and our lives. I argue that one’s understanding of oneself conditions the context of decision-making. I elaborate one way of making moral understanding answerable to truth using Plato’s metaphysics in the *Philebus*. Truth is valued and truth is essential to the independence of the moral such that seeming right and being right are distinct. However, truth is neither primary nor exhaustive of morality, because we have additional distinct resources for morally judging others.

I turn instead to an “internal” account of moral understanding to answer the question regarding the personal gravity of moral criticism. Using Winch’s work on universalizability and fellowship, I argue that our conception of others must be sufficient to reflect their individuality within our moral understanding. Second, using Gaita’s work on remorse and the lucidity of self-reflection, I argue that the truth about ourselves and the wrong we do others can arrest and constrain our moral understanding and our authority.

Moral understanding operates in a social milieu: argument, conversation and rationality. Arguments are grounded in meanings with primary (shared) sense, but solicit agreement in secondary sense—of what is similar, of what follows. Meaning in the secondary sense can be necessarily practical, creating practical necessities within points of view.

Accounting for the consequences and understanding of disagreement is identified as pressing. An original contribution is the idea of critical authority. One’s articulation of moral meaning is controlled via the critical authority expressed using critical vocabulary. Accepting another’s critical authority is based, in differing domains, on our relation to them, e.g. friendship, trust, fellowship. The nature of inter-personal relations are delimited by the critical authority characteristic of those relations. Critical authority explains the independent and personal force of moral criticism.

To be intelligible depends on accepting some critical authorities, though I allow for the intelligible repudiation of morality in some circumstances. Wronging someone is explained as denying his critical authority, thus denying his relation to oneself, and thereby undermining his place in the moral world. The consequence of wrongdoing is the disintegration of the moral world.

I defend against Nagel’s realism and Korsgaard’s constructivism. Both are committed to judging individuals but their accounts of morality undermine the intelligibility of the personal gravity of moral criticism. Developing the idea of Moral Consensus, I defend myself against the related charge of relativism.

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For my mother and father

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1 Introduction

It is impossible, because all things are interrelated. I can hardly open my mouth to speak without feeling as though the sea burst its dams and overflowed. How then shall I express what my soul has received? How can I set it down in a book?

ISAAC LURIA

1.1 What is the question?

What is the nature of our understanding of moral situations and the criticisms we make concerning our responses to them? Why, with that understanding, do we understand some situations as moral and some not? Why does correctly understanding moral questions occur in us as such a strong motive? Why do we criticize¹ other people when they get it wrong? I aim to give complete though skeletal answers to these questions. Collectively, they amount to a description of our understanding of morality and moral phenomena.

I have sought, particularly in these opening remarks, maximal clarity in stating the extent of my answers and the methods by which I have arrived at them. In respect of the first, I have sought clarity of a different sort throughout. I have tried to minimize intangible abstraction by the introduction of examples drawn from my imagination, my experience, literature, history and art.

1.2 What is the answer?

In one sentence, the answer I offer is that moral understanding is one's understanding of another's proper claims on one. One understands a situation as moral to the extent that it involves one's relations to others. Criticisms of one's responses to moral situations depend for their significance—their meaning—on how those responses emerge from fidelity or infidelity to shared conceptions of inter-personal relationships.

¹I shall use American spelling throughout.

This answer is illuminating insofar as it renders certain common ideas regarding moral understanding as *derivatives* of this focus on relationships. Moral understanding is not essentially constituted by one's understanding of human flourishing. It is not essentially constituted by one's understanding of why one state of affairs is better or preferable to another. It is not essentially exhausted by or grounded in our more general reasoning capacity or knowledge—or universal laws, if there are such. Finally, one's moral understanding is not essentially constituted by one's knowledge of how to maximize social accord.²

Diminished or deformed moral understanding has the consequence of diminishing the life that we can share with others. It results in the dissolution of our relations and thus much of the possibilities for life. This is why the understanding I describe deserves to be called moral understanding.

We are, in our nature, aware of our community with others. On a person-by-person basis, we both maintain our relations with people and discover people's effects on us through our awareness of them. A proclivity to attachment—brute or intentional—is the motive force of our moral understanding. The void opened between people by wrongs is filled by the harmonizing effects of proper criticism. When motivation is undistorted by emotions in their pathological mode, criticism of others closes the gaps between us, quickening community. No amount of effort guarantees success. Tragedy cannot be banished.

Therefore the moral life is best characterized *immediately* as attending to others in their relation to oneself, and *reflectively* as attending to negotiating the content of one's relations and inter-personal relations generally.³ I mean 'negotiating' as both agreeing and finding possible ways through. What is negotiated is what I think we should call human or moral reality. It is to the features of that reality that the cognitive modes or categories in what we call moral thinking are directed.

²These views can be found in works famous or current. Accounts of human flourishing are found in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) and Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Consequentialism is given a most plausible exposition in Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World: A Rule-Consequentialist Theory of Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). The practical reason view is found in Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*, edited by Mary Gregor, trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and J. David Velleman, *The possibility of practical reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). Indirectly, the social accord view is pressed in J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: inventing right and wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977). Nor is morality to be understood by reference to rights, natural or otherwise, a view obliquely developed in Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, state, and utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974).

³My account does not acknowledge duties to oneself. See §9.4.

1.3 How does it say it? What kind of answer is it?

My remarks above may suggest a prescriptive dimension. The form of my account is not a prescription, though accepting it would have practical consequences. Rather the account of moral understanding to follow is a *description*. I offer arguments and demonstrations of why I think it is a correct description and a preferable explanation.

Unlike those who attempt a wholesale theoretical elimination of (first order) moral phenomena while simultaneously seeking to preserve them as reconstituted simulacra,⁴ I try to practice throughout what I preach in chapter 7. There, I provide an extended elaboration of the methods and aims of discussion and argument. I say that the aim of a discussion is not in the first instance the exchange of reasons, but rather the elaboration of a point of view by whose internal logic one is moved to accept what is said—including “taking *this* (thing) as *that* (sort)” and acknowledging “the (narrative) logic” as correct. That is the kind of argument I offer in favor of my account, rather than the demolition of rival accounts. Of course, I make extensive reference to other philosophers’ work, particularly since my account originates in the *constructive* exegesis of work by Winch, Gaita, Diamond, Cavell, and Plato; as well as constructive arguments against accounts from Korsgaard and Nagel.

To an extent then, some of what I say, particularly the terms I use, is a stipulation that *this* term shall refer to *that* phenomenon. The referents of the terms are indicated by the examples I use as demonstrations. Philosophers aim for clarity of expression. Sometimes in untangling our concepts and use of language, the borders cannot be uncovered because they are not-determined. Instead, they must be defined. The test of the validity of those stipulations is their practical consequences for our understanding, concepts, conceptions, and language. In this sense, the description I offer, if right, can refine the lives we share with—and because of—language.

So, this account has a practical dimension. It has been a condition on the form of the account that it be applicable to certain practical and non-academic activities which I will enumerate shortly as assumptions in my arguments. One immediate consequence has been that I have not often sought to undermine other accounts. Instead I have built up

⁴I have in mind Mackie, *Ethics, op. cit.* and Gilbert Harman, *The nature of morality : an introduction to ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), both of whom argue that moral practices are irremediably compromised, yet offer new grounds for those same practices.

the positive considerations in favor of mine. I do not have an argument for why the questions I began with are worthy. I think they are. I offer examples whose presumed appeal suggest that others think so too. My work suggests the point of view within which these questions are worthy. I cannot of course make explicit the motive for adopting *that* point of view without risking a certain regress. The account should speak for itself.

For this reason, the use of examples is important for revealing how language use—broadly construed—may evince our moral understanding. Rarely in our actual confrontations of each other and moral phenomena do we use philosophers' terms of art such as 'agent' or 'utility'. This is not merely a matter of philosophers' subject matter. As it happens, setting cats alight is not common and is even less often disputed morally.

Moral discussions—one of the principal moral data—outside of philosophy often have the character of dialog.⁵ Even when we reflect, our internal dialog is no less rich than our inter-personal dialog. If that is right, then it is plausible that our internal deliberations too are carried out, i.e. understood, in ordinary language. If that too is right, then what we *say* is expressive of the understanding by which we decide moral questions. It is the primary, though not only, reason that my study proceeds from language use.

Some of the theoretician's questions and answers suggest themselves: What is morality? In what does it consist? How does it persist? On what does its subsistence depend? Briefly, morality consists in the linguistic practices (broadly construed) associated with the critical vocabulary applicable to relationships. It persists through the ongoing collective determination of the nature of inter-personal relationships. It depends for its subsistence on the possibility of inter-personal relations. These answers are only suggestive of what my account of moral understanding implies for moral theory-building. I have not defended them at length.

I said that morality consists in linguistic practices. Linguistic practice must be broadly conceived as communicative conventions that include both pragmatics and unspoken communication by gesture.⁶ Cora Diamond describes the range of moral language:

Whole sentences, stories, images, the idea we have of a person, words, rules: anything made of the resources of ordinary language may be brought into such a relation to our lives and actions and understanding of the world that

⁵I consider two detailed examples in chapters 7 and 8.

⁶On the other hand, I would not want to suggest any theoretical link to the "discourse ethics" of Karl-Otto Apel or the ethical dimensions of communication theory of Jurgen Habermas, or anyone else in the Frankfurt School.

we might think of the thinking in that connection as ‘moral’. There is no limit to be set.⁷

A detailed example may make the range clear. As language use or linguistic practice is the primary data of my investigation it is vital to have a clear picture of it. In this extract from Ingmar Bergman’s film, *Through A Glass Darkly*, Karin is gradually going insane from an incurable illness.⁸ David is her father, a successful writer. Martin is her husband. David and Martin have just finished eating lunch on their small boat. Neither says a word.

David: What’s up?

Martin: What d’you mean?

D: You don’t say anything. You seem almost hostile.

M: Maybe there’s no point in talking to you about it. I don’t know.

D: Please do.

M: It’s about Karin.

D: Karin. Well?

M: She’s been poking around in your desk and came across your diary. Of course she read . . .

D: No. *(Pause)* Oh my God.

M: What did you write?

D: Oh my God.

M: Karin wanted me to ask you.

D: I wrote that her illness is hopeless. I also wrote that I feel a terrible impulse to observe its development.

(Martin stares at David. His face is twisted with disgust. David has gone slack, passes one hand across his knee, over and over again.)

D: I haven’t any excuse. Can’t defend myself.

M: It’s always ‘you’ and ‘yours’.

(David shakes his head.)

M: You’re absolutely perverted in your frigid lack of feeling. ‘Observe its development’. That’s significant.

D: You don’t understand.

M: No, I certainly don’t. But one thing I do understand: you’re chasing subjects [for writing]. Your own daughter’s illness. Bloody hell, what a fine idea!

D: I love her, Martin.

M: You—love! In your emptiness there’s no room for feelings, and as for any sense of decency, you haven’t got it. You know how everything should be expressed. At every moment you have the right word. There’s only one phenomenon you haven’t an inkling of: life itself.

⁷Cora Diamond, ‘Wittgenstein, mathematics and ethics: Resisting the attractions of realism’, in: Hans Sluga and David Stern, editors, *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 248.

⁸Ingmar Bergman, ‘Through A Glass Darkly’ (1961).

(David looks at Martin.)

M: You're cowardly and sloppy, but on one point you're almost a genius. At explaining things away and apologizing.

D: What d'you want me to do?

M: Write your book! Maybe it'll give you what you long for more than anything else: a name as an author. Then your daughter won't have been sacrificed in vain. I can . . . I should . . .

(He checks himself and bites his lip. David looks at him. David's face has fallen in, his hand still goes moving restlessly.)

D: No, say what you're thinking.

M: You've got a God you flirt with in your novels, but I can tell you, both your faith and your doubt are equally unconvincing. What strikes one most is your monstrous inventiveness.

D: Don't you think I know?

M: Well, then. Why go on? Why don't you do something respectable for a living?

D: What could I do?

M: Have you ever written so much as one true word in any of your books? Reply if you can.

D: I don't know.

M: There! But the worst of it is your lies are so refined they resemble truth.

D: I do my best.

M: Maybe. But you never succeed.

D: I know.

M: You're empty and clever and now you think you'll fill your emptiness with Karin's extinction. The only thing I don't understand is how you fancy you can mix God up in all this. He must be more inscrutable than ever.

D: Martin, there's just one thing I want to ask you.

M: Go ahead.

D: Can you always control your innermost thoughts?

M: I'm not so complicated, thank God. My world's very simple. But rather clear and human.

D: Even so, several times you've wished Karin was dead.

M: No, absolutely not! Nobody but you would hit on such an idea.

D: Can you swear to me you've never thought such a thought? After all, it would be quite logical. You know her illness is hopeless and you know from your convictions there's no sense in your sufferings. In which case she might as well be dead.

M: You're grotesque.

D: Depends entirely on your point of view.

M: This is a meaningless discussion.⁹

This dialog illustrates a wide range of morally salient linguistic practices. Not talking or hesitating to talk may be significant. The solicitation to talk may be a specifically moral gesture; even, of course, a look of disgust and the exclamation of regret or remorse, “Oh my God.” Notice that there is not one use of ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, ‘irrational’, ‘permissible’ or ‘incorrect’. Rather, the critical terms are: perverted, frigid, emptiness, decency, cowardly, respectable, grotesque, and sloppy. David is accused placing himself before Karin, focusing on himself (“‘you’ and ‘yours’”), using her for his writing, susceptibility to ambition, deciding to observe what he should not and untruthfulness (though not in the sense of lying). Notice again that David has not in a simple sense done anything to Karin. Martin’s criticisms are appropriate whether Karin had read David’s diary or not. All that matters is that David is Karin’s father. Criticisms are made, excuses or exculpations are offered and rejected. Notably, sometimes even the impulse to explain is rejected as ‘monstrous’. Martin hesitates in some criticism wondering at his place to do so and its point. The conversation does have arguments with premises and logical conclusions. But the goal is to convey a point of view, not a conclusion as such. And one literal conclusion is immediately dismissed, irrespective of its logic, just because it is, for Martin, unthinkable. The conversation ends when meaning has gone dead. A gap opens between David and Martin in which there is no scope for *both* to continue.

Moral understanding then, specifically, *consists* in the ability to employ the critical vocabulary of morality. The evidence of that ability is precisely the ability *both* to conduct and understand critical dialogs about relationships. It is not sufficient only to understand moral dialog. Responding appropriately to the solicitations of others—i.e. engaging or not—is also part of the linguistic practice of criticism.¹⁰

Part of the philosophical illumination of this account lies in the clarification, augmentation or elaboration of various ideas, e.g. decisions, considerations, lives, persons, the will, authority, argument. Furthermore, several themes recur in elaborating the account. These will be familiar to philosophers and include contrasts between the hypothetical and the actual; general and particular; abstract and concrete; universal and individual; or regular-

⁹Drawn from Ingmar Bergman, *A Film Trilogy*, trans. by Paul Britten Austin (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), p. 44-46.

¹⁰So Hare’s supposition that someone might understand moral language without ever using it seriously (i.e. prescriptively) is false on my account, see R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

ity and necessity. A less familiar theme is the understanding of the world such that the possibilities for it are partially determined by one's being part of it. On this understanding, one makes the world; one can be a stain on it; one can be in accord with its other constituents. This idea interacts with another theme: understanding how one is both in the world and out of it depending on whether one is responding to it or expressing one's individuality by the effects one wills. They come together in trying to elucidate the internal and external—i.e. recognitional and impositional—senses of “how things should be.” The explication of this last is a crux in moral philosophy.

1.4 What is the argument?

Assumptions

Philosophers invariably bring assumptions to their arguments. That may not be so bad if the assumptions are made explicit, especially since assumptions about morality are part of the data to explain. I shall enumerate nine and a half of mine here. Though presented as assertions, I hope that the soundness of these assumptions will be vindicated by my account's explanatory appeal.

The first two concern the source of the moral phenomena for investigation. I assume *first* that true moral scepticism—the outright denial of such a thing as morality or moral phenomena—is extraordinarily rare. Certain reductive accounts of morality as, e.g., biological or prudential are not denials of the phenomena, only uncommon reductive descriptions. Acting, rather than speaking, as if there were no morality is criterial of a serious personality disorder. I will mention moral scepticism below. So, I assume *second* that moral phenomena are reasonably commonplace in ordinary lives. Anyone can recall a moral situation they have heard of or been in, even if one is sometimes mistaken in thinking it a moral situation. The experiences called moral within ordinary lives are the initial data of moral investigations.

The next three relate to the practical dimension I said this study had. These assumptions place constraints on the content of an account of moral understanding. I assume *third* that philosophical accounts of morality ought to result in something that could be used to make actual moral decisions. So, it should sometimes prove useful to consider what to do

in a moral situation by considering an analysis in terms of an account. One consequence of this is that general principles of reasoning, even moral reasoning, may be understood as derivative of actual practice.¹¹ I assume *fourth* that philosophical discussions of morality ought to result in something we could imagine actually being said outside of academic moral philosophy. This is one basis for thinking that literature may be morally instructive. It is also a reason for thinking that an injunction to “maximally satisfy utility” must be a product of some discursive artifice. I assume *fifth* that philosophical discussions of morality should not make opaque how one might provide moral instruction to another, e.g. by directing them into situations where they may learn, even if such instruction could never be conceived as completing the task. Telling them “to act only on the reasons there actually are” is not, I suggest, such an instruction.¹²

A further four are empirical observations of moral phenomena. I list them as assumptions since I do not intend to argue that appearances are deceiving. *First*, a person is sometimes criticized for his moral character and the actions taken as expressive of his character. While criticism of a mathematical assertion may be limited to detailing its error, it is rare that criticism of a moral response does not include criticism of character, albeit sometimes implicitly. *Second*, moral suffering and scarring are possible. Some people’s lives are destroyed by the knowledge of the wrong they have done. For others, the recognition that they have done wrong may change their lives, characters and outlooks. Morality often has serious consequences. *Third*, among the consequences of intractable moral disagreement, more than other disagreements, is hatred, incomprehension, and conflict. Moral disagreement can make co-existence difficult even impossible. *Fourth*, it seems that people can disagree on matters of morality without thereby being obliged to judge the other as wrong. Disputes about abortion are one contemporary example. I argue this point at length. For some it is dogma that this is a conceptual falsehood. For them, my overall argument must be conditional on the assumption of its truth. The truth of the condition may then be settled later in “purely conceptual” terms.

Finally, though I will defend the methods of this investigation and its argument below,

¹¹I have in mind that, e.g., certain of the formulas of the Categorical Imperative would be given a derivative rather than “supreme” role. Moreover, the status of that imperative must be suspect when any formulation “strives in its principles to the very boundary of human reason.” Kant, *Groundwork*, *op. cit.*, p. 4:463.

¹²Yet this is precisely the seeming practical upshot of accounts advanced in John McDowell, ‘Virtue and Reason’, in *The Monist* 62 (1979), pp. 331–350; Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formation* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002); Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993).

I need to introduce a methodological assumption here (my half-assumption). From the practical constraints listed and the assumption that morality is commonplace, I assume that our use of language—what I have called linguistic practice—is a suitable object for an investigation of moral phenomena. This is not, as I said above, the assumption that moral phenomena just are linguistic.

Argument

The question I have posed might be put simply if awkwardly as *what* is it that moral understanding *understands*? A working definition of the *functional* role of moral understanding that satisfies our practical constraints is:

Moral understanding is the vehicle by which we appreciate moral salience and act under the idea of moral necessity.

So we can characterize the investigation as the search for the object of moral understanding, the understanding of which realizes the functional role of moral understanding.¹³ The argument I offer is best understood as elaborating certain plausible candidates for the object of moral understanding until one *both* realizes the function required and meets the constraints or assumptions regarding any account of morality. One reason my argument need not compel agreement is that I do not claim to have exhausted all candidates. Indeed, I should not want to, since it seems to me plausible that there should be more than one correct *description* of morality and moral understanding. Another description of my argument is that I am building an existence proof for morality out of a handful of available ideas, viz. life, reality, authority, the will, inter-subjectivity, individuality and criticism. The proof, as I said, will in part depend on the possibilities which the acceptance of the description opens or forecloses for what we can recognize as life *and* for what we recognize as error.

The argument proceeds at the simplest level as follows. First (ch. 2), will an understanding of the form of (moral) questions meet the functional role? It will not because the context in which questions are asked is also relevant. Second (ch. 3), will our understanding of our responsibility for our lives suffice? It will not because the sense of responsibility we have for our lives is inadequate. Third (ch. 4), will our understanding

¹³This should not be confused with functional role accounts of concepts, e.g., in Christopher Peacocke, *A study of concepts* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992).

of the conditions for the truth about our decisions suffice? No, our moral understanding is not exhausted by truth or reality, because both require a *personal* understanding. So, I pause to reinforce and elaborate the claim that moral understanding is individual and personal. This is so because (ch. 5) people can disagree morally without thinking the other wrong *and* because (ch. 6) of the range of personal consequences of misunderstanding or error. Therefore, there is a further constraint on candidates for moral understanding: they must be personal and individual. Fourth (ch. 7), will our understanding of arguments and discussions generally suffice for satisfying the functional role of moral understanding? It is insufficient because it does not explain the inter-personal demand we respond to from others. Fifth (ch. 8), is our moral understanding of inter-personal relations? This seems plausible since it controls our responses to others and because our relations seem unavoidably pervasive. After determining (ch. 9) that this account meets relevant constraints on morality not yet considered, this candidate—our understanding of our relations—is accepted. After elaboration, it is augmented by defending it from theoretical realist and relativist challenges (ch. 10).

A précis of my central claims is given in §1.8. A comprehensive summary is given in §9.10. A summary of the arguments is given in the analytical table of contents.

1.5 What is the method?

The scope of this account is large and ambitious given my limitations for time and space. Therefore my methods and intentions must be understood as somewhat programmatic. I am mapping out a hypothesis space and then motivating a thesis within it. By ‘hypothesis space’ I mean a set of mutually supporting hypotheses where, in the ideal case, each gains support as one gains support. So my intent is not to “document” the phenomenology of moral experience. It is to describe the logic of descriptions of (moral) lives, i.e. when it is correct or true to describe this as that.¹⁴ It is also to outline the logic employed in the discourse of our moral life: how we discuss, converse, and argue.

It is by investigations of this kind that we refine the discipline of the discourse to ensure

¹⁴This way of characterizing the logic of description is developed in Peter Geach, *Mental acts : their content and their objects* (Oxford: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), §1.

that it remains “minimally” truth-apt, at least in Wright’s sense.¹⁵ Of course logic and reality are closely related.¹⁶ I ensure that reality as we experience, think, and talk about it is accounted for by considering how what we think and say is true.

There are two aspects of reality which press us to allow that reality may have a texture or human dimension. One is the idea that what is discovered through love, pity, respect, etc. is the reality of meaning not of fact. Some of our true thoughts register such experiences.¹⁷ The second is the familiar sense that while aspects of reality are fully independent, aspects are also dependent insofar as we humans constitute reality.

My intention then is to explicate the “cosmological role” of these aspects of reality, and their attendant logic: the role they play in the explanation and understanding of our moral lives—just as scientists elaborate the cosmological roles of natural laws, properties, and capacities in the explanation of aspects of the physical world.¹⁸ I am seeking to articulate a sense of the world that encompasses more than the typical sources of explanation—the causal or mathematical—by including the cosmological or logical.

This sense is the logic of possible and actual systems (of a cosmological extent). Its inspiration is our evident capacity to be together: in love, respect, and much else. We make our world to the extent that we *can*. We are always discovering limits to our lives together, to possible harmony. A key hypothesis in my hypothesis space is that morality is about our relations in the *human* world.¹⁹

Priority of Language

The investigative process I have pursued is divisible into three parts. They are applicable to any study of understanding. Conceptually, they are pursued in this order. First, study and describe the *objects* of the understanding we purport to have. Second, study and describe the *understanding* we purport to have of those objects. Third, study and describe the

¹⁵Minimal truth-aptitude is a quality of a discourse when it has sufficient syntactic discipline and standards of warrant to permit the definition of a truth predicate on it. Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 140–142.

¹⁶Indeed, for some they are integral, e.g. Michael Dummett, *The logical basis of metaphysics* (London: Duckworth, 1991) and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by C. K. Ogden (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922).

¹⁷This is Roy Holland’s idea expressed in R. F. Holland, ‘Education and Values’, in: *Against Empiricism: On Education, Epistemology and Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 52–61.

¹⁸The term ‘cosmological role’ comes from a discussion of the best explanations of phenomena in Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, *op. cit.*, p. 196, and chapter 5 *passim*.

¹⁹Technology is not in the human world since it could have in principle been made by the only one man ever to exist.

critical *vocabulary*, the vocabulary we use to mark comprehension and incomprehension, fidelity and distortion of that understanding. Practically, one pursues these in reverse order. It may seem rather peculiar to suggest that we can discover what there is and how we know it by looking at how we talk about it. Surely the metaphysical and epistemological projects are prior?

My commitment to and support for this methodology comes from various interpretations of the Frege-inspired project that is pivotal in recent analytic philosophy. The project's guiding idea is to achieve a perspective on various abstract objects—numbers, intentions, and others which are not prototypically physical or causal—by vindicating the good standing of the discourse—viz. its capacity to refer—with which these objects are described *without* engaging in any related metaphysical or epistemological theorizing. The idea is that the investigation proceeds by asking how we understand the discourse and how the discourse gets its meaning. When the investigation succeeds, the propriety of the form of the vindicated discourse provides a vindicating outlet for epistemological and metaphysical developments. My use of the project is Wittgensteinian in its elaboration. Wright summarizes the elaboration as an injunction: “language-games first; ontology second.”²⁰ Decisive difficulties in prosecuting his project, would cause me methodological difficulties.²¹

Of course, a characterization and demarcation of the discourse to be vindicated is also needed. In part for this reason I proceed from examples of what we *actually* say. Discussions of what the examples mean, of which vocabulary is relevant and in what way, of how context works, are all instances of providing what is needed for the Wittgensteinian project. A project, following Wright, of vindicating a particular discourse as truth-apt by its internal discipline and syntactic properties *depends* on being able to individuate different discourses, each of which may have distinguishing properties with respect to its relation to error and a posteriority.²² Failure to do so may permit mixed discourses to inflate or deflate to include their aggregate syntactic properties, leading to problems similar to

²⁰Crispin Wright, ‘Human Nature?’, chap. 8 in: Nicholas Smith, editor, *Reading McDowell* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 156.

²¹For more detail, see in order Crispin Wright, *Frege’s conception of numbers as objects* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983) chapter 1; Bob Hale, *Abstract Objects* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987) chapter 7; then Bob Hale and Crispin Wright, *The reason’s proper study: essays towards a neo-Fregean philosophy of mathematics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) chapters 1, 2, 5, & 14.

²²Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33–61.

the Frege-Geach problem consequent on mixing truth-apt and non-truth-apt discourses.²³ So the attempt to record the phenomenology of moral language is of a piece with pursuing a method in which a discourse is demarcated for structural analysis.

Not Systematic Semantics

With this emphasis on language, why not develop a semantic theory for language or concepts? Because both approaches implicate characteristics of the reality to which semantic properties relate that are insufficiently well understood. This relation between a word and reality is especially problematic when what is referred to are modalities, relations, and judgment-dependent phenomena. For instance, the so-called truth-makers of possibilities or counter-factuals are notoriously difficult. Causal semantic theories are especially embarrassed when explaining the causal origins of our understanding of relations, necessities, or perceptibles such as colors. Indeed, the problem is acute with statements whose very assessment would alter the underlying reality under assessment, such as assessing, “Jones is good at learning languages,” before he had learned more than one.²⁴ Yet, these things—my willingness to act, my relations to others, the necessity of my acting—are central to moral phenomena.

So, I am unabashed in elaborating their reality since in part we may eventually want a semantics of moral statements and we will need to know *what* is to be explained as standing in semantic relation to word or thought. Neither the reductive naturalist nor the irreductive logicist can do without a good account of what we understand morally when our thoughts are true. Indeed, the difficulty of these central notions suggests that any cognitive account of morality will need more philosophical resources than truth and knowledge.²⁵ Moreover, the possibilities for rich meanings recognized in complex forms—such as remorse or tragedy—may require social conventions or individual anomaly if the possibility of the meaning one *intends* is to be understandable from the form of an expression.

²³Peter Geach, ‘Assertion’, in *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), pp. 449–465.

²⁴Some of these difficulties are succinctly discussed in Geach, *Mental Acts*, *op. cit.*, §§7–10 and Gareth Evans, *The varieties of reference*, edited by John McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), while the last example comes from Michael Dummett, ‘What is a Theory of Meaning? (II)’, in: *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 53–54.

²⁵Crispin Wright, *Rails to Infinity: essays on themes from Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001).

This is not something readily accommodated within semantic theory.²⁶ The idea that a theory of semantics can of itself exhaust the logic or nature of thought must be argued for not assumed. Dummett, a well-known semantic theorist says, “We do not expect, nor should we want, to achieve a deterministic theory of language [even if] only in principle ...”²⁷ Moreover, he expressly acknowledges that where we cannot give an informative account of why a sentence is true, if the sentence can be understood then we shall have to attribute to hearers “a faculty of *unmediated* recognition.”²⁸

Metaphysics

But if it is the curious character of the reality comprehended by moral understanding that undoes a semantically conceived project, why not do moral metaphysics? Mainly this is answered in chapters 3 and 4, where fact is insufficient for *exhaustively* characterizing what is morally understood. In a sense though, my account is Platonic, in the metaphysical realist sense of that term, since I use a metaphysical account of the world to anchor some facets of morality, such as the terms ‘proper’ or ‘appropriate’. It is in this way opposed to the starting points of Marx, Hume or Mill. However, it is also Kantian, in a sense that invites the label of idealism, by my development of mind-world relations whose significance (or content) depends on our willed response.

My metaphysical commitments are few, intentionally. I am committed to relations and individuals, and thoughts that fix on individuals in whole or in part by their relations. Truth I take to be the status of sentences or thoughts assessed as being free of error. Taking something as true provides certain entitlements (and responsibilities) in our cognitive economy. The rest of what I say—in the context of analytical philosophy—is I am afraid mostly programmatic, partially because I am seeking to argue for new categories and aspects of reality that will need accommodation in future metaphysics.

Adjustments of this sort are suggested by recent discussions of space. The Kantian notion of space as an *a priori* construction of reason that is not to be falsified by discoveries of

²⁶For differing acknowledgments of this point see Crispin Wright, ‘Wittgenstein’s Rule Following Considerations and The Central Project of Theoretical Linguistics’, in: *Rails to infinity: essays on themes from Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 206n40 and Stanley Cavell, ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’, in: *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 1–43.

²⁷Dummett, ‘WIATOM II’, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

²⁸Michael Dummett, ‘Realism’, in: *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 271.

the curvature of physical space is one example.²⁹ The good standing of modes of thought regarding “ego-centric” and absolute space is another.³⁰ Both suggest that there may be aspects of reality that while archetypally metaphysical depend on vagaries of human cognition.

The idea I press in this account is that reality may have a texture that depends on the actual contingent nature of meaningful human thought at that time, indeed for that person or those persons. The emphasis is both on the actuality of the thinker’s situation in the world and the determining that governs the sensible or experiential³¹ character of his thought’s object. The plausibility of this idea must wait on the elaboration given to it in subsequent chapters.

Decision And More

I start with an account of decision as an explanatory entry point. I need not have done so. Since deliberation is closer to the current focus of debate in moral philosophy, I started there. There were several reasons. First, confrontations with moral situations are often those that require us to make decisions about where we stand or what to do. So decision is a central though not exhaustive expression and object of moral understanding. Second, decisions and the actions entrained by them are paradigms of the things for which we take responsibility. Moral responsibility is a central component of the common idea of morality. Third, since Socrates, much philosophical discussion has revolved around the practical conditioning of the will by moral education and by the will’s potential incontinence. Plainly then, a satisfying account of morality will need to say something about the relation between the will and decision. I do so in chapter 5.

However, while decisions are an important part of any account of morality, it cannot be the sole one. There are two reasons for this. First, it seems that the absence or presence of thought that is the precondition for culpable decisions can explain much wrongdoing. This was revealed clearly in Arendt’s study of Adolph Eichmann’s explanation of his behavior in World War II.³² She remarks that:

²⁹This is discussed in Keith Hossack, ‘Geometry and the a priori’ (Spring 2001).

³⁰See Evans, *Varieties*, *op. cit.*; Peacocke, *Study of Concepts*, *op. cit.*; Christopher Peacocke, *Sense and content : experience, thought and their relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

³¹I mean this as an approximation of the French ‘sensible’ as used in Simone Weil, *Cahiers*, volume I (Librairie Plon, 1951).

³²Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem : a report on the banality of evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

I was struck by the manifest shallowness in [Eichmann] that made it impossible to trace the uncontested evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives.

...

There was no sign in [Eichmann] of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behaviour as well as in his behaviour during the trial and throughout the pre-trial police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*.

...

If we were responsive to this [moral] claim [on our attention] all the time, we would soon be exhausted; Eichmann differed from the rest of us only in that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.³³

Of course thoughtlessness is not the only explanation. Sometimes men hate, though again sometimes for no reason.

Second, sometimes great goodness is similarly explained by an absence of decision. It is an exemplification of the response of a saint that they should act without any forethought, acting as it were out of love or humanity or “pure” necessity.³⁴ A person may reveal his character by his understanding that there is *no* choice to make, that he must do what is demanded. We shall need therefore an account of moral understanding that is not obsessed with accounts of decision, deliberation or action. The currently received theory of action, in particular, chafes in chapters 5 and 6, but I could not attempt to outline an alternative in the space allowed to me. The conception I would offer must therefore suggest itself from my discussion.

Alternatives to Contemporary Moral Philosophy

It seems to me that just such an obsession with action, deliberation and decision has colored much of recent moral philosophy to the exclusion of much else that is important. Highlighting alternatives is another goal of mine. In the 1950’s a complaint was made that moral philosophy had lost its way in its excessive attention to the *moment* and *form* of moral judgments.³⁵ Many of those concerns remain, transmuted, in the present interest

³³Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1977), p. 4, Part I §1.1.

³⁴This way of putting it is from R. F. Holland, ‘Absolute Ethics, Mathematics and the Impossibility of Politics’, in: *Against Empiricism: On Education, Epistemology and Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 139–142.

³⁵Iris Murdoch, ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume XXX* (1956), pp. 32–58; G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, in *Philosophy XXXIII* (1958), pp. 1–19; Stuart Hampshire, ‘Fallacies in Moral Philosophy’, in *Mind* 58 (1949), pp. 466–482.

in practical reason. The emphasis is on a conception of human freedom that is focused on the ability to choose based solely on moral principles or reasons without an essential regard for how the world is at the point of deciding or responding. Those principles are to be determined in advance. And the hunt for reasons is conditioned by prior regulative knowledge of, e.g., human flourishing or the principles of social accord.

No doubt there is truth in these ideas. However the emphasis on what has occurred *prior* to confronting a moral situation occludes the extent to which the apprehension of the *actual* situation may control a person's response—the response that is expressive of his moral character.

Shifting emphasis to the apprehension of the actual situation has important implications for the modes of moral thought we must explain and the categories our moral understanding must comprehend.

One is the possibility of a moral category of the unthinkable—something that should or could not figure in practical reasoning—where the sense of unthinkable is necessarily a moral sense. Williams says, “It could be a feature of a man's moral outlook that he regarded certain courses of action as unthinkable, in the sense that he would not entertain the idea of doing them . . .”³⁶ Indeed, Williams laments the lack in moral philosophy of a moral category connected with the emotional dimension of moral criticism.³⁷

The shift in emphasis may urge the thought that perception has an evaluative perceptual modality, the exercise of which may provide a distinctly moral motive.³⁸ Holland, for one, suggests that the injunction not to falsify may be observed with a spiritual demeanor beyond the acknowledged benefits for himself and others of truth-telling.³⁹ This is similar to the idea that it matters greatly “to live in the truth” or see things as they really are, free from the distortions of what Murdoch calls the enemy of the moral life, “the relentless fat ego.”⁴⁰ Seeing things as they truly are seems a standing *motivation*, independent of the

³⁶Bernard Williams and J. J. C. Smart, *Utilitarianism: For and against* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 92.

³⁷Bernard Williams, ‘Morality and the emotions’, in: *Problems of the self: philosophical papers, 1956-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 207–229.

³⁸This idea is developed more or less directly in Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970); Martha Nussbaum, ‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature.’, in *Journal of Philosophy* 82:10 (October 1985), pp. 516–529.

³⁹R. F. Holland, ‘Is Goodness A Mystery?’, in: *Against Empiricism: On Education, Epistemology and Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 92–109.

⁴⁰Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

consequences which may in fact be worse than ignorance.⁴¹

Further, making our moral understanding more fine-grained opens the possibility that what counts as moral persuasion, argument, and discussion may not take mathematical proof as a paradigm. Indeed, it may not be syllogistic in form. Sometimes a moral argument just recalls the obvious or points to the role something plays in our life. Either may be an effort to highlight a moral category or engage an evaluative mode of thought. Sometimes that is how one (comes to) understands one's role in life. Murdoch identified our task as moral people as replacing descriptions of ourselves and others with increasingly lucid ones.⁴²

Problems of Tone

I am not arguing for all of these views. I intend them as illustrations of why practical reasoning or decisions cannot be the center of gravity in philosophical accounts of morality. There is more which is difficult to put well in short academic prose. Moral philosophy can lose a sense of the seriousness internal to the idea of morality. There is a shrinking back in moral theorizing from doing *permanent* damage through judgment—viz. introducing a kind of finality. Theories of moral judgment may correctly identify you as a malefactor but that is only a judgment—another fact. Where does the idea of consequence come in that is not already neutered by desire- or prudence-oriented accounts of action? Yet, this is precisely what is most harrowing about the personal consequences of moral misunderstanding. “Whatever else, his innocence is gone.” “Whatever else, after what I have done, I could never *ask* someone for the benefit of the doubt, for pity, for compassion.”⁴³ “I did it, I’ll have to live with it for the rest of my life.”

The shrinking back is connected with a certain self-image philosophy can take on, a bloodless worldliness that says that whatever else, it's just talking in the Senior Common Room. It emerges as a recurrent desire to introduce a kind of intermediation between myself and what I do, making out that there is a conference to weigh matters (reasonably) *before* they are passed onto the will. A consequence of this is to block out the evaluative

⁴¹This point is elaborated well in C. S. Peirce, ‘The Fixation of Belief’, in: Philip P. Wiener, editor, *Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings (Values in a Universe of Chance)* (New York: Dover, 1958), pp. 92–112.

⁴²Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, *op. cit.*, pp. 37, 64–67.

⁴³Nozick, for example, thinks this is the circumstance humanity is in as a consequence of the Holocaust. Robert Nozick, ‘The Holocaust’, chap. 20 in: *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), pp. 236–242.

perception of another, e.g. to regard them with pity, such that there is *no* gap between the judgment that someone is pitiable and responding out of pity. The existence of a gap makes the idea of practical necessity seemingly internal to concepts like pity seem external and foreign.⁴⁴ It is a tendency I argue against at length in chapters 5 & 6.

Current Debates

It will now be clear why I have not directly attacked current moral philosophical debates. Indeed, where possible I have adopted terminology which I hoped had a limited profile in the standard literature, e.g. ‘understanding’ instead of ‘concept’, ‘consideration’ instead of ‘reason’, ‘decision’ instead of ‘deliberation’. I have not sought to find principles with which to taxonomize my position relative to others.⁴⁵ If the justification of my methods has been right, moral philosophy need not focus on metaphysical notions such as the truth of moral propositions or the existence of moral properties in order to produce a satisfying explanation of moral phenomena. This explains too my having avoided any talk of “cognizing values” as, for instance, part of an analysis dividing reason and value. I cannot offer a comprehensive rationale for this choice. I think of moral thinking as a distinctive mode of thought, not a distinctive fixing on particulars, facts or properties. Evaluative modes may make some things more salient than others, but they do not reveal values that are “out there.”

Everything I have written is responsive to well-known issues in moral philosophy, though I have not always signaled them as such. For instance, much of what I have said bears on moral cognitivism, the view that moral statements are truth-apt.⁴⁶ This is a consequence both of the methods detailed above and my description of a hallmark of the cognitive, viz. the possibility of recognizable error. On the other hand, I have tried to avoid the baggage that substantive theories of truth bring in their train: propositions, structured thoughts, and conceptual components of thoughts.⁴⁷ To be clear, the reason for avoiding them is that these constructs can elide the moral categories, modes of thought,

⁴⁴This is exemplified in works that treat all motives as formally like desires such as Bernard Williams, ‘Internal and External Reasons’, in: *Moral luck: philosophical papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101–113.

⁴⁵As is attempted in, e.g., W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930); Henry Sidgwick, *The methods of ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1922).

⁴⁶A view developed at length in David Wiggins, ‘Truth, and truth as predicated of moral judgments’, in: *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 139–184.

⁴⁷By ‘substantive theories of truth’ I mean those that predicate a property (truth) of truth bearers.

and aspects of reality which I have wanted to emphasize are part of the phenomena to be explained.

Similarly, much of what I have to say bears on debates about realism, irrealism, and anti-realism—that is, the extent to which any notion of truth can be extended to those statements or thoughts which we could never *in principle* know to be true. My frequent distinctions between dependence and independence help to distinguish which domains may be apt for description as realist (or objective, though these are not the same). To the extent that one perceives relativism and anti-realism to be bedfellows, my discussion bears on relativism.⁴⁸ Moreover, the considerable prominence I give to the personal and individual would—if it were not bracketed by my frequent reference to truth, actuality, reality, and error—similarly favor relativism *qua* subjectivism.

There is much that is confused in moral philosophy in the relations between, e.g., rationality and normativity, morality and normativity, morality and rationality. Any one could bear elaboration as a doctoral thesis. I have tried to elaborate my arguments so as to show the differences rather than explicitly identify them.⁴⁹ The same is true for my recurring attention to the active and passive modes of response and explanation, the contrasts between making and discovering, between the possible and the actual, the subjective and objective, between what is known and what is, the world of meaning and the world of fact.

It is similar for confusions between universality, generality, and particularity. The temptation to universality is driven in philosophy by a preoccupation with the “edge cases” in categorizing phenomena. Generality is a proper emphasis in our thinking, if for no other reason than if something is generally true it will be most effective to work on that basis. That said, generality should not be permitted to exert an excessive influence on our thinking. For that, attention to particulars is called for, but on the understanding that they are particulars *not* edge cases to the general or universal. This temptation often gives rise to the preconception that only what is secured in theory is itself secure. But this is a position which must be argued for, not assumed. This is one reason I have labored the motives and

⁴⁸The claim of bed sharing rests in any case, I think, on a mistaken assimilation of anti-realism to idealism. See chapter 10.

⁴⁹In any case, an assumed primacy for rationality in moral philosophy is something I aim to undermine. I follow Gaita in thinking that our attachment to others is not rationally secured, it is secured by what we find possible, by how we become vulnerable to other people. Raimond Gaita, *A common humanity : thinking about love and truth and justice*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. xviii and 34. Much of this thesis is an explication of that thought, though not necessarily in terms that Gaita would welcome.

form of the account I am giving. It should be clear now why *my* account has the form it does.

That being so, I think that what motivates the flight to theory as the only secure foundation are motives to which I should wish my own account to be answerable. Features of a good theory include accuracy, simplicity, consistency, coherence, and explanatory scope. I believe I have met these constraints in the explanation of moral understanding I give.

1.6 What are the limitations?

One consequence of the ambitious scope of my explanation of moral understanding is that there are significant shortcomings in what is addressed, some more grave than others. I list them in approximately descending order of importance.

I do not directly address various forms of moral scepticism. One kind of moral scepticism asserts that there could be people with no moral understanding whatsoever. I argue that such a person would not be an intelligible part of our society. Another kind claims that someone might possess moral understanding and not ever act on it. I argue indirectly that such a person could not have the moral understanding of those who do act on it. I think that moral scepticism is an edge case, and thus ruled out by assumption and methodological scruples. Mainly, I think that moral scepticism is ill-motivated as something that someone might actually ask of someone else. Consider this dialog:

Why be moral?—What kind of answer do you expect, what would satisfy you?—I am not sure.—Then why do you ask? What circumstance are you in that the question arises? Do you find such a question natural?—Well, I’m tempted.—Your answer lies in your own description of it as temptation.—Well, I want to do something that is wrong. Why shouldn’t I?—If you think it is wrong, then you don’t need a general reason for being moral, you already have a particular reason not to do what you want in this case.

Two further reasons suggest themselves for bypassing the sceptical impulse outside of philosophical abstractions. The first is Cavell’s detailed argument for why the extreme generality in the sceptical impulse is too general. No one could actually ask the question with that generality and still mean something by that particular speech act.⁵⁰ The second

⁵⁰Stanley Cavell, *The claim of reason : Wittgenstein, skepticism, morality and tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), Parts I and II.

is McDowell's explication of the sceptical impulse as a desire for a fantastic experiential 'given' that will provide an ultimate foundation for the practice of making claims.⁵¹

I have not elaborated a distinction between the ethical and the moral, though I think there is one. Broadly, I suspect the ethical is universalizable and the moral is not (essentially) so. This distinction is important, and I touch on it in §9.2.

Utilitarianism is not directly addressed. Consequentialism is to some extent. Utilitarianism is not addressed because it has several well-known seemingly intractable problems in the literature.⁵² First, there are more values than utility and utilitarians have difficulty broadening the notion of utility without having it balloon into the values encompassed by other theories. Second, the personal is important in a way that the impartiality of utilitarianism has difficulty accommodating. Third, difficulties in the relation between the general and the particular are twice as acute in the recurrent difficulty of finding a workable act-rule distinction.

More generally, utilitarianism, like all species of consequentialism has, following Gaita's usage, an "administrative" account of action that I oppose throughout.⁵³ An administrative account of action conceives of the human capacity for action solely in terms of the states of affairs one may affect or effect. This has two consequences. First, it urges us to see states of affairs in the first instance as better or worse, not as unthinkable or evil or any other moral category. Second, it urges us to understand moral demands as in the first instance being made by one or more states of affairs (the present and its possible future sequents) rather than by other moral agents, even when they part-constitute the states of affairs. Both of these are, I think, at odds with moral phenomena. The second in particular obscures the nature of the wrong done to individual persons, not considered as constituents of states of affairs. Moreover, the conception of action I urge is one that acknowledges our capacity to effect change, but also emphasizes action as a response to or conformance with one's circumstances in the world. It has, in that sense, a passive dimension alien to the administrative conception.

⁵¹John McDowell, 'Two Sorts of Naturalism', in: *Virtues and reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory, Essays in Honour of Philippa Foot* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 149–179 and John McDowell, 'Might there be external reasons?', in: J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison, editors, *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 65–85.

⁵²For example, "Utilitarian theory is embarrassed by the possibility of utility monsters who get enormously greater gains in utility from any sacrifice of others than these others lose." Nozick, *Anarchy, state, and utopia*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁵³Raimond Gaita, *Good & Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 73.

I am not sure what *moral* naturalism is, and discussions under that rubric seem to have little in common. So my discussion of it is oblique. Sometimes it is the idea that morality must not eschew the ordinary facts that feature in other disciplines. I agree with that, but it is a modest claim, placing few constraints. If the claim is meant to depend on limiting genuine ordinary fact to physical or scientific fact, then I argue against it throughout. Sometimes it is the idea that the key to morality is to be found within the nature of being human.⁵⁴ Again, I agree as far as that goes. But the nature of being human is precisely something at issue as a datum in moral investigations, which presses the claim toward the status of a truism. When seemingly moral non-human beings outside the realm of thought experiments are available to us, perhaps we will be able to determine the force of the claim. It is not even obvious (to me at least) that moral philosophical naturalism is incompatible with the existence of God.⁵⁵ If the idea is that morality is comprehensively reducible to our animal nature, then since that is manifestly implausible I leave the burden of proof with that idea's proponents.

My concluding remarks in chapter 11 discuss further limitations.

1.7 What is the structure?

I have tried to make this thesis a continuous discussion, an ongoing example of an argument, an invitation to see moral understanding and deliberation in the way I explain. For reasons of continuity, the chapters are not well suited to being read individually or out of sequence. Each does not pick up a well-known discussion in moral philosophy and subject it to lines of criticism. Each chapter is not a potential journal article. There are some examples of that kind of philosophical analysis.⁵⁶

As I signaled at the beginning, the presentation of the account has a narrative structure the following of whose logic is integral to accepting the account. I gave that narrative above in the search for a functional realizer of moral understanding. However, I have also discussed my method as an investigation into the constitution and objects of moral understanding, as well as morality's personal basis. Those three threads bind the investigation.

⁵⁴A concession to the empirical even Kant granted in his notion of "practical anthropology," Kant, *Groundwork*, *op. cit.*, p. 4:388.

⁵⁵Consider the conception offered in, e.g., Pope John Paul II, 'Papal Encyclical: Fides et Ratio' (September 1998), §§69–74 and 90.

⁵⁶See chapters 4 and 10.

They are summarized in table 1.1 on page 38, where each thread is given an animating question and final answer. The chapter-by-chapter entries show the progression and accumulation of the elements from which the final explanation is constructed. The table was an asset to me in writing. I hope it can be one for the reader.

Table 1.1: Structure of Investigation by Chapter

	Personal Responsibility	Constitution	Objects
Ch.	On what does one's responsibility depend? The possibility of proper criticism of one's bearing within relations.	In what does one's understanding consist? One's ability to be critical of oneself and others.	What is it that is understood? Moral reality composed of inter-personal relations.
2	Pose the question, and establish individuality as a condition on responsibility	Grasp of how criticisms apply to different aspects of decisions and the moral understanding of which each is expressive	Other people's decisions, intentions, and actions in terms of the parameters they considered in so deciding
3	One's being the motive agency in aspects of one's life	One's ability to recognize the general forms of human lives and deviations from those forms	The intra-personal network of relations that make up a life; passive/active contrast in possibilities for lives
4	A life where responsibility arises as an issue must be inter-personal	One's ability to understand and negotiate one's place in the network of inter-personal relations	The inter-personal network of relations that make up reality
5	Moral attention, moral understanding, and the will are the lowest level of action explanation	One's ability to respond to the world and people, identifying possibilities in decision	Cognitive relations to the world, situations, and people
6	Higher level explanations use one's authority to make actions one's own	One's critical powers as expressed in shame, remorse, etc.	Error, one's impact on reality, the wrong done others
7	That one's points of view (POV) are necessarily one's own in conversation/action	One's grasp of arguments, demonstrations, conversations	Secondary sense of things and their role in POVs, logic, and shared lives
8	Being held responsible by others	Ability to negotiate inter-personal relations	Relations, people, possibilities for living with others
9	The possibility of life with others	Distinguishing the moral and non-moral, ethical, prudential, etc.	Our human or moral reality
10	That any method for deciding must be one's own	Understanding is primed by individual's particular experiences	Moral Consensus, dissidence, data of moral categories

1.8 Summary

Given the unusual nature of my approach this introduction has been longer and more labored than most. Before proceeding to detailed exposition, let me recount my account's central claims—its “cash value” as it were.

1. Moral understanding is our understanding of the (proper) claims of others on us.
2. Our moral understanding is manifested by our mastery and application of critical terms that relate to the deformations of (or fidelity to) inter-personal relationships considered as particulars *and* as general forms.
3. The objects of our moral understanding are things such as lives and relations *and* the discursive practices that sustain them such as decisions, determinations, criticism, apology, forgiveness *et al.*
4. Morality depends on the possibility and actuality of living together in brute, intentional, corrective, and emergent ways.

Fifth, a key original contribution is the idea of critical authority in chapters 8 and 9. Our articulation of moral meaning is controlled by our inter-personal interactions. Our inter-personal relations are governed by critical authority. Our understanding of critical authority is expressed by our critical vocabulary. We accept the critical authority of others over us based on our relation to them, e.g. friendship. The nature of inter-personal relations are determined by the character of the critical authority each relation has. Critical authority explains the independent and personal force that moral criticism has. I argue that to be intelligible we must accept some critical authorities, though I explicitly allow for the intelligible repudiation of morality. Wronging someone can be explained as *inter alia* denying his critical authority, thus denying his relation to oneself. These five claims are at the core of my explanation of moral understanding.

The account includes further elaborations:

1. A detailed account of decision-making, moral and non-moral, that makes more explicit the targets of our vocabulary of praise and criticism.
2. A distinction between a person and his life; how lives may be shared; how we are not the sole factors of our life.

3. A discussion of how an elaborated idea of truth cannot exhaust our understanding of moral understanding.
4. A discussion of the relation between the will and understanding; a sketch of moral modality; and the character of our embedded awareness of and expectations from humans.
5. A discussion of our understanding of shame, regret, remorse, apology, and reconciliation along with an account of how our own authority is implicated in our understanding of the world.
6. A discussion of how we collectively determine the character of reality and the demands of our relations with others.

If my explanation is broadly correct, it excludes the sorts of accounts described in §1.2. That, I suggest, is philosophical progress. It is, therefore, to the elaboration of my explanation to which I turn.

2 Moral Thinking by Decision

The chief danger to philosophy, apart from laziness and wooliness, is scholasticism, the essence of which is treating what is vague as if it were precise and trying to fit it into an exact logical category.

The Foundations of Mathematics

F. P. RAMSEY

2.1 Moral Psychology and Practical Reason

Morality presents itself as a motley of phenomena. I use 'phenomena' to mark it as the sort of thing which most encounter, study, describe; about which one can wonder and reflect; an object for which one might develop an understanding. Two things at least are characteristic of morality, though not unique to it. First, people make moral *decisions*. They make decisions that they characterize as moral whose basis they also describe as moral. Second, people criticize—make *critical* judgments of—themselves and others, criticism they characterize as moral. My intention is to provide a basis for discussing these aspects of morality. The basis I shall offer is of the understanding someone has when he morally decides or criticizes. That understanding—his moral understanding—is a part of his psychology we may call his moral psychology.

An account of our moral psychology should explain our cognition of moral phenomena. In this chapter I shall argue that moral understanding is unusual in emphasizing the personal responsibility we bear for our moral thought. Indeed, individuality is a condition on the moral responsibility at which moral criticism is directed. Second, I shall provide a detailed anatomy of how people make their decisions. I shall suggest that our criticisms of people's decisions and the basis on which they have been made focus on different parts revealed in the anatomy of decisions given. Detail is needed if we are to understand the variety of moral criticisms and the moral understanding of which they are expressive. Later I shall argue that our moral understanding is constituted by our ability to make moral criticisms. In that sense, among the objects of our moral understanding are other people's

decisions, intentions, and actions and the basis on which they made them.

This last—the basis for decision that moved them to action—expresses someone’s moral understanding. Therefore, moral criticism is also criticism of someone’s moral understanding. The question of one’s responsibility for one’s moral understanding is one that recurs in following chapters.¹

Collectively, the discussion in this chapter should be seen as similar to a functional specification of our moral understanding. The descriptive framework for decisions offered is not intended as unique to morality, but may apply in general terms to any domain. This may be important for difficulties in areas outside the scope of my discussion, such as the moral assessment of one’s epistemic policies—sometimes, “the ethics of belief.” However, for my purposes, my elaborations of the framework are in the service of moral philosophy and should be judged by their utility for moral psychology. One reason for the generality of the discussion below—including its many exceptions—is to ensure that the framework is sufficiently broad and complex to illuminate the core of moral psychology. Philosophically, the practical reason model (PRM) is among those dominant in moral philosophy for explaining decision-making and judgment with regard to action.² The assumptions behind the PRM are one way in which debates about internalism and externalism about reasons and motivations have gained attention.³ In the rest of this section, I shall briefly try to indicate why the PRM is too narrow and why a descriptive framework of greater breadth and detail is needed for a comprehensive moral psychology. The difficulties that motivate the internalism/externalism debate are discussed in following chapters, especially chapter 5.

Practical reason in the PRM usually contrasts with theoretical reason in being about actions—being specifically reasoning that can result in action. The PRM characterizes decision-making as the search for and consideration of reasons for action or inaction. As-

¹An answer will have been formulated by chapter 6.

²I take this name and the account offered as a reasonable, if coarse, amalgam of views developed in, e.g. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, edited by Onora O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); J. David Velleman, *The possibility of practical reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) and in a related camp John McDowell, ‘Virtue and Reason’, in *The Monist* 62 (1979), pp. 331–350; Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formation* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002); Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993).

³See, e.g., John McDowell, ‘Might there be external reasons?’, in: J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison, editors, *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 65–85; Bernard Williams, ‘Internal and External Reasons’, in: *Moral luck : philosophical papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101–113; William Frankena, ‘Obligation And Motivation In Recent Moral Philosophy’, in: A. I. Melden, editor, *Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1958), pp. 40–81.

assessments of the correctness of decisions on this model are determinations that there was a preponderance of reasons for the action or that there were no reasons against it. In this sense, for some candidate action, practical reasoning determines whether the action is permissible or not.

Matters are actually more complicated in the model. One can imagine it as a process which begins with a set of facts about the current state of affairs and perhaps one or more goals under consideration. The process operates within certain constraints. These constraints are a consequence of available resources or means as well as regulative principles. The process successfully results in intentions categorized as necessary, impermissible, or their converses. (Necessary actions must also be permissible.) Amongst those that are permissible, some will be preferable to others. When all proceeds normally, those ends that are necessary beat those that are permissible in eventuating in attempted action. If not necessary but yet possible, those that are most preferred trump those that are less preferable. As far as it goes, the specification is not problematic. A first question is whether all permissible actions are commensurable, and if not, whether the PRM has further resources for deciding? A second question concerns whether the understanding by which we identify reasons—especially as *salient* reasons instead of, say, *pro tanto* or seeming reasons—is *within* the PRM or without.⁴ Whatever else is true, the basis by which we identify reasons had better not be so permissive as to lose normativity such that anything may be a reason for anything.

One consequence of the PRM as so far specified is that an ideal decision-maker (an Aristotelian *phronimos*, say) is a possibility. Specifically, if reasoning is a process that could be rigorously characterized as operating with perfect fidelity to constraints, then someone could realize that ideal in their decision-making. It does not matter whether the constraints are apparently moral such as a principle of not lying or a regulation not to treat others as means or a limited resource such as having only one life to live. Nor does it matter that for contingent—“merely medical” in Russell’s phrase—reasons no one can

⁴This is one way of pressing an objection that has motivated a distinction between the theory of value and a theory of practical reason. However, in introducing a theory of value one introduces yet another category of cognizable entities in the world, viz. values instead of, e.g. evaluative modes of cognition—in the same way some have reified reasons as things in the world, e.g. Nagel, *Possibility of Altruism*, *op. cit.*. For the value/theory distinction, see e.g. Alan Thomas, ‘Values, Reasons and Perspectives’, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* XCVII (1996), pp. 61–80. These entities are vulnerable to Mackie’s famous queerness objections in J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: inventing right and wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), chapter 1. My account does not require this distinction, therefore I shall not argue for or against it.

meet this ideal, e.g. because of the speed at which we think. Insofar as an ideal decision-maker is logically possible, according to the PRM he should command our aspirations as reasoners.

One could imagine instead constructing a computer to the PRM's specification. Creating a computer to do this is not too different from building a computer to play chess. There too, one begins with the state of the board and a goal of winning. The process is constrained by the rules governing chess. For any possible move at some point in the game, the move may be necessary (because one is in check), impermissible (according to the rules), or permissible and preferable (or not). Today's chess computers have improved to the point where they regularly beat even the best chess players. Alternatively, if the PRM is understood as involving the exercise of a perceptual capacity sensitive to reasons, one could imagine refining sensors for this purpose, perhaps including a learning capacity. These possibilities should give a theorist pause, for is a "clockwork" moral thinker even coherent?

A further formulation of the challenge in line with questions above is to elaborate the origin of the set of constraints in an instance of the PRM. What secures them? Why not treat people as means? I will press the challenge by suggesting that there could not be any such set and that the appearance of any such set is actually an expression of our individual understanding. Indeed, one way of formulating a challenge to the idea of a *phronimos*—someone who *ex hypothesi* navigates the space of reasons internal to the PRM perfectly—or *phronimoi* is whether we should like to characterize a saint as an ideal decision-maker? For if we do not, should we take that to impugn the saint's moral thinking as a distorted instance of the PRM? Yet, it is at least intuitive that a saint's moral understanding is in an important sense ideal.

Another consequence of the PRM is that our attention in our reasoning need not be toward those whom we may wrong in our actions, but rather to the *process* of determining which actions are permissible, etc. In the moral case, that is difficult to reconcile with the way the errors we make and the harm we cause elicit such strong responses from us toward ourselves and toward others—responses that can make life together impossible. How could such drastic consequences ensue from our sometimes being imperfect instantiations of the decision-making process?

These questions and objections hint at the difficulties the PRM has in explaining our

moral psychology. In the face of these difficulties, I aim to develop an account of moral understanding that does not give pride of place to the rational. There need be no presumption that the rationalizing route is to be preferred in the face of challenges to its authority. As Williams says:

Once we see that it is impossible to rationalize everything, the project of rationalizing as much as possible need not be understood as doing the next best thing. We may conclude instead that we were looking in the wrong direction.⁵

It is a goal of this thesis to develop a conception of moral decision-making—as part of an account of our moral psychology—whose emphasis is on the understanding a decision-maker has such that he comprehends the wrong he can do to others by his actions. The goal in this chapter however is to broaden the conception of decision-making from the narrow conception of the PRM. (A “road map” of broadening elaborations are developed in the rest of the thesis). However, I do not mean to exclude traffic in reasons from our moral psychology. The PRM undoubtedly explains something. As the chapter unfolds, its explanatory limitations should become increasingly clear, particularly in the area of personal responsibility, to which I will turn in the final sections.

2.2 Considered Decisions

Often we believe something, intend something, and act with little thought. We do these things immediately, almost automatically. Arithmetical calculations and perception in ordinary circumstances are examples. This is not always the case though. Here are some examples where we are confronted with a pressing situation but pause to consider the question that has arisen.

Car My car is an older Volvo and now needs substantial work to continue running. Should I have the repairs done, or should I consider getting a new car? Which car would I get? I’ve always wanted a classic Saab. I must consider longer-term costs. Would I enjoy having a new car? Given that I live in London, do I really need a car since I commute to work without one? *Should I get something sporty or practical, or keep my current car?*

Life Imagine a woman considering the pursuit of an academic career. A successful academic career will require that she complete seven years of doctoral study, followed

⁵Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the limits of philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985), p.113.

by six years of intensive work to publish enough to get tenure. Work of that intensity most likely precludes having a child during that period. However, assuming everything goes to plan, she will be 35 when she is first able to consider having a child. That is somewhat old to begin a family, yet having a family is important. *Should she consider a different career?*

Career I have been approached by a head hunter about a job at Microsoft . The job is exciting, working on new internet technologies. In addition to a good salary I would also receive a valuable block of Microsoft share options. However, I have only been in my present job for nine months. I like this job, though the company is not as prestigious as Microsoft. I also manage a team of three. My departure may well compromise their position at the company, or at least disadvantage them. I hired them and I feel somewhat responsible for their success here. *Should I change jobs?*

Co-workers I have been James' manager for a year. We work closely together and get along well. We socialize infrequently and have been on "team-building" exercises our company sponsored to encourage cooperation, informality, and ease of communication. Because of this I consider him a friend, rather than merely a colleague or acquaintance. Owing to poor company performance there will be lay-offs. James is to be laid off. It is my job to inform him and complete the process: paperwork, clearing his desk, escorting him out. Should I, as his friend, be the one to carry out this bit of corporate formality? Will my ability to commiserate with him be undermined by my having been the agent of his termination? It is my job—that for which I am paid—to do precisely these sorts of things. Might it not be nicer coming from me in any case? *Should I carry out this part of my job?*

Friends Mike is an old, close friend of mine. I think we have similar values. I know from conversation that he takes a dim view of adultery. One day, a mutual acquaintance, Mary, tells me that Mike is having an affair with a woman with whom he works. I know the woman and know that they are good friends. Knowing Mike as I do, I insist to Mary that she must be mistaken. Later, I recount Mary's claim to Mike with no response. Months later, after Mike has divorced, I learn that Mary was right. Mike has never told me and I am leaving to stay with him for a week. Perhaps there is a reason he never told me. Do I have a right to bring it up? On the other hand, can I accept his hospitality—let alone continue our friendship—while keeping my knowledge of his affair from him? *Should I tell Mike that I know of his affair?*

War Suppose my country mobilizes for war and I am called to serve in a combat role. If I do not go I may be imprisoned, marked as a coward, or as a shirker. I may take on the mantle of being a conscientious objector. If I do go I may have to kill, I may be killed, or maimed. I may be witness to great horrors and injustice. Further, I may have other demands that I will be less able to meet if I go to war, such as the

demands of my ailing mother, or my children.⁶ *I wonder whether to heed the call?*

These situations are not presented as dilemmas. They are not intractable nor are the considerations on different sides balanced. I offer these only as cases where we do not proceed automatically, where we pause to consider the situation. I am going to call what we do in these cases making a *decision*. I mean it as a semi-technical term. We have many ordinary ways of describing what we are doing in these situations. We may be weighing the pros and cons, thinking about what to do, deliberating, wondering what to do, coming to a decision, going through the decision process, etc. I mean to capture *all* of these under the activity of *deciding*, an episode of which we call making a decision. Sometimes we decide, and sometimes we judge our decision. Our decisions are usually in response to an implicit or explicit question arising in a situation. Decision-making is an attempt to answer such questions. Using 'decide' and 'decision' in a semi-technical capacity is for ease of expression, for what they signify are variously described.

Our moral thoughts or response may be immediate; they may be deliberative as in the above examples; or they may be reflective when there is more time or the situation is hypothetical. In this thesis I am focusing on the first two; and in this chapter on the second one as the best paradigm of moral thinking, partially because it is situated in some sense between the other two. I call what I am talking about decision. As I use it, it is not secondary to what is usually called deliberation. As will become clear decision encompasses deliberation, at least outside the specialized reflective deliberation about ends. Nor is my use of 'decision' meant to beg the question in debates about moral realism. I am not claiming that decisions are primary in our moral psychology. I think they are the most transparent for investigating the nexus between action, awareness, and consideration. Moral decision-making is one way of focusing on the idea of a possibly moral confrontation with the world, in an active mode. There are passive modes, and there are reflective ones as well. I address the passive mode of moral understanding in the chapters that follow.

I have comparatively little to say about reflective or hypothetical moral thinking. Moreover, the idea of a reflective consciousness making demands on us, because we must be able to endorse our second order motives is already well-developed in the literature.⁷ It

⁶Inspired by the famous example in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (Methuen, 1973).

⁷See e.g. Harry Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of A Person', in *Journal of Philosophy* 68:1 (1971), pp. 5–20 or Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), chapter 4.

is not my intention to argue against that idea here, for there are, no doubt, differences between reflective and immediate thinking. However, reflective decision making has no presumptive claim to be the paradigm. Experience suggests otherwise. Moreover, reflection should not be confused with care, attention or seriousness which may be proper parts of decision-making too. Reflection also has limits insofar as it is cognitively limited to the imagined contents of hypothetical cases or those that are remembered.

2.3 Decisions and Person

Our decision-making can be about what to believe. Is the newspaper accurate? Is my co-worker sincere? Are there such things as black holes? These decisions are often about the world around us. Sometimes they are about ourselves. Am I being selfish? Do I really envy Jim's job? Other decisions fall somewhere in between. Is it unseemly to spend so much time with my brother's wife? Does this tie suit me? Philosophically, it is often thought that we do not decide what to believe.⁸ Our beliefs are a response to the evidence or reasons that pertain to the question. I cannot believe for no reason. No doubt that is correct, but it does not foreclose the way in which someone may and another may *not* decide when reason or evidence is sufficient: "I decided to believe him." "I decided the balance of evidence undermined his claim." The issue of our standards for belief will become clearer when discussing authority and determination in chapter 6.⁹

Sometimes we decide what to do. When we decide what to do, the question we answer is what do I do now? The question is not what *can* I do, not directly. We may need an answer to that question if our decisions are to end with intentions or actions. However, sometimes we consider situations where we do not need to know the extent of what we can do. We may, e.g., be wondering what we would do with no financial restrictions. It may never come to be but it does not preclude making decisions about it. Obviously there may not be much point in deciding to do what *no one* could do—though that may

⁸See e.g. Bernard Williams, 'Deciding to Believe', in: *Problems of the self: philosophical papers, 1956-1972* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 136–151.

⁹The distinction in any case is roughly between those beliefs which are, say, transparent such as perceptual beliefs and those which are reasoned such as theoretical beliefs. One way to put it is between belief *simpliciter* and warranted-belief (where the subject is aware that his state of information is warranting). The latter are those where we might consciously apply our epistemic policies. The difference is somewhat evident in the distinction between the German verbs *glauben* and *überzeugen* (roughly believe and convince).

itself be a question¹⁰—such as attend conflicting appointments, but it suffices to show that sometimes we need to know what we can do *now* and sometimes not.

Our decision-making is usually first personal: what do I do? But it need not be. It can be plural—what do we do?—or impersonal—what does one do? I could easily ask my wife to decide whether to buy a new car. There are asymmetries between first person forms of questions and other forms. Indeed there is often a special significance about the question if it can *only* be asked and answered in the first person, “Shall I go to war?” perhaps because it would be impudent for anyone else to ask it.¹¹

Similarly it may be significant if the question can only be addressed to a particular individual, “As his *friend* can you lay him off?” There is a difference between, “What do *you* think?” and, “What does *one* think?” The first aims at eliciting your view as an individual, while the latter usually aims at eliciting the common view. (I say ‘usually’ because someone may ask *you* to use the common standard, as when pointing to a mathematical proof and asking what you think: they mean to solicit your assent that it is correct.) The questions asked of a witness at a trial are aimed at eliciting what he witnessed. It won’t do in that case to report what others witnessed. That is inadmissible because hearsay. If you are called as an expert witness, one is called as an exemplar of one’s profession, e.g. a pathologist, and the standards of practice in that profession, even though the questions ask what you, in *your* judgment, would do or take to be the case.¹²

Someone can say, when asked for advice, “If I were you, I would not go for an academic career.” Naturally, no one ever is anyone else, so the antecedent possibility is only a manner of speaking. Accepting this form of advice is never exculpatory such that one can *wholly* blame an adviser for their choice of career, as one can blame someone for a bad restaurant recommendation. It is understood that a decision of that gravity must rest ultimately with the person who takes the job. The question of first personal responsibility is developed below.

¹⁰See page 54 below.

¹¹This is discussed further in chapter 8.

¹²This is discussed further in chapter 7.

2.4 Assessing Options

When deciding what to do we try to determine the possible *options*. Then we try to find which of our options is best or most satisfactory. Pursuing some options precludes others, otherwise there would be no need to find the best. We could simply try them all. Options can preclude others in many ways. If I decide to lay James off, our friendship will likely be changed in irreversible ways. Once I confront Mike with his secret, it will no longer be secret. Sometimes you only get one chance. Frequently, there are considerations of time or resources that limit options. In any case, if we determine one option as recognizably *better* than another, then it would be odd for us to choose between options *arbitrarily*.

We consider options when determining the best. In considering each option we question its merit or demerit. The notion of better, best, and merit is a complex one. It is related to Anscombe's idea of a "desirability characterization" that makes sense of her dictum that intentional action is toward an end seen "under some aspect of the good."¹³ Good must not be taken here as moral good. Rather, I should like to understand the notion of best, better, merit as understood in terms of an ideal of decision-making that the decision-maker finds motivating (in the domain of the decision). An option is best when it is the most motivating. Subsequently realizing that an option would have been more motivating at the time of the decision is indicative of an error in the decision-making process. In this way the idea of getting it right is primary, but indexed to the domain of the decision and the ideal seen as governing. So we can say that a man is trying to get it right according to some understanding of right for decisions of the kind he takes this one to be. That understanding of right is what I will call someone's decision-making *ideal*. For the moment, an ideal is any basis for assessing or comparing a decision such that the possibility for improvement can be manifest. Many such ideals exist beyond the moral. Ideals are like norms, and they may apply in law, maths, science, etc.¹⁴ In ideal circumstances—if there are such—we decide the best option.

The merits of options decided upon may vary. Decisions about matters of fact may result in beliefs; about hypothetical situations may result in the adoption of principles or intentions; about what to do may be eventuate in action. I say 'may' because our decisions do not always "complete", they may be blocked or interrupted. 'Best option' should not be

¹³G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), p. 75, §39.

¹⁴ Alternative ideals are discussed in chapter 9 on page 283.

understood here as directed at the best outcome. Best as used here is in reference to merit, and an option may have merit independent of its outcome. I may decide that confronting Mike is best and yet botch things so as to make things much worse. The actual or intended outcome may be irrelevant when, for instance, I have no idea of the likely outcome but decide that acting courageously is the best option.

Also, I am intentionally equivocating on the meaning of ‘determine’.¹⁵ To determine can mean to discover or find, as when I determine that the wheel base of my car is 88 inches, or that my ankle is limited to 60 degrees of motion, or that my co-worker has lied. It can also mean to make or resolve as when a judge determines a dispute in my favor, or when I determine to increase my cardio-vascular strength through exercise. This equivocation will be a recurrent theme, particularly in conjunction with the exercise of *authority* in making determinations (in chapter 6).

The evaluation of merit or demerit is based on those *considerations* that apply to the option. Sometimes considerations apply singly, sometimes in combination. All considerations need not apply to all options. The option with the most merit is the best. *Determination* of the best option is the object of decision-making. (This may sound initially like the picture of the utilitarian calculus, but the resemblance is only initial as will become clear below.) Obviously a great deal depends on how the merits of options are determined. This depends on the considerations that bear on the option. A consideration is something that is taken to bear on a decision. This is wholly general. Here are some examples.

- The cost of repairs to my old car versus buying a new car. The aesthetic appeal of Saab versus Volvo. My need for a car.
- The advantages of an academic career. Desire for family.
- The *explicit* commitment I made to stay at least a year when I took my present job. The *implicit* commitment I made to those I hired. James’ expectations of me as his friend, as his colleague, as his manager. My employer’s expectations of loyalty.
- My expectations of Mike in light of our friendship.
- My fear of being maimed. The weight of other’s opinions of me as a coward. My loyalty to my country.

¹⁵The equivocation I have in mind relates approximately with a similar philosophical dispute between constructivists and realists about meanings or facts. It is discussed further in chapter 6.

- My *general* belief that returning good for evil is courageous. The thought that lying is rarely a good idea.

All of these may be considerations bearing on the options considered in decision-making.

A first question is how does a consideration come to bear on the merit of an option? Can anything count as a consideration? This question is addressed below with the idea of our *understanding*.¹⁶ Suppose for now that there are considerations that bear on the merit of one option or another but that not *anything* can be a consideration for *any* option.

2.5 Deviations in Assessing Considerations

Decisions and a decision-making process can deviate from the ideal in many ways. By ‘the ideal’ I have not meant a “cosmic ideal written in the heavens”, or even a stipulated ideal such as for instance is employed in tennis through its rules. I mean the ideal circumstances that may part comprise or be implicit in a decision-making ideal as described above. There are at least five distinct kinds of deviation from an ideal with respect to the process of assessing considerations.¹⁷

Types i–v

- (i) We may fail to identify all of our options and perhaps fail to uncover the best one. I may not realize that I can be the bearer of the news of James’ lay-off but not the implementer. I may fail to consider the possibility of leasing a new car or of contributing to the war in the medical corps.
- (ii) We may misunderstand *how* a consideration applies. This takes two related forms. The first is a misunderstanding of this kind of consideration, e.g. sensitivity. The second is its application to the case, e.g. James’ layoff. I may realize that sensitivity to James’ feelings is a paramount consideration, yet misunderstand what form such sensitivity should take. I may think he would prefer the direct approach to the roundabout one, and be mistaken about that. I may think that the call to arms is a matter of courage, and think that it is more courageous to conquer my fear of

¹⁶Understanding is defined in chapter 5.

¹⁷The deviations noted here are a recast simplification of fallacies identified in John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive*, 8th edition (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1916), Book V.

being maimed than to face social exclusion. I may think that safety is a key factor in buying a car but mistakenly believe that air bags greatly enhance automotive safety. Failures of this sort I call failure to understand a consideration's *mode* of application.

- (iii) For any option we may fail to consider some of the considerations that apply. I may fail to take into account the differences in safety of driving a new car compared to an old one. I may not consider that James is anxious to leave and leaving with a lay off payment may be appealing. I may not consider how my parents will feel if I choose to be a conscientious objector.
- (iv) We may fail to understand how different considerations apply in combination, what we may call their *joint mode* of application. This is not merely the aggregate sum or product of demerit. Two options may be innocuous singly, but in combination problematic. For instance, I could leave my company for another job. Or I could leave for a role at Microsoft that does not compete with my current employees. Neither might be problematic. I may not realize that doing both will not only be a blow to those people I hired because I am abandoning them, but also that it will be seen as a vote of no confidence if my new role at Microsoft is as their chief competitor. I fail to see that as the compound impact of my leaving.
- (v) We may understand all the options, all the germane considerations and their modes of application but simply make an *error* in calculating or aggregating. We mistake an inferior option for the best without any error in the evaluation of merits. Errors in calculating or aggregating, which are related, are irregular cases where we simply make a mistake, what Wright characterizes as a “cognitive shortcoming” or “bare error” or a misfire of an otherwise functional capacity.¹⁸ If someone were pathological in making specific mistakes of this kind, we might wish to say something different. Perhaps we would say they were blinkered or bigoted or perhaps that they had a condition such as high-functioning autism. Either way, it seems right to say that the “mechanism” of decision-making did not work, either temporarily or permanently. I shall return to this category of deviation or error.

The types of deviation are summarized in table 2.2 on page 68.

¹⁸Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 144; Crispin Wright, ‘On being in a quandary: Relativism, vagueness, logical revisionism’, in *Mind* 110:437 (2001), p. 57.

2.6 Unsatisfactory Outcomes of Decision-Making

A decision can deviate from an ideal in four ways that are not a product of the decision-making *process*. In these cases, the outcome of the process proves unsatisfactory in some way, e.g. unsuitable, unusable or paradoxical.

Type a & b

(a) All options may lack merit, i.e. they may have only demerit.

(b) All options may have so little merit as to be inconsequential.

In such cases, agnosticism about the question may be the answer. Inaction, the practical equivalent of agnosticism, is not always an option though. Inaction may be the worst of three options the other two of which are equal in merit. For instance, waiting to be arrested for avoiding the draft may be worse than either declaring oneself a conscientious objector *or* enlisting—though inaction is in some cases an action, paradoxical as it sounds.

Whether inaction is an option may require a further or associated decision about the *urgency* of the context. Sometimes we deliberate because there is an immediate *need* to do so. Whether there is an immediate need or not may require a determination that it is a consideration. A determination of need, though, will affect the *care* or *caution* we exercise in decision-making. That may affect our understanding of the *gravity* of the situation, of what level of merit is taken as trivial. If a man's life is hanging under a sentence of death, the smallest evidence of his innocence is of the greatest consequence. So whether we *must* act on options of scant merit turns on the necessity of acting—indeed deciding—at all. The question of the necessity to decide is an old and important one. I will say more about it in chapter 5. Our understanding of these factors conditions our understanding of the decision-making process generally, and particularly. Our understanding is, I shall say, of the *mode* in which we are “*asked*” the question that we are trying to decide. ‘Mode’ is synonymous with ‘context’ unless otherwise noted.

Type c & d

(c) Two or more options may have equal merit, producing a dilemma. Sometimes a decision may be made by flipping a coin as when the Saab and Volvo are comparable.

Sometimes not.

(d) Two or more options may be *incommensurable* instead, producing a “darker” dilemma.

The types of deviation are summarized in table 2.1 on page 68.

This last possibility (d) illuminates the complexity of the ideas of merit and of something’s being better. It reveals that they are not univocal. It is sometimes true that merit is a scalar or cardinal notion (e.g. cost), or a tractable ordinal notion (e.g. ranked preference). In such cases, comparisons may make sense. I may well be able to quantify the cost to me in time, money, and opportunity of pursuing an academic career rather than joining industry now. However there is no reason to think that this will always be the case. Is it obvious that I shall be able to measure or rank my revulsion at the prospect of killing against my concern at making a coward of myself? Or that I can place on a balance my friendship with James and my loyalty to my employer? Incommensurability comes from the introduction of incommensurable considerations, whose effect can be to make the option incommensurable with other options.

Some say we can always at least rank our options, *making* them commensurable. It is not obvious why. Perhaps incommensurable considerations are the source of the problem. Consider commitments as considerations. Commitments have different characters. One makes commitments to oneself, to family, friends, co-workers, lovers. Someone may insist that he could *not* rank these since they were different (in kind) by saying to his wife, “How can you ask me to choose between you and my parents?” What basis is there for insisting that he could (or should)? The insistence seems to depend on the premise that, for any two things, you must be able to say which one you like best (in the same way that children think you can only have one “best” friend). But why accept that? Perhaps because in a situation where we are forced to choose we will choose one. Of course a lot depends on the fact that we are *forced* to choose in these examples, and a lot more will depend on the particular examples and the nature of the force involved. It is still an assumption even in such cases that what is revealed is which *of the two* you prefer *apart* from other considerations. It is itself based on an assumption that other considerations in the nature of the case will not distort the fidelity of describing any choice as between solely those two.

Similarly some say that the rankings show themselves as a kind of *preference* that reveals itself in action. For instance, visiting my father on Sundays rather than spending Sundays with my girlfriend reveals my preference for my father. This is false or a gross distortion. The logic of ‘prefer’—by which I mean its usage and tone—does not extend to these cases. If someone were to say, “I prefer not to kill others,” or, “I prefer to serve my country,” he will be saying it for some kind of, perhaps ironic, effect. These are not things about which one expresses a preference. They are, let us say, matters too grave for mere preference. I cannot say I prefer to believe that courgettes are green. It is not the sort of thing where preference plays a role, as it does in preferring Pinot Noir to Merlot. Nor can I say I prefer to do my duty. Part of acknowledging something as a duty is admitting that it makes a claim on me *independent* from my preferences. Similarly, that I honor a family commitment every Sunday does not show that I *prefer* my father to my girlfriend. Indeed, I may protest that I prefer to spend Sunday with her, but that I feel obligated to see my father. That I do see my father does not make a liar of me in saying sincerely that I would prefer to be with her.

If this is right, then there are significant limits to how ‘preference’ is revealed in action. The distortion in thinking that preference is revealed in action comes from conflating decision and preference or perhaps from running together the observer’s goal of *explaining* actions with individuals’ decisions to act. It is a mistake, or an economist’s simplification, to think that choice reveals preference. It reveals something. It reveals the outcome of a decision-making process, but such outcomes, e.g. decisions, are not best understood as the expression of preference. One might object in the same way to the idea of decision, viz. one does not decide to honor obligations. That is sometimes right, though often not in the case of conflict. In any case, the objection shows more generally how little is gained from focusing on a single notion, viz. preference or decision, in explaining one’s motivation.

Of course we do have preferences which do play a part in our thinking. In reflecting on past girlfriends I may conclude that I prefer brunettes to blondes. The preceding discussion shows that this possibility is limited to only some domains. Also, I may say, after appropriate consideration, that I prefer to believe that his intentions are sound. This is a figure of speech that expresses my decision: that on balance I trust him or that I prefer to rest with my “gut” intuition. It reveals something, e.g. my credulousness, my caution, the

importance I set by giving someone the benefit of the doubt, and so on.

The outcome of a decision-making process—if investigated—always reveals at least one thing. It reveals (if it is investigated) that a question that arose in a particular context was answered by using a set of considerations in reference to some options. Sometimes this results in a decision, which is itself revealed in one or more derivative beliefs, intentions, or actions. This is the truth in the idea that choice is revealing. Of course what we want revealed is an explanation of why *those* considerations and not others were taken as germane, of why those options and not others were considered, and how the decision taken was affected by the context in which the decision was made. The explanation of these things is, I claim, to be made by reference to the understanding of the decision-maker. In the case of moral decisions, facets of someone's moral understanding are revealed by the decisions they make. The elaboration of this point is one of the aims of this thesis.

2.7 Formalizing Decisions as Questions

All the examples so far have had at root some sort of question. We can say *formally* that the process of decision-making is always directed at answering a question. If it were not, it would be mysterious as to what else we should attend to guide the decision-making process. Formally then, we can (partially) characterize any decision-making process by giving the question to which it is directed. Someone's own statement of the question where available usually constrains permissible formulations of the question. I say 'usually' because someone can be self-deceived about their decision-making. A formal characterization of a decision's question has considerable explanatory limits. Formalization can introduce a generality that inhibits deeper or more fine-grained explanations. Worse, the introduction of generality can distort what is to be explained. Here is a cautionary example. Bernard Williams includes as a central component in his account of our moral psychology something he calls our "subjective motivational set." He says of the elements of our subjective motivational set, *S*:

I have discussed *S* primarily in terms of desires, and this term can be used, *formally*, for all elements in *S*. But this terminology may make one forget that *S* can contain such things as dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various *projects* as they be abstractly called,

embodying commitments of the agent.¹⁹

What, though, are we saying when we say we can *formally* treat all of these elements of *S* as desires? Or that our commitments can be described as projects? The idea seems to be that these things have something *common* such that we can call them desires, say they are desire-like, without distortion. Similarly, a commitment is a kind of project I have taken on and so commands my attention. The danger of this way of speaking is that the (logical) grammar with which we speak formally as opposed to informally can be mistakenly thought to apply beyond what is common to both. It is worse when there is no relevant commonality or the commonality is so thin that dependence on it is obscuring.

For instance, it might have been thought a harmless formalism to say that choice reveals preference. However, closer inspection revealed that the grammar of preference does not extend harmlessly to include commitments. Put formally, the logic of preference is importantly distinct from the logic of commitment, where ‘logic’ is equivalent to the conditions for agreement. The concern in Williams’ case is captured in accepting the obvious truism that desires can be motives. However, it is by no means obvious that all motives *are* desires, or even obviously helpful to *describe* all motives as desires. When I decide not to take the Microsoft job because of my concern for those I hired, it is a distortion to say I do so because I desire their well-being at the company. I may or I may not. Either way, that is not what weighs as a consideration in making my decision. Rather, I am concerned about them; I feel responsible to them; I will feel badly if I desert them.

Though I think there is something incorrect and unproductive about the way Williams proceeds here, the discussion here is principally cautionary. Indeed Williams acknowledges the limitations of theoretical categories in for instance the case of ‘person’:

The defects of *person* as a theoretical category represent a failing in that particular proposal, but they also illustrate failings in the theoretical enterprise more generally. How can we come to see the weaknesses of a theoretical concept except by reference to the every day distinctions it is supposed to replace ...?²⁰

I shall return to the form of rules in chapter 7, their ground in chapter 8, and the limits of formal method in chapter 10. The above claim that we can formally characterize in-

¹⁹Bernard Williams, ‘Moral Luck’, in: *Moral Luck: philosophical papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 105, emphasis added.

²⁰Williams, *Ethics and Limits*, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–115.

stances of decision-making using the question to which they are addressed is made in the knowledge—and with the *caveat*—of how modest are the gains in so doing.

2.8 Understanding Questions and Form

One reason for concern about a formal specification is that the question itself rarely encapsulates the *basis* on which we answer the question in decision-making. Specifically, it rarely encapsulates the considerations that bear on the question. We might say that every question has certain things taken as given (“givens”) that constrain the range of acceptable answers. Thus, my question, should I buy a new car, is rather more like saying, “Given that my Volvo is old and broken, that I live in London, etc.; should I buy a new car?” So, to characterize a particular instance of decision-making, we need to integrate the considerations into the form of the question.²¹

Another concern is that the question alone—even as extended above—does not include any sort of instruction about *how to answer* the question. The considerations may be included. But still, that formulation does not include how much care is required, or whether approximations may be used. The “mode” in which the question is asked is not included. As noted before decisions can have grave consequences. It is no light matter whether I go to war. The *form* of the question “Should I go to war?” is not an obvious clue to this though, as it might be asked in the context of a game. Whether the question is one that may be delegated or whether the question demands an answer from me alone is another facet of this concern. This is not to say that the inclusion of these elements in the specification of the question yields questions that are different in kind. Questions regarding grave matters have something in common with those that are less grave. Even more prosaic questions may be asked in different ways, in different contexts. The point is that a question’s linguistic form is not a *definite* determinant of what is understood, or is meant to be understood, by someone trying to answer the question. So much is a basic conclusion of most linguistic theory in any case.

There is a more fundamental obstacle to thinking that decision-making is comprehen-

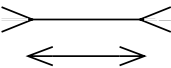
²¹There is an interesting correlation here with Frege’s philosophy and the question of the role and content of the “judgment stroke” (viz. the ‘|’ in ‘-’) in Frege’s formal system. The remaining “content stroke” or “horizontal” represents the content of what is thought or judged, but the judgment stroke represents what is taken as understood in so judging *that* content. Gottlob Frege, ‘Grundgesetze der Arithmetik, Volume I’, in: Michael Beaney, editor, *The Frege Reader*, trans. by Michael Beaney (Blackwell, 1997), p. 215 (p. 9 in the original).

sively characterized by the question to which it is addressed. It can be thought that precisely formulating the question, taking into account the two concerns described above, is the difficult part of decision-making. After that, the thought continues, all that is required is to calculate or determine the answer. However at least one thing further is required: an understanding of the sorts of answers the question demands. Sometimes an answer to a question demands belief, “I have to believe he will be there.” Sometimes it demands an intention, “I’ll guard against my tendency to be critical.” Other times it requires an action like extending one’s hand in friendship. One may doubt whether one could have formulated the question without knowing the kind of answer wanted. It seems possible though. The sceptic’s question (p. 35) is an example. Someone may doubt whether a question must be answered or whether inaction—or indeed withdrawal from the situation—is permissible. Some questions present themselves as quandaries where we may not even know what we don’t know.²² Sometimes this is because a question appears well-formed but is actually nonsensical. Some questions are unanswerable for “merely medical reasons” because for instance the answer would take more than a lifetime to determine.

Moreover, not all questions have right answers (or wrong ones), for they may be dilemmas or not-determined.²³ Nor do they all permit of a best answer, e.g. for reasons of incommensurability. It is misleading then to think that, formally, all questions may be thought of as having wrong and right answers. Even if they did, that would not mean that interesting differences stop there. There are differences in how we are wrong. Sometimes an answer is obviously wrong, other times it seems right but is wrong, as with illusions, e.g. the Müller-Lyer illusion, or semantic puzzles, e.g. the liar paradox.²⁴ As we say, someone can be interestingly wrong or trivially correct, or even pedantically correct. The point to stress is that the form of a question does not exhaust what one understands in deciding an answer. Rather our understanding of what is presupposed explicitly or implicitly by the question is as much a part of the determination of the question as the context in which it arises.

²²For five conditions on being in a quandary, see Wright, ‘On being in a quandary’, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

²³‘Not-determined’ is discussed in §§6.8.

²⁴The illusion is that these two lines are the same length:  but look to be different. One version of the liar paradox is, “This sentence is false.”

2.9 Judgment of Others

This anatomy of decision has been labored to permit discussion of the following claim.

Decision Focus Claim about Judgments My claim is that we critically judge ourselves and others by our decisions, in the first instance.

It is not uncommon to judge others. Here are some examples.

- He is a consumer materialist. He is self-centered. He is amoral.
- He is cavalier. He is gullible. He is incautious. He is meticulous.
- He's a fine person. He's a man of integrity. He is kind.
- He is superficial. He is glib. He is self-serving.
- He is sentimental. His ideas are banal. He has no morals.
- He is innumerate. He is idealistic. He is earnest.
- He is vain. He is insensitive. He is all monstrous inventiveness.
- He was right about that. He is wrong.
- He is a realist. He is thoughtful. He is a good man.

The claim is that these judgments take decisions as their objects. So, in "Your buying that Saab was rather materialistic" the judgment is that of being materialistic, and the object is a specific instance of buying a Saab. Where a person makes many such decisions we may judge that he is a consumer materialist, in which case the judgment's object is the person or his character. The judgment is of an individual. We can of course speak of a common view being, say, banal, but in so doing we mean to judge those who endorse the view, not some notional "common deliberator." Judging people is discussed further in §2.10

In the discussion that follows I do not assume that judgments of people and their decisions can be formally taken as either "right" or "wrong." The vocabulary used in the examples above makes fine-grained distinctions in our judgments that do not reduce readily to right and wrong—or indeed any binary distinction such as correct or incorrect. It is not obvious that such reductions should *always* be possible. The judgments have the form they do—use the vocabulary they do—to focus the judgment on one or more ways in which our decisions deviate from an ideal. These deviations are of the kinds outlined previously (§§2.5–2.6) which were pluralistic rather than dualistic in character.

Judgments use a particular vocabulary because that vocabulary appeals to an independent ground for its correctness, or more precisely to what is indicative of the independence of grounds. In this sense, the form of our judgments can admit of a certain kind of objectivity—or again what are indicative of the hallmarks of objectivity. The ideas of independence and objectivity will be developed further in chapters 4 and 7.

Moreover a basis presents itself for distinguishing amongst discourses so-called. Discourses need not be distinguished on the basis of vocabulary alone but on the basis for criticism—what we can call the ‘critical protocols’—such as decision-making ideals, on which criticism and correction depend.²⁵ The use of ‘critical’ here marks a judgment made with reference to an ideal to which a decision might have aspired. In that sense, criticism is relative to an ideal. Criticism identifies deviations (or not) from an ideal—i.e. freedom from error—so in that sense too freedom from error is a form of merit in the sense given above.

For any decision (critically) judged, there are broadly four *foci*:

- (w) response to the call to decide
- (x) the diligence of the decision-making process
- (y) the considerations employed
- (z) understanding the significance of the outcome

The emphasis in what follows is on critical judgments that a decision is deviant or lacking or mistaken in some way. This does not rule out praise. For now, we can take praise as the converse of negative critical judgment. Praise, on this view, is a judgment that someone’s decisions (and the actions *et al* that result) is a superior instantiation of some decision-making ideal. The more perfect one becomes perhaps, the more immediate is one’s realization of decisions in accord with an ideal. At the limit, one may show one’s perfection by which options are immediately discarded or not even considered. In chapter 5, I shall argue that sometimes decision and action are integral, indivisible.

²⁵This distinction is illustrated with respect to moral and prudential discourses in chapter 9.

Type w

It was asserted above that people often believe or act with little thought, *automatically* as it were. One focus of judgment (w) is that acting automatically, i.e. without thinking, was inappropriate in the circumstance. The person should have realized that a considered decision was needed. In these cases, we say of someone that they are, e.g. careless, hasty, insensitive, or cavalier. Suppose that when I was asked to layoff James, I did so without hesitation. Suppose James asks indignantly how I could have done it. I tell him I never really thought about it, I just did it. He may ask pointedly, “Weren’t you a bit hasty?” He may continue, “Did you consider how it might feel coming from you?” That complaint frames the question that comes close to characterizing the decision I failed to consider. The pointed question is a critical judgment that this second question needed to be addressed, and not with an *unthinking* response—though the actual absence of thought is a limit case of insufficient thought concerning the question needing an answer. I am, in James’ judgment, insensitive and hasty because I failed to consider how he might feel. It is in this case not the judgment that my decision *as such* was blameworthy, but rather my blindness to this circumstance as one requiring deliberation. We might say that for me the question did not come up. In line with my remarks about perfection though, a question may arise whose answer arises just as quickly.

Type x

Type w can be distinguished from type x since the question *does* come up but is handled without due diligence. We may again say that the person has been hasty, but we mean that the decision-making *process* was needlessly rushed. We may also say that she was cavalier, dismissive, careless, or irresponsible and much else perhaps. Suppose that while speaking to the headhunter I consider my responsibilities to my employees and make my decision by the end of the phone call. It will be true to say, if asked, that I *did* think about the question. But if I am asked how long or how hard, I shall have to say a few minutes, and probably not too hard. I may be challenged to explain why I think the matter only deserved a few minutes of thought. The focus of this criticism is not one of the content of either the question or the considerations employed in deciding. The challenge is fundamentally adverbial—the *way* I decided is suspect. The critical judgment

is that I have somehow misunderstood the diligence appropriate to the question. In this sense, what is being criticized is my understanding of the mode in which the question has been asked. This kind of criticism is common in challenging how a belief was decided. We say that someone was gullible, ingenuous, or foolish. In arithmetic contexts we say someone was careless, though perhaps not innumerate.

Type y

In saying colloquially that someone is innumerate, we mean that they do not manipulate numbers with facility. There are other senses of innumeracy that connote lack of some mathematical concepts. These senses are likely though to feature in critical judgments with a third focus, type y: the considerations used are inadequate, inexhaustive, or misunderstood. We can say that these critical judgments—viz. (type y)—have as their foci the form of the questions to which our decisions are answers.

Why has ‘decision’ been applied as broadly as it has?²⁶ Is it right to say that we *decide* the solutions to, e.g., mathematical problems? I have allowed that much of what we do is effectively automatic. Most of our ordinary mathematical reasoning fits this category, but not all. One may choose one proof over another because it is more elegant or does not use a disputed theorem. Indeed, mathematicians and computer scientists speak of the beauty of one proof compared to another. It is a misunderstanding to think that such judgments are only shorthand for simplicity or parsimony. In computer science, one often balances speed, size, and elegance in selecting algorithms and their implementations. It is however within the purview of the programmer to say what is to be balanced and how. Often it is his individual idea of what balance is that makes him an admirable programmer. In higher mathematics and theoretical physics, the considerations that may be brought in favor of a theory are broader and more contentious, such as manifestability, tractability, and conformity to an intuitive sense of order. Was it a theoretical or scientific consideration Einstein offered when he said he could not believe that God played dice with the universe? The account of decision offered depends centrally on the idea of considerations like those above; ones that essentially characterize the question being decided. This characterization was called above the “givens” of the question, e.g. “Given that any theory must be tractable

²⁶One reason is that it carries less philosophical baggage than the Aristotelian term of art ‘deliberation’.

...” Complex mathematical (and scientific) reasoning fit within the scope of my account of decision without difficulty.

The givens should not be understood as being, as it were, determined entirely by the nature of the question. Rather, any answer to a question is only fully understood as an answer to that question when it includes what is *taken* as given (even if tacitly) in the premises, methodological assumptions, and considerations. The considerations—and more broadly the givens—employed in answering a question are how we make decisions our own. We make a question our own by what we add to the formulation of the question. We can discriminate between one understanding of a question/answer pair and another by what we must attribute to someone to explain that decision and not another. This broadly Fregean idea of differing cognitive significance as the basis of individual content attribution has been developed by Peacocke into his “Discrimination Principle.”²⁷

Of course, we often agree about the considerations, and thus the formulation of the question. We can share questions, in that sense. In cases of agreement, something further will explain different decisions in response to the *same* question. Different decisions often stem precisely from which considerations are taken to apply. An aim of this thesis is to develop a conception of understanding sufficiently rich to explain why people take this or that consideration as applying. The nature of that understanding will unfold over chapters 4 to 8.

One way to see the distinction I am trying to articulate is to see that sometimes we agree or disagree about the *form* of the question (i.e. roughly, the words used in the question), and sometimes we disagree about the meaning of the question (i.e. roughly, the significance of the question and its considerations).²⁸ Disagreement in the second precise sense is not possible unless there is already agreement in the first sense.²⁹ When wondering whether to take the Microsoft job, if I don’t consider the people I have hired, we may try and highlight the *absence* of that consideration by saying that I am self-serving, or self-centered. The judgment in that case marks the absence of a consideration, however it could just as well mark an exaggerated importance if instead I were called ambitious, i.e. placing my ambitions before much else. In the same vein, I might be judged vain for

²⁷For more detail see Christopher Peacocke, *A study of concepts* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 203–208, §8.2.

²⁸This corresponds roughly to a linguistic distinction between a theory of sense and theory of force or pragmatics.

²⁹The idea of these two, primary and secondary, senses is elaborated in §7.4.

giving undue weight to the prospect of owning a Saab convertible. We mark traits that may have due application elsewhere, such as being pragmatic or earnest, when they are out of place, say in deciding whether to confront Mike in the example above.

Type z

There is a fourth focus of critical judgments: their effectiveness. Here, people appear to agree on the form, but disagree on the outcome, in their decisions. There are different kinds of disagreement. For instance, we may agree which considerations are germane to the question of whether most politicians are well intentioned, yet still disagree about their intentions. We agree the considerations are germane, agree how they apply and neither of us recognizes a “calculation error”. However, I am satisfied and you are not. The difference shows itself in my assent to the claim and your assent to the contrary—or your withholding judgment. To be clear, we might both agree that there is a warranted presumption against the good intentions of politicians. However, I find the considerations in favor of their good intentions sufficient to overcome the presumption. You may find the same considerations inconclusive and so remain with the presumption. Or you may find them sufficient only to remove the presumption, so you withhold assent or dissent. The distinction is between whether a decision-making process is *conclusive* or *inconclusive*, e.g. when confronting a presumption. We may explain the difference by saying, e.g. that someone is cautious, prudent, circumspect or rigorous. Alternatively we say someone is liberal, intuitive, catholic or generous. Another reason a decision-making process may be inconclusive is if it results in an unsatisfying outcome, in the sense developed above when discussing dilemmas (type c).

We may instead both make *conclusive* decisions. One may heed the call to war, the other the call of conscience; again, one may remain unresolved. The form of the outcome is different. The question is then pointed as to where the difference in the decision-making processes lie. Close inspection may reveal a difference of the third kind (type y), in considerations. However it may not. Instead a difference that is not a matter of degree may be at work. We agree that a consideration of cowardice is pre-eminently salient in responding to the call to war *and* to the same *degree*, viz. pre-eminent. Yet, one thinks it cowardly to avoid the hazards of combat while the other thinks it cowardly to consent in an unjust

war, say. Further examination through discussion may reveal that what cowardice *means* to us is different, though not in any sense that would cause either to object to the dictionary definition. The difference is one that ramifies in any decision of how to answer the call to war. One means it as the opposite of what is sometimes called physical courage, the other as the opposite of moral courage so-called. So, there is commonality of form in the question but a distinction in meaning, expressed naturally enough by saying that they *understand* different things by the question at issue.

There is a further distinction available. Again we both make *conclusive* decisions. Again we agree about the *form* of the question. We appear also to agree about the decisions—i.e. they are the same—but we differ in the import we attach to the outcome. By ‘import’ I mean whether the decision made is *effective* in actually moving one to action. Suppose we are in identical situations and are both offered plum jobs at Microsoft. We talk about it and agree that taking the job would be poor. We agree that leaving would short-change our employers and leave our teams exposed. However, one takes the job and the other does not. For one the decision that leaving would be poor was effective, for the other it was ineffective. How can that be, what explains the difference? Suppose further investigation reveals no further difference beyond one of us actually taking the job. We review the salient considerations, their applications, their inter-relations, their support for the conclusion and what the conclusion is. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of our recitals and agreements. What are we to say? I think we should not simply chalk this up to weakness of will, viz. *akrasia*.³⁰

The explanation, I suggest, lies in a difference of meaning or understanding, though not in any philosophically technical sense of those terms. Acting poorly, short-changing others, leaving others exposed means something to one such that he does not take the job. For one the meaning of the decision is *expressed* by refusing the job. For the other the meaning of the decision is expressed by their assent to the statement, “Leaving would be poor,” but not in refusing the job. He takes it anyway. The decisions appear to differ in their import and they then appear as different decisions. In a sense, this is right, but returns the emphasis to the form or content of the decision rather than leaving it on the decision-maker. To restore the emphasis to the decision-maker, it is better to say that each *understands* the meaning (or import) of the decision differently. One of us takes the

³⁰I shall discuss weakness of the will further in chapters 5 & 6.

decision's significance, if accepted, as precluding taking the job. Their understanding stands between them and the job. For the other, it is as if he were to say, "I see that it would be acting poorly, but I am going to do it anyway." His understanding of what it is to act poorly is such that he can do it anyway.

The anatomy is now complete. The judgment types and their foci are summarized in the following tables. Their complexity and the variety of the vocabulary by which we express these judgments is primary data for any account of moral understanding (and moral psychology) to explain. The use of this vocabulary forms the provisional functional specification promised.

Table 2.1: Focus of Type z Judgments

Outcomes	Merit		Response
Satisfying	Commensurable & Determinate		In/Conclusive
Unsatisfying	Type ³¹	Description	In/Effective
	<i>a</i>	Uniform Demerit	
	<i>b</i>	Trivial Merit	
	<i>c</i>	Dilemma	
	<i>d</i>	Incommensurable	

Table 2.2: Focus of Type y Judgments

Assessment of	Type ³²	Deviation Description
Options & Considerations	<i>i</i>	Option Overlooked
	<i>ii</i>	Consideration Misapplied
	<i>iii</i>	Consideration Overlooked
	<i>iv</i>	Considerations Jointly Misapplied
Merit	<i>v</i>	Calculation Error, Cognitive Misfire

2.10 Judging People and Personal Responsibility

We mark the various above distinctions with critical judgments of people. Some examples follow.

- Acting poorly means little to him.

³¹See page 54 for the discussion of type z deviations.

³²See page 52 for the discussion of type y deviations.

³³See page 54 for the discussion of type x deviations.

Table 2.3: Focus of Type x Judgments

Mode in which Question is "asked"	
Facet ³³	Description
Immediacy	Urgency or need of answering
Gravity	Caution or care required in answering
Context	Conversational context of question
Response	Required outcome is belief/action/principle
Domain	Bases for criticism

- For him, leaving the team exposed would be wrong; he wouldn't do it.
- She is conscientious about career decisions.
- Leaving them in the lurch did not mean much to him, anyway not enough to stay.
- He feels his obligations more keenly than others.
- He is not idealistic that way.

Judgments allow precisely the distinctions remarked upon with criticisms of decisions of types w–z. There is a contrast between making a close examination of someone's work to judge (make a determination of) that they are innumerate and judging (determine that) they are careless. There are of course further differences too. Sometimes judgments are like descriptions, other times like accusations. Attending to errors can focus on a lack or malfunction of *ability*. This is the case where someone is simply poor at math. It is like a description. The criticism may commend a response yet not demand it. Other times more is intended by a judgment: the impugning of character or the prescription of redress. My judgment that you are cavalier is meant *critically* insofar as it aims to focus the *responsibility* on you and correct your decision-making. Nagel describes the personal focus thus:

Moral judgement of a person is judgement not of what happens to him, but of him. It does not say merely that a certain event or state of affairs is fortunate or unfortunate or even terrible. It is not an evaluation of a state of the world, or of an individual as part of the world. We are not thinking just that it would be better if he were different or did not exist, or had not done some of the things he has done. We are judging him, rather than his existence or characteristics.³⁴

Personal responsibility is the typical facet of moral judgments of others, as opposed to non-moral judgments. Insofar as you accept the *critical authority* I speak with, my criticism, when accurate, makes a demand on you. So much is dependent on the ideas of its

³⁴Thomas Nagel, 'Moral Luck', in: *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 36.

being criticism and your *accepting* it. (The idea of critical authority—my authority to criticize you—is the subject of chapter 8.) However, you may reject my critical authority. Or you may accept it but cite exculpating factors that diminish your responsibility such as being tired, poorly trained, under unreasonable pressures, or unsuited to meticulous work. These considerations combine toward undermining the judgment. At the limit, they may vitiate the judgment such that I withdraw it because it is not correct to hold you responsible. Thinking the judgment no longer correct depends in part on thinking that there are standards of correctness for the terms of the judgment. One source for the application of these terms to this judgment will be an ideal governing this domain of decision-making and discourse. The ideal in question is of course the same one mentioned in the discussion of deviations from ideals. In speaking of an ideal from which we may recognizably deviate it was stressed that no universal over-arching ideal is internal to this account of decisions. It is sufficient to secure the idea of an ideal as the basis of these judgments that the decision-maker is willing to judge himself by his own ideals at least. I discuss further the possibility of being unwilling to judge oneself in chapters 3, 4 and 6 and the consequences of acting on personal rather than shared ideals in chapters 7 and 9.

There are at least two strong objections to making moral judgments with moral responsibility as we do. First, it is no doubt common to say that critical moral judgments of your decisions focus on *you* (as well as your decision). But what kind of individuality are we highlighting (or italicizing) by emphasizing ‘you’? Someone could object that they did no different than anyone else would do, or any animal with similar drives? What is the object of this “individualized” judgment: a soul, an idea of a person, a human being, a mind, a will, a brain? Is it merely an individual in Strawson’s sense of something that is not cognized under a kind (or sortal) term, but does not otherwise implicate one’s *character*?³⁵ Relatedly, it is a commonplace that many, if not all, decisions are the product of forces outside our control—e.g. social circumstance, parentage, genetics, and dumb luck.³⁶ If that is right, on what basis, if any, can we assign individual or personal responsibility to others?

These challenges taken together obscure a distinct conception of a responsible individual toward whom our judgments are directed. Is our entire practice of judging others incoherent for the lack of a proper object? This will be a central concern for chapters 3

³⁵P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959).

³⁶In moral philosophy this concern has famously been discussed in Williams, ‘Moral Luck’, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–39; Nagel, ‘Moral Luck’, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–38.

through 6.

For now, I claim that judging others through criticism is a pervasive practice. Examples abound above and in common experience. These judgments are directed toward others and toward ourselves. Moreover, in the moral case we hold others responsible in our critical judgments. Examples abound again. We hold ourselves responsible characteristically by our *regret* and sometimes our *remorse* for what we have done.³⁷

I may come to see that it was vanity to think it so important to confront Mike when I did. I could have waited, perhaps until Mike was better able to take my criticism. Perhaps I will feel remorse for challenging Mike. I may think I have wronged him, making him a victim of my vanity. By remorse I mean the kind of anguish I have over my vanity and what I have done—the wrong I have done—to Mike while in vanity's grip.

We regret some of our actions, wishing that we had not done them, or not been in the circumstances that required them. I may regret having chosen an academic career. My regret stems partly from my responsibility—I could have abandoned my academic career—and perhaps from how it has turned out. I may find it regrettable that the country is going to war now, while I am of an age to fight. I may regret confronting Mike, though I still think it was the right decision to do so. There are similarities in these cases. It is not my fault that the country is going to war now, and it is not my fault that I did not foresee dire consequences in confronting Mike. I am *responsible* in the latter case, but in a way which is partly circumscribed by the limitations of my capacities to decide, to determine the best course of action. On the other hand, the possibility of error remains.

The answer I shall give in chapters 8 and 9 to the above challenges to our practice of criticism and judgment is that we have a moral understanding of our responsibility to others in our lives with them. Sven Lindqvist, for example, reflects his present understanding of our relation to others, "We are not born human. We become that. We become that through solidarity with each other. We become that by taking responsibility." In contrast, he remorsefully reflects on his past failings, his self-deception, "That is the kind of person I wanted to be. I thought I was that kind of person."³⁸ He expresses anguish at the kind of person he was, an anguish that is conditioned by his sense of responsibility for what he has done to others and with others. His anguish is in part at his failures of solidarity, his

³⁷I shall return to regret and remorse in chapter 6.

³⁸Sven Lindqvist, *Desert Divers*, trans. by Joan Tate (Granta Books, 2000), p. 109.

failures in how he has lived with others.

There is obviously something superficially absurd in Lindqvist saying we are not born human. I think he means that we become people—live the lives of people—by how we learn to live with and understand the lives of others, i.e. their characteristic forms and deviations. That distinction will require a further one between personal agency and the life within which such agency is exercised. It is also a basis for a start on elaborating a moral understanding that permits distinctions between the responsibility for that which we author and for that which we do not—or for that which is independent and that which is dependent (or inter-dependent). I shall further develop this distinction in chapter 4.

3 Persons, Lives and Context

I wonder if I am not yet again talking about myself. Shall I be incapable, to the end, of lying on any other subject?

Malone Dies
SAMUEL BECKETT

3.1 Is Judgment Avoidable?

Central to my discussion of decision-making was the idea that there is *someone* to whom the form of a question (including its considerations) has a particular import in decision-making. These two—form and someone—are intimately related in our judgment practices. I am judged responsible for my decision-making because some considerations (some form) and not others are important to me. I am, we might say, *responsible* for what I take as important. And, I am typically *held* responsible for what is important to me. In judging another, one focus was on the considerations that were central to his decision. The previous chapter discussed without resolving an obscurity in the question of *what* is being judged when we judge others. The working position offered was that one is judged on how one understood the question one was deciding, i.e. having this form, those considerations.

But why should this provide a basis for judgment, even if that basis was used to decide? Suppose someone says that they are indifferent to or agnostic about the considerations employed in his decisions. I call them ‘his’ because it results in a decision he does not disclaim. Though, he insists, that is not to take responsibility for the action in any sense that licenses personal moral appraisal. He disclaims personal responsibility for those considerations. Suppose he adds that he could readily use different considerations next time, as if to say:

I did consider James when deciding whether to lay him off. So what? With what necessity does it follow that James is important to me. I can prove my indifference by making the decision again (supposing it is possible) without regard to James’, e.g., feelings.

This Hume-inspired objection may be summarized as follows. Grant my account of decision-making: decisions are based on considerations, mode, etc. as they bear on some question arising in a situation. Just that does not demonstrate or require that I care about the various grounds by which I decided. Thus, decisions based on them are not grounds for a judgment of *me*. In its strongest form this objector may reject an ideal—even his own—conformity to which they aspire to in their decisions, thus insulating him from criticism.

For example, imagine someone who blows with the prevailing wind, changing their mind to suit their audience. In response to criticism they change their mind, adopting the same ideals, decisions and responses as their criticizer. Some politicians are accused of wanting to be all things to all men, or of never having met an idea they did not like. Those in thrall, like “groupies,” are another example. Or imagine a free spirit who changes as he wishes with willful disregard for his previous thoughts or actions—a recusant from consistency.¹ One could imagine Oscar Wilde or another bohemian saying he cared not a fig for consistency or the past.

To be sure we have many descriptions for such people—spineless, wanton², craven—but it is not obvious that the criticisms (and their implicit prescription to change) *must* carry any weight, least of all with such people. It is unlikely there are people who are *always* inconsistent, though most are sometimes inconsistent. Most people betray an interest in consistency in at least some domains. It is sufficient to motivate the objection that some people are sometimes this way—or are logically possible. The possibility is a standing rebuke to our practice of morally judging people as I have described.

One response to this rebuke is to claim that judgment, responsibility, ownership, value are unavoidable. According to this view taking responsibility for our decisions is an unavoidable consequence of our process of decision-making. Roughly, it is integral to deciding at all that we are opened to moral judgment and criticism. Sometimes this is made a constraint on reasoning *tout court*. One is sometimes, in David Wiggins’ phrase, unavoidably “in the path” of moral questions and there is nothing else to think or do other than to

¹Consider a recent example of willful sexual abandon, documented in Catherine Millet, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*, trans. by Adriana Hunter (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2002).

²Though ordinarily ‘wanton’ has had a licentious connotation, philosophically it has come to mean someone with no higher order policies governing his actions, following Harry Frankfurt, ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of A Person’, in *Journal of Philosophy* 68:1 (1971), pp. 5–20.

answer the question.³ A simpler thought is that one is responsible for, or owns, one's life and all it does and will contain, including decisions and decision-making as well as much of the context in which they occurred. Roughly, "It's your fault, because it's your life." If right, then being judged morally, morality itself, is in some sense inescapable. Put that way, I think the response to the rebuke is false, though I will not argue against it directly here, reserving discussion for chapter 9.

Instead, I think that both claims, viz. radical freedom in decision and inescapable responsibility, indicate a genuine tension in decision-making and moral judgment. Specifically, the tension arises when characterizing the *context* of decision-making. I argued in chapter 2 that an explanation of an individual's decision must usually advert to the decision-making context in which the question "arose" and the person's understanding of that context. I will argue that contexts for decisions are individual because they are conditioned by their occurrence within deciding individuals' lives and the understanding of those lives as the lives of individuals.

To do this I shall first argue for the importance of the concept of a *life* in contradistinction to the concept of a *person* or agent that is usually central to moral philosophy. A central element in that distinction is the dynamic between how a life is a product of activity and circumstances—where one's contribution to the latter is passive. This active and passive dynamic will recur here and throughout, viz. in my discussion of the will in chapter 5, of our determinations in chapter 6, of what is natural and what becomes natural in chapter 7, and the way our relations are both intended and imposed in chapter 8. I hope to accommodate it, rather than eliminate it. A richer concept of a life improves our understanding of what in our context is "given"—by which I mean, not-chosen. The concept of a person explains, complementarily, that of our context that is not given, i.e. is chosen. An improved understanding of context within lives will lead to a tentative conclusion that while the Hume-inspired rebuke is not false, neither is it as broadly applicable as intended.

My argument will begin from generalities in how we use the words 'life' and 'person'. Our usage in this area marks important differences in, e.g., the range of excuses we are willing to accept.⁴ 'Life' is a word with many senses. A dog does not have a life in the

³David Wiggins, 'Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism and Motivating Moral Beliefs', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 91 (1991), pp. 61–85.

⁴Cf. J. L. Austin, 'A Plea for Excuses', in: J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, editors, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 123–152.

same sense in which a human does.⁵ Nor shall I claim that one concept—life or person—is the more important. Indeed, there is no such profitable contest and the distinction may not always be available. But raising the profile and detail of the concept of a life will allow an elaboration of how we understand lives as networks with a particular character, of being more or less ordinary, as being shared or overlapping. That elaboration is also a contribution to how our moral understanding is realized by our knowledge of how our life is our own.

3.2 Formal Specification of Practical Context

I said decision-making can be characterized in part by the question at which it is directed. Let me expand that formal characterization, by which I mean not how someone necessarily would express the question to which they are attending, but how a theoretician might characterize the form of such questions (or how those questions might feature in an argument).⁶ Moral decision-making is *formally* always addressed at the question in its immediate form as, “What should I do?” and in its reflective form as, “How should I live or be?” Ernst Tugendhat characterizes these as practical questions. By ‘practical’ he is emphasizing that these questions have arisen as demanding an answer. He characterizes practical questions further by asking what is presupposed by them.

First, a practical question always concerns one’s own or common acting, doing, living, or being in the first person singular or plural. Second, it always concerns one’s own future or a common future that is more or less immediate or distant. Third, the question (whether narrow or comprehensive) would not be raised if I were not concerned or did not care about my activity (or in some cases my life), that is, if this were not an *issue* for me (and this is also true when caring involves others). Fourth, the practical question (whether posed narrowly or comprehensively) implies that I have a certain latitude for free decision, since otherwise there could be nothing about which to raise a question. Fifth, the practical question also implies that there are boundaries to the freedom; in those cases in which nothing is given, there is nothing that requires deliberation. It is given to me that I find myself in precisely such and such a situation, that I have such and such a character, and finally that I exist at all. Sixth, we not only find ourselves in a specific framework of free choice *when* we raise the practical question, but we also have the freedom to raise or not

⁵A distinction between biological and moral senses of life is discussed at length in chapter 4.

⁶See chapter 7 for more on arguments.

raise the practical question. Seventh, the practical question always signifies, What is better?⁷

Tugendhat's presuppositions are an excellent provisional development of the formal context of any moral question. That context includes, from the first three considerations at least, our life—even in hypothetical or reflective decision-making. A context is often a common one, one that is shared because for others the question has also come up or the question is also their concern. Importantly, Tugendhat notes that a context is rarely entirely of one's own making.

Formal specifications enrich our understanding in limited ways. Other elaborations of the formal question are possible. In §2.7, several caveats were offered regarding the limits of formal specifications. For example, one might dispute Tugendhat's second point, if one thought that acting for the past—in deciding to atone or do penance for past wrongs—is not rightly described as concerning "one's own future." I will work, therefore, with examples and linguistic usage principally rather than formal schemata—though the elaboration I offer is consistent with the formal points above.

3.3 Individual Contexts

Specific illustrations can focus attention on a distinction between a person and a life; and one's understanding of one's responsibility for what is within and without one's control. The son of Adolf Eichmann, the convicted Nazi war criminal, might feel that in matters regarding racism he was obligated by his parentage to err on the side of caution. This could mean that an action permissible for another, might be impermissible for him. So while he might be against affirmative action on social principle alone, he might refrain from expressing his view. He may feel that any expression from *him* on matters of race would have the taint of insensitivity or incaution. As he understands his personal identity, he should avoid even a shadow of doubt over him. This, we take it follows from how he takes personal responsibility for being Eichmann's son. This need not be in tension with his understanding that others take his parentage and its import differently. The possibilities for shame may reflect this difference.⁸

⁷Ernst Tugendhat, *Self-consciousness and self-determination*, trans. by Paul Stern (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 172–173.

⁸See §6.3.

This can go the other way too. A Jew might think that given the history of Jewish persecution there is nothing more shameful than a racist Jew.⁹ He thinks, of all people, he should need no lesson about the immorality, or consequences of racism. He takes it that for him, this follows from being a Jew, from his having that ethnic identity. His understanding that it follows is one way he takes responsibility for a fact of his life. Indeed, one might think that we who live in the aftermath of the Holocaust—whose history includes the Holocaust—must consider matters of intolerance with an extra vigilance. This could mean that what we now find unacceptable might have been acceptable—or at least not morally blameworthy—to those living before the Holocaust. This is not because we *now* know that intolerance is wrong, but because we understand how terrible its consequences may be. That understanding elevates our concern regarding the seeds of intolerance. We are, as we say, living in our own times, and we may take responsibility for *that* fact—indeed we may think that our actions should acknowledge the wrongs done to the Holocaust’s dead.

Less dramatically perhaps, imagine two employees who discover their supervisor embezzling money. One employee feels a debt to the supervisor for having been a mentor to him. Though he thinks the supervisor is doing wrong and should be punished, because of the debt he understands himself to have, he thinks it would be wrong for *him* to blow the whistle. Even so, he may think that blowing the whistle would be right for another employee who is not similarly indebted, or one that did not feel indebted as he does. Indeed, the indebted employee may support the other employee’s efforts to blow the whistle, while maintaining it would be wrong for him to blow the whistle. The example could be more acute if, as in some countries, a whistle blower stood to gain financially for his whistle blowing.

The example’s point (and those above) is that the understanding of his debt as salient to blowing the whistle conditions the context of deciding this matter in a way that goes beyond the narrow specification of asking whether one (anyone) should turn in those one knows to be doing wrong. His understanding of the context of his decision is one that is individual insofar as it takes account of his individual circumstances, viz. that this man was his mentor. That is not yet to say whether he thinks anyone in his indebted circumstances should decide as he does, that question arises in chapter 5. However it does show that if we are to do justice to our moral understanding, we shall have to allow that

⁹A true story of a racist Jew who was motivated by shame was adapted in a 2001 film, “The Believer.”

considerations stemming from the individual decision maker feature in decision-making. The pertinent question is how we understand a context and how it is conditioned by facts about the individual such as who he is, the time in which he lives, what he has done or who he has known.

3.4 Need for and Benefits of A Distinction

An emphasis on the lives that people live rather than persons themselves is helpful for detailing our understanding of lives as contexts. My focus is on developing a conception of a person's life. One reason for this is that the term 'person' is not well-defined, though perhaps no worse than 'life'. As a moral philosophical term of art, 'person' is of relatively recent minting.¹⁰ Indeed, prior to the twentieth century it was more usual to speak of a man, or a human being, or a subject. For the last five hundred years, 'person' was a legal term referring to a legal *persona* which was itself composed of rights, duties, rank and property—themselves within the gift of the monarch. In eighteenth century English it would have been correct to say that a foreigner in Britain was “no person” (“had no person”) because he was without legal recognition or identity until made “personable” by the monarch.

Within contemporary philosophy, 'agent' is commonly used to discuss decision-making. This is however a bare conception used to narrow the focus to someone's agency. 'Agency' there means something like the *power* of acting or deciding. The model of decision-making given suggested that there is rather more to understanding someone's decisions than assessing his power to decide. What is needed is not only a basis on which he decides, but also *how* he decides, i.e. the understanding he has of the situation such that he decides as he does. The power of seeing a decision through enters later. It is not my intention to suggest that there is something wrong with 'person' or that we should stop using it. Rather I shall demonstrate that talk of our lives is perspicuous without being reduced to or “cashed out” as talk of persons. Indeed, I also think that there are times when our talk of persons is *better* understood as referring to lives. Sometimes of course, we speak loosely of both using one word; or it can be unclear which we mean. That does not, I think, undermine

¹⁰Frankfurt acknowledges Ayer, Strawson and Russell's earlier use of the term in a metaphysical sense concerned with unifying mental and physical predicates. Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of A Person', *op. cit.*, p. 5.

the claim that sometimes a better understanding come from taking them as distinct.

Saying someone is physically strong is something we can verify without knowing anything of his life. Indeed a pathologist might determine it post-mortem. Suppose I say someone has a superior spatial reasoning ability. Again, that seems something we could determine just by reviewing the results of standardized tests. These things are intrinsic to the person, but contrary to an unreflective view not everything personal is similar.

Suppose though I say someone works well with others, that they are a “team player.” This is not the sort of thing I can investigate using medical examinations or standardized tests.¹¹ One needs to know something of how he actually work with others. More than that, an examination of the individual’s actions alone is insufficient for confirming an assessment. Rather, one needs to observe those he interacts with, their activities, his actions in relation to them, etc. These things are extrinsic to the person. Saying that someone is a team player is rather saying something of their inter-personal relations: now, in the past, and predictably for the future.

The point is not merely an epistemic one regarding assessment of intrinsic or extrinsic properties. These inter-personal relations need not be beliefs or affective responses. They are, I suggest, just that, existent relations.¹² Talking about these relations—about someone as a team player—will not succeed if the sole focus is on the *person*. Rather the wider relations surrounding a person—the context of the person—must be our attention’s object. Identifying those wider relations with someone’s *life* is what I shall urge below.

It might be objected that the right way to think of the relation between a person and a life is as a *thing* acquired by a person. This is encouraged by the possessive idiom with which we often speak in the vernacular: *Get* a life; he *has* no life; he had a hard life. These ways of speaking suggest a thing which we might abandon or misplace—or even construct. This substantive idiom is no part of my view. No metaphysical claim is made or needed about the constitutions of persons and lives or their relation. The distinctions offered below are not intended as a contribution to the philosophical problem of personal identity (though I make some modest remarks below).

The claim I am making is that a good understanding of people and their decisions re-

¹¹The evidence regarding personality profile tests offered commercially is not robust enough in my view to call my claim into question.

¹²‘Relation’ may be given whatever philosophical account one inclines toward. My arguments depend only on the possibility of attending to relations in our thoughts, no different from, e.g., spatial relations.

quires clear conceptions of lives and persons. A component of the clear conceptions comprehends how lives can be taken as distinct or not; distinct from each other and from the persons whose lives they are. Another component comprehends how lives *generally* go such that we can describe particular lives and the persons whose lives they are. Though my distinct conceptions emerge from the ordinary distinctions we make in language, my refinement of it makes the conceptions that emerge—‘person’ and ‘life’—semi-technical. It may seem that I am distinguishing individuals (*continua*) and lives (*qua* a complex event) suggesting each has morally salient properties. That is correct, but unclear and off-beam. My claim is better put by saying that humans depend on lives for their “personhood”¹³ and a life is a collection of relations over time that depends on the bodily causal agency of a human animal. The focus on an agent and his agency tends to emphasize the intrinsic power to act, suggesting that the locus of moral attention to oneself as an individual is similarly intrinsic, e.g. one’s projects, integrity, principles, etc. My emphasis on a life is a corrective to this assumption and its consequences.

These conceptions and distinctions are relevant to decision-making contexts discussed above. Our understanding of people (including oneself) and their lives (including one’s own) is a basis for our understanding of a decision-making context wherein an individual’s decision reveals what is important to him, what he values. Only by having a clear distinction between how we are alike and how we are individuals can we make progress in understanding how a particular context is like and unlike others because of factors peculiar (possibly unique) to the individuals in those contexts.

3.5 Ruined Lives

The foregoing said, no better way is available to argue for the perspicacity afforded by the distinctions I am urging than by cases that demonstrate increased perspicuity. When we say, “Robert’s life was ruined by his time in the trenches,” must we mean something about how a *person* was changed? That is obviously the case if we said a sprinter’s sports career was ruined by a car accident that cost him his leg. There, he can no longer run and if running “was his life” then the ruination is plain. Can we not take it sometimes at face value that a *life* was ruined and not a person? Suppose that Robert shows no

¹³Recall Lindqvist’s remark on page 71. See also chapter 4.

incapacity from the experience. He is not shell-shocked, he was not wounded, he speaks of it sometimes with humor, sometimes with seriousness, but always with equanimity. He is effectively unharmed, is not disabled as such, not phobic or prone to nightmares. If we are to insist that his life was ruined we mean, I think, that his life was *stained* by the experience. And that might be because a kind of purity or cleanliness that his life might have had is now an impossibility. It is, we might say, deformed or disfigured. A deformation implies a form against which it is a deformation. For the moment, take it that the form is the way lives *usually* go, the way we expect them generally to go.

Robert's mother might lament that her son should have witnessed such brutality, that he came of age in the hell of the Somme, that he learned so young, in so vivid a way, how uncertain life is. It is not merely that she wishes that Robert should not have had these experiences. His mother might think that the young should not know the impermanence of life—ignorance is better. Robert might himself wish for a life in which he had not killed, in which he had not seen things he did. Asked why, it is understandable that he might say that he simply would rather he had not seen what he did, nor done what he did. He wishes they were no part of his life. Most naturally, he may wish that circumstances had not been such that he had killed. This need not be an expression of guilt or remorse or even regret—unless in the last case, a third person expression of it, viz., “It is regrettable that ...” Nor need it be the thought that those experiences were useless or pointless. He may recognize the benefits of those experiences, the edge it gave him over those not forged in war. It is simply the wish for another life, a regular life, one with those things absent—perhaps one more easily understood.

With these descriptions though it can seem like the focus is what the person came to *know* or *experience*. Yet, this is not the substance of the mother's lament, nor of his school friends' concerns. They do not lament principally what he now knows. If the model of stain, of ruination, is apposite then the lament is that his life cannot now be what it might have been. And what it *might* have been must be relative to some expectation they had for him, a hope for a life that has not been disfigured in this way. A temptation to think that the change is just in the *person* being described is misplaced. We may want to allow that he was *changed* by the war, but not *ruined*.

Suppose his school friends recall that Robert laughed a lot more before the war. If they are asked what is meant in saying his life was ruined, it will under-describe to the point

of parody to say merely that his disposition to laugh is reduced. Rather, the gravity they intend is that his is a life that is no longer as light. More poetically perhaps, his “wings for humor” have been clipped. But in order to warrant a term like ‘ruined’ it would not be enough to say that his previous *capacity* for laughter had lessened. Ruination marks a deviation from some idea we have of how much laughter is part of an unmarked life, of the usual propensity to humor. It is of course an expression of degree as well. I don’t mean that one could be somewhat ruined, but that ruin indicates a significant deviation from how things go. One’s life might be *marked* by a road accident as a teenager. But, the trenches of the First World War, the battle of the Somme, these are by-words for something like “hell on earth.” This, we think, can warrant words like ‘ruin’, ‘disfigure’ or ‘deform’.

Robert need not be completely unchanged, the example depended only on his not being disabled. So if we wish to say that he has changed—something marked by talk of ruin—then we should speak of Robert’s life (as well as perhaps Robert). The change marked is in the character of Robert’s life. It is not a change attributable to him as a person. There is no ‘either/or’ nor is one concept reducible to the other. How do we acknowledge these facts? Where, in a sense, do we put them? We say they are parts of, facts about, the character of Robert’s life.

The point is the same for the man whose life is ruined by being falsely imprisoned for twenty years. We may imagine that he is not disabled on release. He is able, capable, perhaps like his previously un-incarcerated self only older. Perhaps he is even better off, having become skilled or educated in prison. But we do say his life is ruined for reasons beyond marking the injustice done to him. There are things in the general course of a life that cannot be part of his life: being a footloose youth, the vast possibilities open to the young, etc. Moreover, there are the years he lived under an unjust sentence, under a public designation as a criminal. Here again, I do not mean to point to the nights falling asleep in a bed unjustly made, to that sort of pain. I mean rather, that he grew up in prison, that he was treated as a prisoner, that he lived in the regard of others under this designation and in that relation to them. Being unjustly imprisoned is at one level beside the point. The injustice warrants talk of ruin. What is important here is that these facts, of how things went for him, are—sometimes only—best attributed to his life, not just to him as a person.

3.6 Self-Hate and Lives

Consider instead cases of self-hate. Sometimes self-hate is obviously self-directed at oneself as a person. We say, e.g., he hates himself for his inability to quit smoking. He loathes weakness, doubly so in himself. Here, the hatred is directed at a tendency amenable to the will—the sort of thing that spawns New Year’s resolutions. That smoking is typically considered amenable to the will is one reason we say he hates the weak person he is. It is his belief in his responsibility, manifest in the idea that success depends only on trying harder, that focuses his hate on himself, personally.

Hate may go deeper than smoking yet be personally self-directed. Imagine a self-hating homosexual. Suppose his religious beliefs are that homosexuality is wrong, yet he realizes that he is inescapably attracted to the same sex. Homosexuality is not amenable to the will, yet there is no obvious requirement to describe him as hating his life. (He may, but that will be for the consequences his homosexuality has for his life.) Plainly he hates himself for, as he might say, *what* he is.

Consider instead a self-hating Jew, as Woody Allen is accused (by himself sometimes) of being. This seems different again. It is not something amenable to the will. It is not enough to stop observing Jewish holy law or believing in God. Many self-described Jews live that way. Moreover, from the perspective of anti-semites, having Jewish parents is alone adequate for being identified as a Jew, irrespective of belief or indeed conversion. So, here, a person may not wish to be a Jew, may seek by conversion or avowal to be a non-Jew, and yet hate that they are, in an importantly inexorable sense, a Jew. To understand this self-hate, we should, it seems, acknowledge that he hates his *life as a Jew*, not himself—though not because of any particular disadvantage being a Jew has brought. He hates the fact of his being inescapably a Jew precisely *because* it is inescapable.

One may object that he hates the fact that his parents were Jews and that says nothing yet of his life. But why does he hate his parents being Jews? It need not be because they are Jews. A self-hating Jew is not necessarily also an anti-semite. Rather if this is a case of self-hate, and his parents are responsible for what he hates, then he hates that they have *marked* his life by making him a Jew. They mark, or in this case, *form* his life as a Jew, making him heir to all that may entail. And that inheritance is not like a material inheritance, but as we might say an inheritance of identity, a way in which the possibilities for his life are

shaped—perhaps curtailed—and given a particular character. From this perspective, a generic life is, we may say, unavailable to him. His life is limited in what it can be, it limits perhaps his anonymity, his opportunity to conform, and so on. (Though we should not imagine we have an idea of a life wholly without limits.) We understand what he hates, that for which he inveighs against fate, as a fact about his life. He hates *what* he is, not *who* he is.

This is not the only such example. Imagine a revolutionary of deep Marxist conviction whose background is definitively *bourgeois*. His life has the tarnish of illegitimacy, his recognition of which may spur him to prove that who he is, a Marxist, is more than what he is, a child of the *bourgeois*. Or again, what is it about Romeo that Juliet bewails when she asks, “Wherefore art thou Romeo?”

It is of course true that a genetic inheritance, such as dwarfism, is superficially similar insofar as it determines limits for one’s life and one’s inter-personal relations—foreclosing possibility. There are however differences. The differences reveal the role of the will, for no amount of willing can for an instant create the illusion that one has any freedom in accepting the principal limits of being a dwarf. No amount of willing produces growth or genetic change. But the limits of being a Jew or a Capulet are not like this. These identities press but cannot causally enforce limits, as genes may. There is a tempting sense of freedom in one’s response to the character of one’s life. This (seeming) freedom in one’s understanding of the necessity of the limits to one’s life is one reason for thinking that someone’s actual understanding is expressive of their individuality.

3.7 The Active/Passive Distinction in Lives

Two facets of one contrast have been at work and may be usefully adumbrated. First, it is common to speak philosophically of a person as a set of capacities dependent—perhaps supervenient—on some exhaustive characterization of certain underlying properties. Physically, this may be conceived as a body and its physical abilities. Often a conception of a mind constituted by its beliefs, concepts, and any consequent capabilities is added. We could in principle, the thought continues, give a collective specification of all that a person is capable of solely by reference to these attributes. The characterization is, roughly, forward-looking.

Nick is light on his feet, he is a quick study, his knowledge of the law is formidable. He could bring these capacities to bear on a situation. With these capabilities in mind we are able to understand and predict how things are likely to go for someone. Rick's caution, we suggest, means he will not likely leave a secure job to start his own business. His fitness will serve him well when he goes trekking in Nepal. Dick has always had a facility for learning languages, and there is no reason to suppose he will not speak fluent Thai after a year in Bangkok. From this perspective, we can see a person as the author of his life *through* his capabilities and character. His life, we say, is a natural extension or product of the person he is.

Other things about someone are not expressed by this way of speaking. They are instead backward-looking. We speak of Nick's life being comprised by all that ever happened to him: the job he had from '82 to '85, his time in law school, his decision to study the law, the birth of his child, his wife divorcing him, the assiduousness with which he has run three miles daily. The abilities in the preceding paragraph are things that could be measured by the methods mentioned above (page 80). There may not be methods for revealing the events of his life, or even the effects of those events. Nick may not even remember many of them. Neither limitation vitiates the claim that they are part of his life. The events may not have changed him in a way revealed by his abilities. Does one gain abilities on the birth of one's child? Of course one may gain a change of perspective, a reordering of priorities, etc. That is of course to the point. We must have a way to speak of these things that are indubitably to do with Nick, but which are neither expressed by nor reducible to our ordinary talk of persons.

It is easy to try to reduce these events and their effects to changes in affections, knowledge, experience, dispositions, etc. But this may obscure important differences, as if these changes were faithfully reducible to changes in taste. However, even the regularity of his daily running is not well described as a capability. It is not faithful to speak of it as the *ability* to be regular or consistent. Rather, it is right to say that his life is the one it is—has that *character*—in part because of the regularity, the rigidity with which he has made running a daily event. That is not the same thing as saying that he runs assiduously. The first is a past tense comment about what has happened, viz. that his life has had a certain rigidity. The second is adverbial, viz. that he runs assiduously. It may be an ability of course, but as an ability it is distinct from the *form* his life has had *because* of the exercise of that ability.

If the foregoing is broadly correct, then the conception of what comprises a life is distinct from the person and the abilities with which he lives that life. The relation between a person, their life, and their abilities is not pre-determined either. For instance, someone with tremendous musical talent may never realize anything of their talent for reasons within or without his control. He may practice too little, or fail to get noticed by a record company—one reason for speaking of luck. So mere possession of abilities is not yet a formula for “determining” what form or extension a life, with those abilities, will take. Of course in the normal run of things one’s abilities will figure importantly in the life one does come to live.

Second, a distinction is emerging between the ideas that a life is often shaped by things outside a person’s control and that a person is usually in control of themselves (their body at least) as well as the life that is a product of his control. Even a slave may act with dignity inside the bounds of his slavery. This distinction is an important one. It is an expression of the active/passive contrast that I shall return to several times more. The distinction is not one I intend to make sharp, because I do not think it is sharp. Moreover, the distinction has a dynamic tension. That tension shows itself in the limited freedom we have for taking responsibility for the facts of our life. For now, a rough analogy may illuminate the distinction better.

We may think of someone driving on a road, having a great deal of control over his journey. Roads are generally solid, unmoving, predictable and for a competent driver cars are responsive and easily controlled. So the person, as driver, by dint of attention to driving alone is able to negotiate the road readily. Barring traffic, mechanical failure, or freakish weather he journeys from A to B as easily as anyone has a promenade and chat. Our control of these activities is near total. Sailing is rather different. The sea is unpredictable; the weather changeable and potent; and a boat’s responsiveness limited. There are sea conditions that will overwhelm the best made ship with the most experienced crew. Perfection is no proof against the sea’s power to disturb, or even destroy, a ship. Notwithstanding our sometimes being aided by favorable winds or currents, we have at best limited control of our journey.

I am suggesting our relation to sailing a ship is importantly different from driving a car. True, in both we exert a kind of control. In both we are trying to go somewhere. But in one, we would be surprised to fail in our goal, in the other we are resigned to the vagaries

of seafaring. There is something perspicacious in this for how we understand ourselves and our lives. By analogy, we understand what happens to us as sometimes the natural product of our comprehensive control, and sometimes as the combination of our partial control and the “cards” the world deals us. This is central to my distinction between a person and a life—and a motivation for it.

3.8 Activity and Shared Lives

A feature of the contrast above is how a person is largely shaped by his will. We say for instance that people are self-actualizing or self-fulfilling. We explain someone’s behavior by saying, e.g., that he is trying to improve himself, hopes to realize his dream or is driven by ambition. The object of his efforts in this way of speaking is usually himself: his body, his property, his abilities, his experiences. In these cases there is an *internal* orientation to his decisions because the object of his efforts is himself, taken personally. When focused internally, he need not consider others in his decisions. Indeed we mark this if it is excessive by saying he is self-centered or self-absorbed. We do so to say what sort of person he is. Someone’s life as I have tried to develop the idea cannot be conceived this way, as a thing on which one works, like a car.

One reason is that one cannot pause one’s living or life, even if we sometimes say that metaphorically. One can stop working on a car, but so long as one lives at all one’s life unfolds. It is true that so long as one lives one grows in one or another sense that is personal. However, when we direct our efforts toward ourselves it is typically toward one part, such as a particular experience or skill, not the whole. Another reason is that the parts of a person most amenable to the will are also those which most admit of disposal. I can permit my juggling skills to atrophy as I can abandon work on my Land Rover. There is no such analogy with a life, I cannot abandon a part of the course or content of my life. While I may in some sense disclaim a youthful indiscretion, it is not within my gift to excise it from my life. Part of the impact of remorse and regret is precisely a consequence of the unidirectional and immutable character of life.¹⁴

These reasons are themselves shadows of a contrast that is only crudely expressed as between activity directed toward an object and the activity itself. Only the object is dis-

¹⁴I describe the impact of regret and remorse further in 6.

posable. A life is lived by the person living it. Necessarily, there must be someone who is living it, but from this—for the reasons above—it does not follow that the person is identical with his life.

Another reason for resisting any such identification is that we speak of lives being *shared*, of how others may be part of my life, constituting it as it were.¹⁵ I say, “She was a part of my life for eight years.” This is not the same as saying she was in proximity to me for eight years. Nor is it reducible to my having had duties and responsibilities to her for eight years. We shared experiences. There are experiences I had which she is a part of and they would not be the experiences they were if she had been someone else. The texture of those experiences depend on her part-constituting them.

Her goals and worries were mine too. (I might say that within limits I bound my will to hers.) This is not a claim of coincidence. Nor need it be the result of an agreement that any goal or worry of hers, would be taken on by me, and vice versa. We did not share a life because we shared worries and goals. Rather, her goals and worries were mine too *because* our lives were shared. I can insist that the goals that shaped that part of my life were *mine* because they were *hers*, because that is explained in the first instance by the fact that we shared a life. Putting it that way substantiates the idea that our lives were at that time shared, intermingled, occupying the same time-space. Of course, our life may yet divide just as two designated roads (e.g. M40/42) are one before they diverge.¹⁶

There are other conceptions of what occurs in a life that make our lives more readily separable. Only one of us can become pregnant, though the very same child is ours. Only one of us works for Microsoft, say. These unitary alternative conceptions do not undermine the shared conception. They are parallel. Moreover, if other conceptions cannot accommodate the idea of common goals, shared experiences, shared lives then they will be impoverished in explaining how, e.g., common goals condition the contexts of our de-

¹⁵I think this is consonant in intent with the expression, “She is a part of me,” or, “I cannot imagine the nature of life without her.” Indeed it is naturally paired with, “A part of me died with her.”

¹⁶Lewis uses an example like this in discussing variant personal identity conditions. David Lewis, ‘Survival and Identity’, in: *Philosophical Papers*, volume I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 63–64:

It may seem far fetched to claim that we ever count persons otherwise than by identity *simpliciter*. But we sometimes do count otherwise. If an infirm man wishes to know how many roads he must cross to reach his destination, I will count by identity-along-his-path rather than by identity. By crossing the Chester A. Arthur Parkway and Route 137 at the brief stretch where they have merged, he can cross both by crossing only one road. Yet these two roads are certainly not identical.

cisions.

Human lives become intermingled in more ways than just love and our need for others. Intentions, systems, and emergent patterns of human engagement also entwine lives. For example, being a member of a team is a system of engagement. Joe may say:

Being part of the team changed everything. I thought as a team member. Being in the team changed me. Things I've done with them would not have been the same if I'd been alone, or even with friends. I depended on them and they depended on me. My expectations were set by our life as a team.

Sometimes we say that our reality was shaped—given a particular texture—by our being in the team. Or we say that the whole was bigger than the sum of the parts, that we were part of a giant body. (Both of these ways of speaking are developed in chapter 9 and §4.6, p. 117, respectively.)

Joe may continue, “I took the team into account in everything I did.” This does mean that one takes the team—and one’s place in the team—into consideration in one’s decisions. However, I mean to suggest something more. Joe says, “For ten years, those guys were my family. I would have done anything for them and I expected them to do the same.” The idea of a family is natural here for we sometimes say that my family is part of me. Indeed, the demand and expectation of being more or less selfless—thinking beyond oneself to those with whom life is shared—is natural in these contexts. It would falsify the thought to think that being a family member (or a friend) was, say, reducible to seeing through certain activities, e.g. remembering to call or going to weddings.

Being with others in these ways—viz. teams, families, friendships—demands that the others be treated with a certain regard, a regard in which it is natural to feel the demand of their expectations. There is a reason we are drawn to substantives to describe our bonds and relations to others. We speak of the strength of our friendship. We use the image of a corporate or complex personality when we speak of “the family’s eating habits.” No doubt, there are interesting questions to answer here about the ontology implicit in these ways of speaking.¹⁷ The resolution of those philosophical questions will not I think do any violence to the conception of shared lives offered since it is based on explanatory and linguistic necessity in the first instance.

The above aspects of shared life recur in many other forms of human engagement, what

¹⁷The ontology of groups is discussed at length in Paul Sheehy, ‘Social Groups, Explanation and Ontological Holism’, in *Philosophical Papers* 32:2 (2003), pp. 193–224.

I might call ways of living or being together. Here are some examples: a theatrical company, the members of an orchestra or band, a religious assembly, a military unit, an academic department, a smoking club, a crowd of fans, a nation, a national struggle, an ethnic community, the survivors of a disaster, fellow travelers. Some of these spring from the brute affinities looming in our awareness of each other, others from the particular intentions to inter-relate ourselves, still others from an inter-personal conception and intention, while some simply emerge as patterns or dynamics of interaction amongst the first three.

3.9 Lives As Networks of Relations

It is of course neither a matter of chance nor choice which life is ours. We cannot change lives as we change cars. A person lives his life, they do not as vernacular idiom implies “have it.” It is a mistake to think that the analogy offered above (page 87) supposed that we might leave a car or ship for another. It was central to that analogy that living is something over which we have varying control. That does not weaken the idea that internal to a life is the person who lives it, who is its motive force. It is compatible with lives being shared to differing extents, giving sense to the superficially absurd daydream, “I wish I had her life”.

The section above suggested that there are contrasts between what I do *to* myself and *with* my life (compare object-directed activity and activity itself). A natural way to put the difference is that one exists *within* one’s life.¹⁸ The sense of ‘within’ is a focal one in my conception of the relation between lives and persons. It would not be my life if I were not within it. Indeed we often express our sense of alienation from earlier experiences by saying that I cannot see myself there, doing that. On being told about some outré past episode of ours or reading old diaries, we may marvel, wondering how it could have been us. The person in the diary episode is as a stranger. When we feel estranged from our lives, our sense of ownership or responsibility—the sense we feel that it is or was our life—is undermined. The experience and possibility of alienation is an important and motivating part of reflection and growth.¹⁹

This should not be confused with the existentialist idea of bad faith or willful self-

¹⁸I suppose the obverse is that for myself I simply am, or exist—assuming that is intelligible.

¹⁹I will return to alienation in chapter 6.

deception. Nothing has yet been said about an acknowledgment one must give one's past or even whether one's past demands responsibility. (That has been a pregnant question hanging over this chapter.) Plainly one sometimes does. At other times, someone is bewildered by his past, yet take responsibility. And again, sometimes, we disclaim our past, repudiate our responsibility—or at least attempt it without being pathologically dissociative. My conception of a life offered elaborates how one can recognize oneself or *not* in one's past by delineating the contrastive understanding required. Of course a component part of that understanding will precisely bear on the question of my responsibility for my past, the consequences of that responsibility, the determination of the meaning of the past as it were. That thought gains detail in chapters 5 and 6. In this chapter though, the conception developed aims to clarify our understanding of that for which we are taking responsibility.

I also say 'within' to make vivid an image of a particular life as a network of *relations* with one person as the common vertex of the relations. A person is the nexus within the network of relations that constitutes his life—though this should not be taken to imply that a person is reducible to being the nexus. The discussion has been directed toward making the following claim:

Compositional Claim Regarding Life My claim is that this idea of a composition of relations, what I shall call a network, is a principal, irreducible and necessary part and object of our understanding of the life of a person.

It is correct to say that I am distinguishing mutable continuing individuals (*continua*) from the lives they cause and have. But, it would be more precise to say that the distinction is one of mutual dependence. Humans depend on having a life to be people, and there would be no lives if there were not humans causing (or willing) them. Each element in the dependence has significance in our understanding of the decisions that happen in lives, and the way that those same decisions shape lives.

One source of the idea that each person is unique—an individual—is the thought that each person has a unique network, a unique life. Simultaneous with that thought is a sense of commonality as people, as human beings. That is expressed by our grasp of the way lives generally go, of what is within most networks, of what one can expect. Indeed some things are in every human network—so much so that these expectations are funda-

mental to the intelligibility of bearing ourselves towards another as a fellow human being (cp. §5.10). One expects to find originating relations to biological parents. One usually finds “parental” relations of upbringing, though not always. Some people are orphans; some grow up on the street; some trace character-making developments to mentors. Generally, one expects to find *inter alia* relations to friends, to first loves, to co-workers, to disappointments and hopes realized, as well as to episodes of humiliation, moments of achievement and joy. Though again not always, people sometimes live in monastic isolation. The contrast between how things usually go, and how they have gone for someone, is expressed in our vocabulary for lives: charmed, hard, unpredictable, trying, ordinary, etc. Our mastery of such vocabulary—with its comparative character—is one manifestation of our understanding of human lives.

3.10 Relations Characterize The Forms of Lives

Focusing on the nature of the relations in our lives is fruitful for two reasons. First, the facts of someone’s life mentioned above need a place and an organizing principle for our understanding. We can say of Robert, the ruined man, that his life has been deformed relative to a life free of war. Our understanding of this is based on the comparison of the character of his network and a war-free one. We can say of the man who hates his life, that he hates the relations he has to his parents and other forbearers. When I say my life was shared, I point to the significant coextension of my network and that of the person with whom my life was shared. I can describe the distinctive mark that running every day has in someone’s life by pointing to a distinctive uniformity or rigidity in his network. Running gives his life a distinctive character. It is one with a particular order. Different relations inter-relate, giving a life a character. Rigidity from running is characterized by regular relations between days and activities, like graph paper is characterized by regular distances and angles between lines. Fugues, like persistent failure to learn from one’s mistakes, are characterized by the repetition of patterns at repeating intervals (the same for figures in choreography). The distortions in a rubber sheet of graph paper placed over a sphere are revealed by the skewed irregularity of lines and angles, as vanity may distort

an otherwise orderly life.²⁰ Conceiving of lives this way explains what is in a decision-making context—to *what* we can attend.

Second, *how* individual lives condition our attention within the context of decision-making is explicable by reference to the nature of the relations within our lives. The nature of a life's relations give human life its distinctive character compared to animals.²¹ Focusing on some relations rather than others in the network is one basis for varying salience in our decision-making. Some, such as our relations to people, will be vital in this regard, others less so. For instance, relations to physical events considered merely causally do not distinguish human lives. Animals' lives are causally characterized by their response to stimulus of different kinds. However, arguably, animals cannot humiliate each other (though perhaps they can taunt). Humans can. One way of describing the difference is that animals cannot stand to each other in those relations, viz. relations that permit humiliation. A dog cannot betray a cat, because a cat cannot trust a dog, those sort of relations do not exist. Hume said we do not judge a lion morally for doing what comes naturally in killing a gazelle. Moral judgment is again not a part of the character of relations we can have to a lion, nor indeed can the lion have that relation to the gazelle. Symmetrically, a lion cannot snub us—except in anthropomorphic fantasy—because we could not seek a lion's recognition such that it could withhold it. But being betrayed is precisely the sort of thing that is possible because I can trust someone. I can be snubbed at my gentleman's club, because of my expectation of recognition from other members. The possibility of primates or other animals having some relations of this kind does not undermine my argument. The argument for a distinctive conception of a human life depends only on there being *some* relations that are possible solely between humans.

It is important to note that relations in my life need not be of my own making. A relation can exist—can be a recognizable part of my life—without my intending or inviting it. I may have a secret admirer. I may treat her differently when I realize the fact of her crush or not. I may remain unaware or acknowledge her crush. My acknowledgment or its absence does not undermine the natural thought that it is a fact in my life, e.g., Zoe had a

²⁰Thinking of networks as having a character in this way is not obtuse. There is a commercial technique, Balanced Scorecard Methodology, which is used to visualize web-like networks, "radar graphs," reflecting the behavioral priorities and distortions of organizations. Robert Kaplan and David Norton, *The Balanced Scorecard: Translating Strategy into Action* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Business School Press, 1996).

²¹In chapters 7 and 8, I describe two distinctive features: joint determination of meaning and critical authority.

crush on you when you were her tutor.²²

This feature of my conception can take us some way towards characterizing more difficult philosophical conundra, such as what *more* is there to pitying someone than the judgment that they are pitiable, or deserving of pity, because they satisfy the conditions for being pitiable? Or (a recurrent question in interpreting Kant's philosophy) what is it to show insufficient deference (*Achtung*) for someone *qua* rational will? A way forward suggests itself by rephrasing the question, using a conception of our relation to others, as: how must we relate ourselves to another so as to regard them *with* pity as opposed to regarding them *as* pitiable? The latter need demand nothing in terms of motivating response. The former, with its adverbial link to action, may well demand a response—e.g. changing one's relation to the pitiable or bearing oneself in accord with the fact of their pity.²³

3.11 Lives Are Patterns Not Essences

The understanding I am urging is based on seeing that our understanding of a person is not exhausted by our understanding of what people generally are if that is understood *essentially*. The biological essentialist and the philosopher concerned with the metaphysical problem of personal identity are searching for those metaphysical or biological properties that all and only humans have. But why presume that the capacity for trust could be meaningfully identified with a biological property? Similarly the philosophical problem of personal identity focuses on identifying one or more—usually intrinsic—properties of the body or mind with the person whose body or mind it is. Even where the properties are relational—e.g. continuity between psychological episodes—they are intrinsic insofar as they are internal to the person.²⁴

One might try to identify people with the relations in their network. Satisfaction of the conditions for being the *same* person might be met by considering their relations to friends, acquaintances, interests, etc. There is a good reason we are sometimes tempted to say that someone is not the same person after serious neurosurgery. We are scarcely tempted in this way when for instance the consequence of the surgery is paralysis. But when they no

²²This idea is developed further in §8.6.

²³This idea recurs in chapters 4 and 5.

²⁴See e.g. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

longer recognize their loved ones, lose their former passions, lose their memory, we are drawn to say this is not the person I knew.

As stated at the outset, my account is not offered in service of philosophical or biological debates about identity. Those debates' parameters do no violence to my account. Indeed, my account might have application to those debates. But insofar as it does that is a welcome fillip secondary to my primary task of distinguishing persons and lives in order to explicate one's responsibility for one's life.

To summarize then, our understanding of any person and his life (including our own) is partially based on our understanding of how lives generally go, of the relations (and their inter-relation) generally present. It is also partially based on the actual course of his life. We may by analogy talk of someone "moving" through his life, and of the path his life "followed." The deliberate shift between active and passive voices echoes the recurrent active/passive contrast. Movement is understood spatio-temporally, but also metaphorically as change. So as one's life continues one gains beliefs, knowledge, experience, injuries, abilities, property, etc. These are all things discussed properly as changes solely to the person.

But as I live I also make friends, fall in love, work with others, join teams, etc.—i.e. engage with others. In so doing relations are established to others, mostly people. These relations are sometimes systematic, i.e. organized according to an idea or paradigm such as orchestras, sports teams or friendships. More generally though, 'systematic' need only mean that there is a natural or normal way these things go. There are, we may say, *unusual* friendships only because most friendships come to be in the same way, e.g. through common interests, workplaces, etc. So describing people's lives when they are out of the ordinary is based in part on a deviation from a norm. So saying someone is a social climber does not attribute to them an ability as when we say he is strong or witty. Being a social climber is not an ability we might verify at a moment, rather it is shown in the kind of life he has. Our understanding of social climbing is based on the characteristic distortion to the relations that make up that life: the betrayals, superficiality, calculating cultivation of others, etc.

To repeat, one way the distortion (or any characteristic form) is recognizable is because of the possible contrast with how life generally goes. Of course, the character of the distortion (the form of the network) may be describable without recourse to a contrast, in which

case it is less a deformation and more a distinctive character, e.g. rigidity or repetition.²⁵ Sometimes perhaps we may be able to indicate a pattern or character but not give a name to it.²⁶ Put simply though, the character of the deformation shows itself in how the social climber lives and how it affects those with whom he lives, those in whose lives he is a part. The generality may be bounded and variable depending on the particular facet characterized. Being a soldier may carry with it detailed expectations for the course of life which simply being human does not.

One might ask why life is not merely a collection of “doings” (rather than “beings”) by the person whose life it is? First, lives have internal relations between doings that no one doing has. Second, the active/passive contrast I have pressed suggests that much in a life is not of our doing but happens. In any case, my account of our understanding of a life is different in emphasis and purpose from two well-known philosophical accounts. Charles Taylor is concerned with the societal nature of our identities in contrast to any notions of a common identity people have just by being human. He conceives the moral question of authenticity in a life as therefore principally not one of self-fulfillment but rather, as it were, as socially realized fulfillment. I do not disagree as far as that goes, but the tack I take with the idea of authority in chapter 6 and the idea of simple humanity looming in our awareness in chapters 5 and 8 is different.²⁷ Similarly, Richard Wollheim is concerned to show how our past bounds our present through the interaction of mental dispositions (the effects of the past) with current transient mental states. His emphasis is on our understanding of our own life particularly our mental life, rather than my emphasis on how we understand any life, particularly with regard to its contributing to the context of our decision-making. My emphasis is much more external, more concerned with independent reality as opposed to, say, mental reality.²⁸

3.12 Responsibility for Our Lives

Descriptions of our relations to others—our life—that we take as correct can feature as considerations in decisions. So, accepting that he is my friend says something about what my

²⁵My use of ‘form’ is characterized further in §4.6, p. 120.

²⁶This may have been the case with some behaviors prior to the development of psychoanalytic vocabulary.

²⁷See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the self: the making of the modern identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).

²⁸See Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Harvard University Press, 1984).

profession of friendship means. I mean he is a part of my life. My life has the form it does in part because of his distinctive individual presence within it, yet ours is a friendship with similarities to other friendship relations. My understanding of that relation informs the context of my decisions—which and what weight considerations have—involving him. Moreover, I may frame decision-making questions because of my understanding of how it affects him *as* my friend (e.g. James in chapter 2). Indeed the question may arise precisely because of my understanding of our friendship and that understanding provides a basis for evaluating different possible outcomes. I can determine that telling Mike's secret would be a betrayal of Mike (from chapter 2). Deciding to tell that secret might exactly produce the deformation characteristic of betrayal, perhaps corroding our relation as friends.

Notice then that for someone's life—different from mine—the same action might not be correctly understood as betrayal. They will not have my life conditioning their decision's context, just as my examples above suggested. Consider again, for someone who has often opined on matters of morality, there would be something shameful in continuing to do so after having been exposed as a hypocrite. For someone who had never pretended to wisdom in moral matters, to opine in a self-serving way might be naïve or banal rather than shameful. The explanation of this difference is of necessity by reference to his different life. But has this explication and its allied conceptions distinguishing persons and lives demonstrated that we must take responsibility for the considerations by which we decide to live, which was the contention with which we began?

The short answer is that it has not answered the question in full, but this much is unavoidable. To live at all is to have a network of relations. It may be more or less ordinary with many distinctive facets. It is *mine* insofar as I am the nexus and principal cause of the network. But it does not follow from the *inevitability* of relations to others that one must take those relations as important. It does not follow from the true or correct description of a life as mine that I am responsible for it in the relevant, viz. moral, sense. Decisions unfold a life that is necessarily yours. I mean 'unfolding' here in both passive and active senses. Sometimes our life unfolds before us as if we were ships in a storm, our course set by the vicissitudes of chance. Other times we unfold our life giving it the form it has, setting the course of our lives.

There is a war, I am drafted and faced with the question of whether to serve. The war

was not my choice, but my decision in response to the draft is. Still it may be insisted: this does not yet *entail* responsibility. To say that I am inexorably at the “helm of my life” is not yet to say why responsibility for the course I set is inexorable. With what I have said so far, it would just beg the question against the Hume-inspired wanton or spineless objection we began the chapter with to say that these facts just entail responsibility. What sort of entailment would it be?

Resisting the claim of entailment rests on two worries. Each captures what is being begged. First, it may well be that there is a fact at issue in the question of what kind of relationship I have, e.g., to my parents or to a co-worker. It is understandable that I should give the fact a role in decision-making. But its being understandable that I give it a role tells us nothing about *what* role I should give it, nor that I need be *consistent* in the assignment of such roles. The facts do not, as it were, speak for themselves. I cannot know what they mean because they are not speakers, even if I know that fact’s import. So, in what does an understanding of a fact’s import and role in decision-making originate?

Second, what kind of facts are my life’s facts? Well, they are not facts about me of an ordinary kind that might admit of empirical or intrinsic measurement. I have described how our descriptions and understanding characterize a life and its facts. We characterize lives by means of the relation between how things usually go and how they have gone for an individual. Our understanding comprehends contrasts in the *forms* of networks. Still there is considerable variation in how things *actually* go for someone. We are individual people. How things *usually* go, will only ever be a more or less detailed generalization (rarely, perhaps, a universalization), idealization, pattern or characteristic quality of human networks. But it is always an intelligible question (even if the answer seems obvious) whether an individual is exceptional or ordinary? Put technically, we can say it is always intelligible to ask whether a particular falls under a universal. So any description of a particular life—or a claim that the network has the form it does as a product of decisions—is necessarily a determination that the life falls under some generalization, pattern, etc. Why though must someone accept another’s determination?

Merely being the principal cause of a life (and its facts) is insufficient to oblige the acceptance of responsibility, so the response to the wanton or spineless fails. In the next chapter I shall consider the idea that the acceptance of responsibility is irrelevant to the truth of relations of responsibility appropriate to someone because of his life and the decisions

within it.

4 Truth, Order and Moral Understanding

A danger besets the scientific, the too realistic religions: they may find themselves proclaiming that whatever is, is right. Facts are not necessarily good for being facts; it is easy, however, to believe so. The human mind has a tendency to attribute, not only existence to what it considers valuable, but also to value what is.

“On Grace”
ALDOUS HUXLEY

4.1 Limiting and Avoiding Truth

I have argued that the course of someone’s life does not of itself demand that he take responsibility for his life in a way pertinent to our moral judgments of him. The problem was that the facts of his life and the relations within it seemed inert in prescribing an import for decision-making. Neither of itself conditioned our decision-making context, though each is undoubtedly a component. Instead, it was the person’s understanding of his life that mediated its role in decision-making, however much he might be the motive force of his life. Moreover, since all that bore on us were seemingly patterns or paradigms of description, the truth of characterizations about lives seemed perilously dependent on personal judgment. The effect was that the Hume-inspired wanton or spineless person, someone I shall call the *Irresponsible*, was not obviously obliged to give any weight in decision-making to his life’s course or character. And, if an Irresponsible could reject his life, which was necessarily his, then clearly he could be similarly dismissive of more contingent considerations in decision-making. So, the conclusion was that moral criticism of an Irresponsible remained motivationally and cognitively tenuous, e.g. Eichmann’s son (from chapter 3) might be wholly indifferent to the purported salience of his parentage in deciding matters of race.

This chapter discusses a commonsense objection to this conclusion. The objection is that the *truth* of descriptions—including of one’s life—suffice for morality’s grip regardless of someone’s acknowledgment of that description as true. The truth of being a wanton and

the propriety of the moral judgment consequent on that truth is, as it were, *independent* of the wanton's acknowledgment. Truth is independent of us, rather than dependent. If it is true that being a wanton is morally bad, then it is so whether one likes it or not. Furthermore, if it is true that you acted poorly and that you should not do so in future, you are making an error if you do not understand that one follows the other.

Much will depend on the explication of making an error. The account of decision-making in chapter 2 revealed precisely the varieties of error. Error and argument receive further development in chapters 6 & 7 respectively. In this chapter, the question is, what force can a strong conception of truth in living, life, and decision-making have? Can it substantiate this commonsense objection to the Irresponsible?

First, we might wonder what aid it is to be able to say of one life that it is a good one or *the* good one? Knowing of the good life does not obviously foreclose the question of why one should live it. How could this knowledge lead to the prescriptive import of 'should' in a response? The answer I shall propose is that the truth of being the good life, when so apprehended, forecloses the question of why someone should wish to live it. That is what it *is* to be the good life. This last insistence adds little since we need to explicate why or how knowledge of the good life is question foreclosing. Howsoever such foreclosing occurs, focusing on the kind of error one makes in misapprehending the good life is not perspicuous. The focus here is on the truth comprehended—the truth of what is—not errors in apprehending that truth. Focusing on apprehension just reinforces the Irresponsible's understanding-oriented excuse. Elaborating an answer regarding the truth of the good life will also begin to show the force a strong conception of truth can have in decision-making. Since the emphasis is on the good life, any force the conception of truth has will apply to moral decision-making as well.

I will offer a Platonic elaboration of the commonsense objection, instead of a Moore-derived one. One could answer the 'should' question by saying that what is good is also desirable—they are the same. If one understands this, then one should desire what is good, including the good life. Famously, this assertion permits an "open" question which, put simplistically, is, "Yes, but is desiring the good life also good?" The fact that the question is not obviously absurd suggests the identification of good and desirability is false. The point is pressed by asking whether the feature of the good life that makes it good, viz. pleasure, is also good? The crucial element in this dialectic when applied

to lives is that implicitly a distinction is made between two things, both lives: a good and non-good one. That distinction always suggests that there is something in virtue of which one is good and the other non-good, a property one has that the other lacks. And then it will seem as if we have found some property (e.g. pleasure) or properties that are identical with or constitutive of the good (life). But as long as the dialectic proceeds in terms of properties of lives, the open question remains potent. For any putative property proffered, one may ask the open question. So much Moore taught us, revealing a property of analytic definitions.¹ A challenge is therefore to say how one life is better than another *without* using a property that invites challenge with an open question. This is one reason for not elaborating an idea of moral reality using putative moral properties.

The focus of the commonsense objection is that the truth of descriptions suffices to indict the Irresponsible. However, a description is a description of something. Ordinarily, in order to be true, a description needs to describe something existent in some suitable sense that might include the imagination, fiction, etc. On some theories though (e.g. disquotational ones), truth is only a formal property of statements (including descriptions) and no relation to reality is specified. The concept of truth used below is integral with reality and actuality in that when a statement is (actually) true, (actual) reality must be as the statement presents it as being. Technically, I mean this as an expression and limited endorsement of Dummett's Principle C: "If a statement is true, there must be something in virtue of which it is true."² By tying truth and reality together, I aim to meet the Moore-derived challenge by appealing to reality without appealing to properties.

To effect the truth-reality link and substantiate the commonsense objection to the Irresponsible, I shall elaborate a metaphysical picture I think Plato offers in some dialogues that supports some moral claims by his fictional protagonist Socrates.³ What I elaborate is less an argument than an explicit way of thinking about lives such that they are in a robust, metaphysical sense *truly* good or bad.⁴ Metaphysically robust *existence* is the "something" on which moral descriptions and judgments' truth depends. Plato rejects a distinction between two lives, good and non-good. According to Plato, there are not two lives on offer,

¹G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), pp. 9–17.

²Michael Dummett, 'What is a Theory of Meaning? (II)', in: *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 52–53.

³I use British spelling of 'dialogue' here for harmony with the many quotations to follow.

⁴I am not making any claims to exegetical accuracy in what follows. I lack the expertise to begin such a project. The claims I make are based on the arguments in the dialogues as "they struck me."

there is only life and diminished life—at the limit no life, i.e. non-existent life. This idea of truth has the force to meet the Irresponsible’s challenge because it does not posit a property the good life has which would make it vulnerable to an “open” question. Instead, truth is linked to actuality, reality and existence. The Irresponsible is presented now with the possibility of living at all—which will depend on acting with sufficient consistency to be recognizably leading a life—and doing nothing but living a solipsist’s illusion. By analogy, the difference is between doing mathematics and indiscriminate manipulation of squiggles. Only the former is the manipulation of numbers we recognize as mathematics.

However, I shall argue that the elaboration of a strong conception of truth and life, from Platonic roots, will not meet the Irresponsible’s challenge. Understanding truths does not exhaust our understanding of morality nor does it underpin it. Moral reality and practice, I shall argue at the end of this chapter (§§4.10–4.11) and in following chapters (5 & 6), unavoidably depends on an individual’s distinctive understanding (of how the world can make moral demands) for a role in an individual’s moral decision-making. I offer four considerations for this conclusion. Why think any metaphysical order the world has is morally good? Why think considerations of existence are morally paramount? Are we not without further moral understanding after all salient truths have been accounted? Why do we morally admire those for whom pursuit of truth approaches a spiritual demeanor? The substance of a refined concluding complaint by the Irresponsible is that even with a strong conception of truth, “mere” truth is not enough to ground the demands of morally critical thought. We have to add something to moral thought’s objects, just as one had to add import to the facts of one’s life.⁵ In chapter 3, facts admitted more independence of interpretation than the constraints arising from any dependence between a person and his life. The stronger attempt in this chapter is an attempt to invert our understanding of a personally centered order (life), to an understanding of a centerless order (reality or cosmos).

In view of the relatively short concluding rejection of this Platonic account, why present the account at such length? There are several reasons for doing so. First, strong moral realism is perennially tempting even when it has emerged under the guise of rationalism. It can be difficult to appreciate moral realism’s limitations without a concrete elaboration. Also, by characterizing and *retaining* intuitive features of truth and reality, I hope to dimin-

⁵I discuss our additions to not-determined reality in chapter 6.

ish the motivation for strong realism.

Second, the account I give in its present form is implausibly strong and would require a more detailed defense than I can give here, particularly since the account has revisionary consequences for some commonsense notions. However, it is I think one of the few ways to elaborate metaphysical moral realism that does not suffer from the difficulties “property-realism” encountered above. Nor, does it posit metaphysically queer entities, in Mackie’s famous phrase, such as values or reasons that are objectified.⁶ Order, of a kind that grounds moral order, is immanent, not existent, in the account I elaborate. Or if it is existent, it exists in the relations between things. Relations may not be metaphysically innocent, but they are not queer.

Third, the conception of reality I ultimately offer retains many Platonic features but is not recognizable as Platonic realism, with its eternal order of forms. Several useful distinctions are retained in the transition from Platonic realism to Platonic irrealism. My conception of ordered reality is a compositional and participatory one that will be reused in following chapters. Moreover, my conception of reality characterizes ‘independence’, ‘dependence’ and ‘individual understanding’ with senses that are important to following chapters. The participatory character of reality in my conception also characterizes the normative senses of ‘proper’ and ‘appropriate’. The discussion of form, formlessness and conformity will be similarly useful. Finally, the discussion of possibility and actuality will aid discussions of personal responsibility.

As I said, I cannot provide a full defense of this cosmic picture of reality, but doing so is a good way to make progress on a question that must attend any account of understanding: how are thoughts and the world fitted for each other? The features of the account I retain after its rejection are for this reason to the point in my inquiry.

4.2 The Importance of Truth

Before proceeding with the elaboration of the Platonic account, consider examples of how truth is important in our understanding of others and ourselves. The commonsense objection begins with something sometimes indubitable: we care about the truth. Truth can matter more than our fear of dying, our prospective happiness, or the well-being of our

⁶J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: inventing right and wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 38-45.

kith and kin even. The truth can be precious.

In *The Crucible*, John Proctor is falsely accused of being a witch and is held under a sentence of death. His wife persuades him to save himself by signing a confession. However, when he discovers that the signed confession will be made public, he tears up the confession, choosing the gallows. When his accusers implore him to confess, they ask why he will not simply sign a piece of paper.⁷ He replies:

Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!⁸

Similarly, the grand Soviet leader Bukharin, who certainly knew that the outcome of his show trial was foreordained, insisted on remonstrating with the court about the truth of the matters in question.⁹ Peter Winch shows it intelligible that we might value truth over happiness when he asks:

How far is it important to a man's life that he should live it in the clear awareness of the facts of his situation and of his relations to those around him? [... In the Ibsen play *The Wild Duck*,] here is a man who is living a perfectly contented life which is, however, based on a complete misunderstanding of the attitude to him of those he knows; should he be disillusioned and have his happiness disrupted in the interests of truth? It is necessary to notice that our understanding of both these issues depends on our recognition of the *prima facie* importance of understanding the situation in which one lives one's life. The question in *The Wild Duck* is not whether that is important, but whether or not it is *more* important than being happy.¹⁰

These examples highlight how knowing the truth about one's circumstances matters—not merely how things seem in the absence of evidence to the contrary.¹¹ The concern relates equally to reality, as when one laments, “I don't know what is real anymore.” It is right to say, as the commonsense objector began, that the truth is important, and intelligibly so. However, there are differences in how the weight of the truth bears on us. John Proctor's wife, Elizabeth, is presented in *The Crucible* as a woman of extraordinary

⁷Historically, Thomas More presents a similar example.

⁸Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (1953), Act IV.

⁹Fitzroy Maclean, *Eastern Approaches* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 94–121, part I, chapter 7.

¹⁰Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 22.

¹¹Nozick makes this point with his famous experience machine thought experiment. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, state, and utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), pp. 42–45

rectitude. Counting on this, John calls her to confirm the truth of his affair with Abigail Williams. Under pressure in court and fearing for John's reputation, Elizabeth lies and denies the affair. For her, the truth of her having lied, even once, of now having made a liar of herself may be a shattering moment. For her, telling a single lie may have a significance it does not have for a politician resigned to working in politics' half-light of truth.

This caveat reminds us that the importance truth has (or can have) depends on the individual of whom it is true.¹² I shall return to this idea's importance in §4.11.

4.3 Socrates Startles

Socrates, as he appears in Platonic dialogues, made startling claims whose assertion have molded Western thinking.¹³ Socrates thinks there are fates worse than death; that a good man cannot be harmed; that the unexamined life is not worth living.¹⁴ He maintains these sincerely—not as platitudes, but as absolutes. For example he takes Polus' description of the following eventuality as scare-mongering, not a refutation of his view:

Take a man who's caught doing something unjust, say, plotting to set himself up as tyrant. Suppose that he's caught, put on the rack, castrated, and has his eyes burned out. Suppose that he is subjected to a host of other abuses of all sorts, and then made to witness his wife and children undergo the same. In the end he's impaled or tarred. Will he be happier than if he hadn't got caught, had set himself up as a tyrant, and lived out his life ruling in his city and doing whatever he liked, a person envied and counted happy by fellow citizens and aliens alike? Is *this* what you say is impossible to refute?¹⁵

Socrates is ridiculed when he insists that it would be better to live a just life—accepting appropriate punishments for one's actions—rather than being thought happy by all. For Socrates, only a just life can be a happy one. So since merely being thought happy, even

¹²For further discussion of this, see "Truth as a Need of the Soul," in Raimond Gaita, *A common humanity : thinking about love and truth and justice*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2000). Gaita asks whether someone could ever be indifferent to the truth of whether their lover was faithful, whether they really loved them.

¹³Socrates' and Plato's impact on Western thought is argued for in Melissa Lane, *Plato's Progeny* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

¹⁴Socrates is a character in Plato's dialogues. He was a historical figure whose writings, if any, are unknown to us. Our sense of his philosophical character, particularly in moral philosophy, comes from Plato, his pupil. Perhaps he had some insight into what he thought, perhaps not. For my purposes, it does not matter. The interest here is in a reconstruction of how someone could think as Socrates did.

¹⁵Plato, 'Gorgias', in: John M. Cooper, editor, *Plato: Complete Works*, trans. by Donald Zeyl (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1997), pp.473c–d.

by oneself, while living an unjust life cannot include happiness, it cannot be preferable. Socrates solicits refutations of his staggering claim that a just life is preferable, even if that includes death and torture of oneself and one's family. Polus replies, "Don't you think you've been refuted already, Socrates, when you're saying things the likes of which no human being would maintain?"¹⁶ Indeed, a bit later, Callicles, stupefied, continues:

Tell me, Socrates, are we to take you as being in earnest now, or joking? For if you *are* in earnest, and these things you're saying are really true, won't this human life of ours be turned upside down, and won't everything we do evidently be the opposite of what we should do?¹⁷

At stake in this debate is our understanding of the order of our world. According to Callicles, if Socrates is right and we should give truth priority over collective belief in bearing ourselves, then our present understanding of the world is inverted. Why then does Socrates think this? I suggest that Plato grounds Socrates' views on a metaphysical basis for the good life. Polus' scare-mongering is putatively refuted by the truth of an existent, (metaphysically) real good life. The weight Socrates places on truth and reality of living a good life is, I think, an expression of the root motivation of the commonsense objection. Therefore, an elaboration of the Socratic view can be an elaboration of the commonsense objection view.

The metaphysical account grounding Socrates is roughly as follows. A good life is one lived in *harmony* with an order *independent* of us. The truth of being good is dependent on real harmony with the order. We live in response to the world into which we are born. So the harmony in our lives must be with the actual world of here and now. By contrast, some think that for Aristotle good derives from the kinds of things humans are—or the kind of function humans have—and thus from accord with our *natures*. For Plato good derives from man's place in the order of things, because the good life is that which is in accord with the world.¹⁸ In this sense, being the good life is independent of humanity. Its content depends on the universe. Goodness depends on how reality is, not on how we take it. But we are not passive players in a static cosmos. To live is to *accord* oneself to the *individual* circumstances in which each finds himself. Failure to apply oneself thus, as the dead or someone with *anomie* cannot, is failure to live.

¹⁶Plato, 'Gorgias', *op. cit.*, p. 473e.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 481c.

¹⁸Plato too had an internal focus, viz. his discussion of the tripartite soul. I address this in §4.5.

So the answer to the Irresponsible, the person who is indifferent to any order independent of his own, is that he is *not living* at all. In moral idiom, the same answer is, if his life is not worth living, value is absent from within it. How could it have value, since it emerges specifically from the rejection of an order of the world on which worth depends? In stronger metaphysical idiom, the answer is that at the limit, his is *no* life. In these senses, it is not true that he lives, except in a distinct, solely biological (animal) sense. He lives a non-moral life, a non-distinctively human life. If right, that too is a kind of answer for it means that the Irresponsible's challenge is not expressible in the moral idiom necessary to be a challenge to moral responsibility. These are revisionary claims whose sense and plausibility will wait on their elaboration below.

Within my Platonic account, the truth of the good life in reality can be the basis for morality's application to all of us. 'Good' in "the good life" is here a combination of collectively constitutive qualities of a life, e.g. piety, courage, manliness, wisdom, etc. The account makes substantial and powerful claims. However, their use in the dialectic between the commonsense objector and the Irresponsible must be made clear. The examples in §4.2 showed that truth is sometimes important to us. It is not obvious that my life's existence depends on such importance since that would be a questionable metaphysical result from an evaluative premise.

A different—inverted—claim is required, viz. that existence *depends* on goodness. One's existence is not something to which we can imagine even an irresponsible person being indifferent, on pain of unintelligibility or madness. (The suicidal-but-sane are not indifferent to existence, they seek non-existence precisely because they find existence intolerable, e.g. as in Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*.) My "master argument" for the dependence of existence on goodness within the Platonic conception will be that something which is a comprehensively bad example of its kind cannot *be* what we took it to be. We may discover that a feather is a useless paperweight. Any putative paperweight with the properties of a feather is not merely a bad paperweight, it is no paperweight at all. By analogy, a life that is irremediably pervasively out of order (i.e. bad), like any other thing, is not what we have taken it to be. We may be expressing something like this when we say, "That is no life." This must admit of degree though. Something can be a bad, though not useless, paperweight, e.g. a coin. While it might appear that the notion of kind used is crudely functional, elaboration will reveal that the claim is conceptual not functional.

If an argument for the dependence of existence on goodness is to work, the goodness on which existence depends must not itself depend on the existence of that of which goodness is predicated. That would be circular. So, my judging my life as good cannot be the basis for my existence, since I will need to have existed prior to my judgment in order to have an object (and occasion) for my judgment. The Irresponsible's claim to radical freedom about the goodness in his life is undermined in this way. Thus the goodness of a particular thing must depend on something external to the thing itself, i.e. goodness must be *independent*. That is a fine result since it is an expression of the commonsense thought with which we began, that the truth of moral descriptions does not depend on the person described concurring in their truth.

Two questions—regarding dependence and dynamics—remain for the account. On *what* does goodness depend such that things can themselves be good? How does goodness apply to things that are not static but *dynamic* (extended in time) like lives? These questions are answered in §§4.4–4.8 where the Platonic account is elaborated. One could accept the account and resume dialectical interaction with the Irresponsible by moving directly to §4.9.

4.4 Metaphysics of Structure: Descriptive Norms

The Platonic account begins from moral and metaphysical considerations of lives found in an interpretation of Plato's *Philebus*. The *Philebus* concerns the nature of the good life. It is agreed first that the good life is not composed solely of pursuit of pleasure or knowledge. Instead, life, like all composite things, is a *mixture*. The dialogue then focuses on two questions. What is the composition of this mixture? Which of knowledge or pleasure is more responsible for the goodness of the mixture? The dialogue culminates in a prize giving where prizes are awarded in order of the elements' responsibility for the goodness of the mixture constituting the good life. 'Responsible for' is a median gloss on the Greek (*aitia*) meaning 'causes' or 'explains'.¹⁹ Importantly for a strand in the master argument under development, the constituents of the good life are *responsible for* the existence of any actual good lives. First prize goes to measure (*metron*), due measure (*metrion*),

¹⁹Michael Frede, 'The Original Notion of Cause', in: *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 125–150.

and appropriateness (*kairion*); second prize to beauty (*kalon*), proportion (*summetron*), and completeness/perfection (*teleion*); third prize to intelligence and thought; fourth prize to knowledge (*episteme*), craft (*techne*), and true judgment; and fifth prize to pleasures of the soul, rather than the flesh.

Verity Harte has argued that we should understand Plato's *Philebus* as offering an account of composition and structure.²⁰ Structure for Harte is the combination of the first and second prize-winning elements in the *Philebus*: due measure (*metrion*); and proportion or completeness (*summetron* or *teleion*). That is, the *structure* of something is consequent on its share of these qualities. The ground for this claim surfaces in the discussion of those things that are limited and unlimited. Harte says, "At 24b8, it is because members of the unlimited are without end—are [*atele*]*—that they are unlimited.*" The unlimited have neither beginning nor end.²¹ Therefore they cannot be whole since, "A whole is complete. Thus a whole is what starts and stops, has a beginning, middle, and end," continuing, "If the unlimited contains what in and of itself cannot be a whole, then limit constitutes a whole—a member of the mixed kind—out of the unlimited."²² So we get an existent whole by mixing what is unlimited with what is limiting, thus creating structure. Structure is a basis for individuation and identity too, because structure adds a notion of number-of-whole-individuals, equality of a whole with another and, thus, ratio. If we can count kinds of things, it is because we can divide things into the same or different using a means of individuation. Measure and proportion are suggested for the limiting role required to produce those (structured) mixtures we take as a whole. Harte reinforces this, pointing out that, "at the end of the dialogue, measure and proportion are that without which no mixture can *exist*."²³ So, existence *necessarily* depends on measure and proportion.

Harte argues that Plato's account of structure adds three features to anything that exists: irreducibility, intelligibility, and normativity. First, structure is globally irreducible, i.e. everything which exists has structure necessarily. Second, structure is intelligible. Third,

²⁰I shall be working from Verity Harte, 'Quel Prix Pour La Vérité? Philebe 64a7–66d3', in: Monique Dixsaut, editor, *La Fêlure Du Plaisir: Etudes Sur Le Philebe De Platon*, volume 1. Commentaires, trans. by Fulcran Teisserenc (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1999), pp. 385–401. Harte expresses related ideas in Verity Harte, *Plato on Parts and Wholes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 177–211.

²¹Seemingly, Plato does not address the limited but infinite, such as the set of natural numbers, which has a beginning but no end.

²²Harte, 'Quel Prix?', *op. cit.*, p. 12.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 13, my emphasis.

structure is normative, i.e. relates to norms or a normal.

Plato had earlier argued for the second feature when he said that all things are composed of four elements: unlimited, limit, mixed, and *cause*.²⁴ Intelligence is placed in the category of cause. Linking intelligence with cause explains the *ordered* character of the universe. This is argued by analogy. Bodies are ordered systems. The human body is ordered by human intelligence. The universe is a body of a kind. If it is ordered, like all bodies, then it is ordered by divine intelligence. Obviously this argument does not show that the universe is ordered—that is assumed—it only purports to show that if ordered, the order is caused by an intelligence. If sound, the order of the world is directly consequent on intelligence. That explains why an order is intelligible (e.g. to us).²⁵

Moreover, the introduction of intelligence “into the mix” also introduces teleology, an important, recurrent theme in the account. Harte says, “It is because the imposition of limit on the unlimited is caused by intelligence that the structures which limit provides are *harmonious* and proportionate.”²⁶ One might object that there is little reason to suppose that human intelligence could discern the intentions of a divine intelligence. That seems cogent, though only for those things, if any, ordered by divine intelligence as opposed to, say, man-made artifacts. However there is no reason to assume that Plato is committed to thinking that we can grasp the totality of the divine intelligence’s handiwork. Plato’s claim could be weakened by supposing instead that our intelligence apprehends order in part or *in toto* because it is ordered by an intelligence similar in kind to ours; as when we have deciphered only part of an ancient language.

Harte continues, “Platonic bywords for structure, . . . , are harmony, measure and proportion.” As above, measure and proportion are that without which no mixture can exist. And, “normative terms of value are concomitant on the presence of structure.”²⁷ This is a partial answer to the dependence question. Goodness (value) inheres in structure (wholeness). However, this wholeness (structure) can be achieved solely with proportion, the

²⁴See my remark on page 110n19 for a caveat on interpreting ‘cause’.

²⁵This is not a great argument, though that is not fatal. Order can possibly appear in many other ways, perhaps through self-organization as in evolutionary or economic systems. Order arising without recourse to intelligence in the Platonic context is discussed in Mary M. McCabe, *Plato and His Predecessors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). The emergent science of order in networks, natural and otherwise, is discussed in Albert-Laszlo Barabasi, *Linked: The New Science of Networks* (Cambridge, Mass: Perseus Books, 2002). These approaches do not answer doubts regarding inherent intelligibility of order. Plato’s secondary argument that unlimited and limit are always combined by intelligence goes some way to providing what is needed for that argument. In chapter 9 I argue for an order, moral reality, arising from our capacities for relations with others.

²⁶Harte, ‘Quel Prix?’, *op. cit.*, p. 15, my emphasis.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 16.

second prize-winner. Epoxy glues provide a mundane example. These are typically sold as two distinct components: a binding resin and a hardener. They are combined in a specific *proportion* in order to make the epoxy. Suppose that the resin and the hardener must be combined in a 1:2 ratio, for optimal efficacy. If they are combined in this way, we have a whole of a particular kind, specifically an epoxy glue. It is *complete* and *sufficient* (*teleion*) just as it is—both elements of second prize—because nothing further need be added to make a distinct whole. So, the ratio is a *definitive* description of this kind, viz. epoxy glue. If the elements have been mixed in exactly a 1:2 ratio, then the epoxy glue is a “perfect” (*teleion*) example of its kind—the sort of thing we could call an excellent (*kalon*) example of its kind. The point of saying this is that there is no way to improve on this epoxy instance. A mixture in a 11:20 ratio would be slightly less perfect (i.e. worse), and also somewhat less effective at binding. One at 19:20 would be almost useless as glue.

The 1:2 ratio describes a norm, what I shall call a *descriptive norm*. So the structure is normative as Harte says, but I qualify it by calling it descriptively normative. It describes the ideal form of the kind, viz. epoxy. This normative aspect of structure is grounded solely in the winners of the second prize, collectively: proportion, completeness, excellence (and in some cases beauty).²⁸ Using the elements in the second prize then, we have an account that describes how a life can be a good (*kalon*) one. It is no answer to the dynamics question, since it depends solely on internal structure. An answer to the dynamics question is crucial for a sense of good—a moral sense—that explains responsibility and decision about, say, what to do *next* in changing circumstances.

4.5 Metaphysics of Structure: Prescriptive Norms

The account does not yet have what I shall call a *prescriptive norm*. This depends on adding the winners of the first prize: measure, due measure, and appropriateness. Let’s return to epoxy glue. The correct ratio of ingredients is merely what is necessary for a mixture to be a perfect instance of epoxy. However, it does not yet determine the proper application of the glue. I do not mean how to smear it, but rather how much is appropriate for a particular task. So, for instance, there is no contrast between two perfect mixtures, one of 25ml resin and 50ml hardener and another of 100ml resin and 200ml hardener. So

²⁸It is not obvious in the dialogue that any other prize-winner could work for this either.

far as their proportions are concerned they are both whole and complete. However, the latter is four times the quantity of the former. One quantity is *appropriate* for gluing the handle of a teapot, while the other is more appropriate for gluing down wood laminate. The difference is related not only to the size of what is glued but also to the materials in question, e.g., wood absorbs more glue than ceramic. So, one could say that the correct or normal (or due measure of the whole) quantity is consequent on the actualities of the particular task for which it is intended. That is, the whole must (be a proper) *fit* (for the) task. The actualities ground a prescriptive norm within which talk of due measure, appropriateness, and fit make sense.

Now we can answer the dynamics question. I propose that (due) measure wins first prize because proportion would have no use, no role—a diminished existence—without measure. By ‘diminished existence’ I mean the sort of thing with which this account impugns the Irresponsible—mere or inert existence. Something’s place in an (cosmic) order is constituted by the role it can play. An actor without a part is not in the play. Applied globally, an actor who could never have a part could not (would not) *be* an actor. With proportion alone something could be a whole. But without measure, that whole something would not be a *part* of an order. This could be weakened to saying that such things may have a *general* kind, but that kind has no application to actual or particular circumstances.²⁹ Due measure and appropriateness give structure a fit between the whole and the *cosmos* (i.e. the ordered universe); or using more mundane philosophical terms, prescriptive normative structure explains a fit between the thing and the world.³⁰

An immediate objection is that this story works for epoxy glue and an intention such as gluing a teapot, but what sort of prescription is that? Why bother to fix the teapot? Well, perhaps to serve tea. But why bother to do that? Perhaps because guests come to tea. And so it could continue. Appropriateness seems to *depend* on ends, tasks and sub-tasks, each containing the last like enclosing Russian dolls. One way to put the concern is that if there were no ends, there would be no prescriptive norms. And ends, archetypally human, do not have the independence our master argument requires. The objection seems sound on first inspection. Things do not appear to have their prescribed role by dependence on

²⁹Care would be needed in elaborating this modification, since one could think, with Berkeley, that general geometric forms like triangles exist without being instantiated. Such objects would, in any case, be special cases.

³⁰This gloss was suggested to me by Verity Harte who glossed my ‘descriptive norm’ as fit between the thing and itself, or the instance and its form.

the independent world of descriptive norms. Rather they seem to depend on particular tasks, tasks that arise from individual needs or the needs of one's life, viz. having guests to tea. This makes norms seem individually-dependent in a way hostile to the independence requirement on the account outlined above.³¹

So, this Plato-derived account has stalled in two places. First, an independent basis in which prescriptions (of appropriateness) can inhere is needed. Second, something general or global—rather than relative to or dependent on an embodied person and his life—is needed. (I say 'embodied' because Plato's account has thus far depended on intelligence ordering a body.) Both of these needs can be met using the necessity of assuming that the universe is intelligently ordered, argued for above (§4.4). If it is ordered, it is against this system (*cosmos*) that final applications of measure and appropriateness are grounded. By 'final' I mean that while an individual may have a task, life, and context that make a particular whole appropriate, that individual must himself be appropriate to the (greater) cosmic order (of which he is a part). So it is not any task that creates the scope for something's appropriateness, i.e. its fit. Only tasks that are themselves appropriate to an individual person's cosmic role will ground the measure (i.e. prescription) appropriate for a complex object, like epoxy. A significant consequence of this result is that artifacts, e.g. epoxy, are *indirectly* appropriate to the cosmos, i.e. their appropriateness is derived. (This provides a reason for thinking that artifacts are not of themselves morally valuable.) Artifacts depend directly on personal ends for their appropriateness, while persons depend directly on the cosmos. Therefore any relation of appropriateness is finally anchored in the cosmic order itself.

This result is not surprising since the moral character of the account under development urges the idea that people's lives are qualitatively different from animals' lives and inanimate artifacts' "lives." If this is right, then human lives are potentially good or bad in *both* descriptive and prescriptive senses.

This clarifies Socrates' curious summation near the end of the *Philebus* where he says:

To me it appears that in our present discussion we have created what might be called an incorporeal ordered system for the rightful control of a corporeal

³¹It is interesting to note the several places where Plato suggests that the world is held together by "friendship," bound by what has been made *together*, by replicating order in ourselves. See for example *Gorgias* 508a and *Timaeus* 32c3. So any resolution of this problem will need to explicate this idea of 'together' in a way that restores independence. This idea will recur in my discussion of joint determination in chapter 7 and in my discussion of harmony in §4.6.

subject in which dwells a soul.³²

Or to contrast creation's active voice with discovery's passive voice:

To me at least it seems that our discussion has arrived at the design of what might be called an incorporeal order that rules harmoniously over a body possessed by a soul.³³

The reference to 'incorporeal' refers, I suggest, to an external *independent* conception of an *intelligible*—because rationally ordered—*system* within which measure and appropriateness (for human lives) make sense. The summation is an expression of a generality and independence with which, once satisfied, the account can proceed. (It is also an expression of how the ideas of independence and generality are necessary to make sense of individuality. The elaboration of that thought will begin in the next section.)

This account also clarifies an acute difficulty in the *Republic*. In the *Republic* the account of the good life was constituted by harmony of the tripartite soul, where harmony or health was a norm with prescriptive consequence. Neither is obviously so. Harmony may be a descriptive norm, definitive of a healthy human: one is healthy if one has a harmonious soul. So far that regards humans as any other sort of structured mixture, without grounding a prescriptive norm. This specification of health uses an *intrinsic* notion of what makes an exemplary human. I call it 'intrinsic' because it is insensitive to the world in which that human lives, just as being excellent epoxy was insensitive to a particular gluing task. By accounting for prescriptive norms outside the descriptive norm for humankind, as Plato does in the *Philebus*, the idea of health or harmony is extended (externalized) to fitness for the world in which one (actually) lives.³⁴ (The idea of a fine man unfit for the time survives in expressions such as, "He was made for another time," said of a Great Edwardian now at sea in a world of permeable social strata.) Extending and externalizing the norm of harmony makes space for facts and considerations about the situation of individuals, rather than constraining them to (natural) facts about humans generally, about humankind. The idea that the beauty or excellence (*kalon*) of a person is

³²Plato, *Plato's Examination of Pleasure (Philebus)*, trans. by R. Hackforth (Cambridge University Press, 1945), p. 64b7.

³³Plato, 'Philebus', in: John M. Cooper, editor, *Plato: Complete Works*, trans. by Dorothea Frede (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1997), p. 64b7.

³⁴Indeed, David Sedley argues that the *Timaeus* can be read as giving a *physical* account of health as being constituted by thinking circular thoughts in harmony with the motions of the heavens. David Sedley, 'The ideal of godlikeness', in: Gail Fine, editor, *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul*, Oxford Readings in Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 309–328.

“bigger” than or outside himself will recur here and in chapter 9.³⁵

4.6 Constituting Ordered Reality

Another problem looms however, for Plato’s account has been built on an analogy between how our intelligence orders our body and how the universe, since ordered, is also ordered by an intelligence. For the analogy to work, the universe must be like a body. However, I said above that the *incorporeal* character of the cosmos provided normativity’s *independent* ground. Plainly there is some mismatch in the analogy between a body and an incorporeal system. A committed Platonist could perhaps respond that the body (and its life) shares a form with the incorporeal system—with the same form in both, the analogy is saved. There is another solution, I suggest, that does not depend on Platonic metaphysical forms.³⁶

If the universe had a body, it would be natural to suppose it contained everything. By ‘universe’ we mean everything that is, so the universe is *constituted* by everything that is. We and our bodies are in the universe, so it follows that we too part-compose, in some small way, the universe. So if the universe is ordered, then we may part-compose that order.³⁷ The discussion has been directed toward describing the following idea:

Compositional Reality Reality is composed of us and our relations—inter-personal and otherwise; intentional and otherwise; independent and dependent.

The idea demystifies how the universe’s order could bear upon us. It does not so much bear on us, as structure our being within it. The possibility of a relation of appropriateness

³⁵In addition, the *Philebus* account may helpfully elaborate the *Republic*’s account of knowledge of the form of the good, i.e. that thing (goodness) which all other forms possess. One could object that human intelligence could *not* discern the divine intelligence ordering the cosmos. Yet, human intelligence, constituted particularly by the knowledge of excellence (*arete*), could grasp due measure. ‘Grasping’—which I should gloss as a capacity to track—due measure gets one an ability seemingly like what Plato says knowledge of the form of the good allows: a grasp—at the limit—of how something is *appropriate*, appropriate to the order of the cosmos. I would of course have to say much more to substantiate this point, it is here only suggestive.

³⁶I believe in any case that it is a matter of scholarly debate whether Plato was still adhering to the doctrine of the Forms when he wrote the *Philebus*. The account under development is for use in this chapter’s dialectic rather than Plato exegesis (a goal I disclaimed above). The alternative solution suggested below is more attractive for my ends insofar as it makes fewer metaphysical claims.

³⁷There is a story of this kind in the *Timaeus*. At 28b-c he says the whole universe (*ouranos* and *kosmos*) has a body. At 30c-d he says the universe is a Living Thing of which all living things are parts. Indeed between 33b and 34b the body is given an appropriate shape, unlike ours because, e.g. no need for feet. It is though a “whole and complete body itself, but also made up of complete bodies.” Plato, ‘*Timaeus*’, in: John M. Cooper, editor, *Plato: Complete Works*, trans. by Donald Zeyl (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1997), pp. 1225–1291.

is a consequence of potentially being part of the order.³⁸ It also effects the link between existence (descriptive norm) and goodness (prescriptive norm) needed in my master argument (page 109).

Conceiving the relation of appropriateness this way has the further benefit of deprecating talk of “sharing” the form of the good where that means shared possession of the very *same* thing. This compositional account explicates a share of the form of the good by reference to something’s appropriateness, i.e. its part/role (one of many) in the system. What is not in the system—neither good nor appropriate—has no share in the form of the good. (Though we do not want to say that what is bad does not exist, merely that it has no role in the body, like the gallbladder.)

One objection is that this conception of goodness is not sufficiently independent, for it is not something to which we can “aspire” to conform or that can “command” conformance. Roughly, being partly constitutive of goodness, we should have to resort to unlovely talk of “commanding ourselves” or “aspiring to be like ourselves.” So, the objection continues, whatever we did would be “right” thus robbing a norm of the independence vital to the account. (Of course, there are also dependent norms, but the master argument needs independence.)

This concern is, I think, informatively off-beam. As components of the cosmic system, conforming to (or being appropriate to) an order just is being in *harmony* with the other elements in the system. The harmony is independent of any *one* of us insofar as we can only *be* in harmony by being in harmony with *others*. Colloquially, it takes two to tango. The analogy is that unless one is dancing alone and in silence, one cannot be oblivious to the music or one’s dance partners yet still be dancing. Dancing a waltz well requires both following the canonical steps of the waltz *and* responding sensitively to the band’s tempo, one’s partner’s movements and other waltzing couples. We cannot determine what is harmonious unilaterally. Harmonious being depends on our relation to others—their actions, their natures, their beings. Thus what is harmonious for me is not *relative* solely to me. The norm of harmony applies to everyone in the system.

The system is therefore like a body and its parts (or a corps of dancers), and it is pre-

³⁸At *Philebus* 29, there is a microcosm/macrocosm contrast whose interpretation arguably supports my Compositional Reality idea.

scriptive for us, *insofar* as we are part of the system, part of the body.³⁹ So the problem with which we began is only a seeming problem. Goodness is robust enough to be independent, I suggest, in the way demanded since it has no dependence on any one thing. Given our structure and our world, any prescription for harmony is still independent of each element. The structure of the argument was roughly transitive: good depends on harmony; harmony is independent; therefore good is independent (of everything except harmony)—as required by the master argument.

There is a connection between our understanding of a relation between individuality and a general (regular) order and the similar relation between individual and general courses of lives discussed in §3.11. Clarity is vital in characterizing the relation between independence and dependence to avoid eliminating individuality from the idea of appropriateness. Consider another analogy: a jazz band. When they are performing the same song, each must be true to the song and to the musical themes within. Each must also take into account the capacities of his individual instrument and the limits of his ability. In this sense, each must make his part in the song his own. So on one side there is the individual's fidelity to the song understood as independent; on another there is his interpretation consequent on his individual nature (fixed and intended, e.g. slow left hand and light mood); on a third there is his dependence on others' playing. Not anything that one does during a free-form interval in a song will be in harmony with the song and its themes generally and their recent particular development in this performance of the song.

Even so, something entirely new can be in harmony. When Charlie Parker invented Bop he did so by taking existing melodies that he played at higher intervals of the chord with concomitant changes to retain fidelity to previous progressions. More formal collaborative efforts, such as a classical orchestra and ballet corps, permit similar opportunities. We treasure the artistry of Simon Rattle's conducting and Rudolf Nureyev's dancing for their innovative interpretation of classics.⁴⁰

The foregoing discussion is important in the following chapters' discussions of generality, individuality, passivity, and activity so I will labor it with a schematic example, a

³⁹A similar analogy regarding our relations to each other as individual bodily parts comprising a body is used in *I Corinthians:12* to describe God's church on earth. There, non-Christians are on earth, but they are not part of God's church.

⁴⁰An excellent expression of this tripartite relationship was when the legendary American dancer, Suzanne Farrell, remarked on a series of performances of choreography by her notoriously precise mentor, George Balanchine:

waltz. Harmony as I am describing it has three parts—independence, individuality, and dependence—and four relations among them. There is the dance—a waltz—a part conceived as independent. Second, there is my individual conception of the waltz I express in my waltzing. It is comprised of the relation of my intended fidelity to the waltz and the relation of my own interpretation of the dance with respect to myself (my abilities, attitude, etc.) Third, there is my response’s dependence on my waltzing partner (and indeed other waltzers in the ballroom). It is comprised of the relation between us with respect to our intended fidelity to our relation within the independent conception of the dance and the relation between us with respect to our individual interpretations of the dance. This fine-grained detail is important to understanding the internal/intrinsic and external/extrinsic discussion of harmony above.⁴¹ Table 4.1 (and the diagram in appendix B) may help to make these relations clear.⁴²

Table 4.1: Anatomy of Instantiated Harmony

Reality	Parts		
Aspect	Form <i>Independence</i>	Formlessness <i>Individuality</i>	Conformity <i>Dependence</i>
Instance	The Dance	(my/your) our dance	our relationship in dance
<i>Me</i>	my intended fidelity to	my interpretation makes	my response to your dance
<i>You</i>	your intended fidelity to	your interpretation makes	your response to my dance

4.7 Dynamics and Appropriateness

A different objection to the conception of goodness offered is that prescriptive normativity, and the goodness it grounds, is not obviously related to moral goodness in the sense of the commonsense objection. Put simply, ‘goodness’ is equivocal between a mere normative

There’s a clarinet cadenza in “Mozartiana” that’s very hard to count, but say you count it out, and it’s thirteen counts. So you tell yourself, “All right, I’ve got time for three pirouettes.” But what about the music’s internal time? What if one note is louder, so it needs a bigger response for you and that takes longer? What if the clarinetist doesn’t have as much breath that night, so the music sort of fades in and out? You can’t really dance to counts, or I couldn’t. On any given night, at any given point, I didn’t know if I was going to do three turns, or two, or four. You have to dance in the drama of the music, in *that* timing, at *that* moment.

Reported in Joan Acocella, ‘Second Chance’, in *The New Yorker* (January 6 2003), p. 51.

⁴¹More generally, this treatment reflects aspects of philosophical debates regarding universals and particulars as well as form, formlessness, and conformity.

⁴²A similar set of inter-relations for cooperative activity is proposed in Michael E. Bratman, ‘Shared Cooperative Activity’, in *The Philosophical Review* 101:2 (1992), p. 328.

(descriptive) and moral sense, since the sense of ‘good’ in good epoxy glue and good lives is not obviously the same.⁴³ Sameness of sense is a feature of the account but will be made more explicit in the next section in relating the point directly to the debate with the Irresponsible.

This section will first complete an answer the dynamics question posed at the end of §4.3 (page 110). In the *Gorgias*, Socrates argues against Calicles that the unlimited is undesirable (not valuable), even to the corrupt. Calicles says his ideal of good is the satisfaction of unlimited desires.⁴⁴ Socrates argues against this that having unlimited, uncontrolled, and unending desires is a painful state, for a man with unlimited desires has no hope of meeting his desires for they are limitless, so he will forever hunger, unsatiated.⁴⁵ In this sense, such a man lacks normative structure because his limitless needs cannot be appropriate to what exists since necessarily what exists is part composed by limit(s). (At the other end of the same spectrum, we could characterize *anomie* as the absence of normative structure through the absence of appetites.) Rather, a man who has self-control, who has order in his life, who places limits and ends, who has normative structure is more satisfied. He is more satisfied because his appetites in life *can* be satisfied. So, unlimited (seeming) desires can only become desirable by being mixed with a limit, thus becoming structured and structuring the life of he whose desires they are.⁴⁶ There is a risk, though, of a “fool’s paradise” if the structure is merely internal, with no regard for the world in which one lives; hence the need for harmony.

It is a further virtue of my account that descriptive and prescriptive normativity are distinguished, because both types of normativity (prescriptive and descriptive) are necessary in order to make sense of a cosmic system that is *dynamically* ordered, that admits change, like a living body. With only descriptive normativity there would only be enough structure for a well-ordered but *static* state. If the world changed, a perfect whole appropriate to the former state could be a perfect whole inappropriate to the new state. For systematic order (i.e. ordered *transitions* from state to state), prescriptive normative structure is needed to give things an enduring role in the system (*cosmos*) over time. (Indeed the Greek

⁴³One should recall that the *Philebus* is explicitly moral in content, aiming to provide a characterization of how it is best to live, of the good life.

⁴⁴Plato, ‘Gorgias’, *op. cit.*, pp. 491e7–492e2.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 493d6.

⁴⁶The *Gorgias* also has a detailed discussion of how “organization”—which I suggest as synonymous with structure—is essential to the good life. *ibid.*, pp. 506c5–507a3.

kairion—joint winner of first prize with due measure and appropriateness—has a temporal, episodic connotation.) That answers the dynamics question, explaining how goodness applies to extended, mutable objects like lives. It is easiest to see this with an analogy to an evolutionary episode. An organism may be well adapted to its environment. If that environment changes, the organism that is well adapted to the previous environment *and* the changed environment is the one most appropriate (well-adapted) to its environmental system's dynamics. In this analogy, the direction of change in the environment as well as the evolutionary markers of success, viz. reproductive success, broadly constitute what I have called the cosmic system or order. This thought will recur.

4.8 Actual and Possible

In the *Philebus*, the good life is a mixture of measure and proportion combined in some way—that is not “mixing” into a mixture—with *aletheia*.⁴⁷ However, measure and proportion take first and second prizes, while *aletheia* receives no prize. Why? In reference to the essential ingredients in the good life, Socrates tells Protarchus:

SOCRATES: But there is still a certain thing we must have, and nothing in the world *could* come into being without it.

PROTARCHUS: What is that?

SOCRATES: Reality: for a thing with which we don't mean to mix reality will never really come into being, and if it ever did it wouldn't continue in being.⁴⁸

The question is what is the significance of the remark about combining *aletheia* to the mixture constituting the good life? *Aletheia* can be translated in post-Homeric Greek as either 'truth' or 'reality'. Indeed, Frede translates it as 'truth'.⁴⁹ Any discussion of truth is of course important for the larger dialectic with the Irresponsible. The philosophically significant contrast however is, I think, between *actual* and *possible*, not truth and reality.

Recall that the question at issue is the good life, how to live. What is it to say that a good life is true or real? The idea offered thus far concerns a life's potential for being appropriate to a cosmic order. Broadly, a life is appropriate when it is ordered sufficiently for possible accord with cosmic order. We can imagine instead a life so disordered, so lacking in form that there is no possibility it could be in accord with anything (or anyone).

⁴⁷Plato, 'Philebus (Frede translation)', *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁴⁸Plato, *Philebus* (Hackforth translation), *op. cit.*, p. 64a-b, my emphasis.

⁴⁹Plato, 'Philebus (Frede translation)', *op. cit.*, p. 64b2.

I shall call a life of the first sort *truth-apt*, where that means that there is a possible cosmic system with which it is in accord. The second sort is not truth-apt because its lack of structure puts it in discord with every possible system.

An ordered life may be truth-apt, yet not true, if, as it were, the world is not favorably arranged for the truth of that life. So, a possible life is actual if it is in accord with the real cosmic system, that is the cosmic system now and here. Let me give some examples. The Samurai's code is a *possible* way of life for the presently non-existent but once actual Feudal Japan; similarly for an Arthurian Knight in never-existent Arthurian England. I suggest that a heroine like Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar exemplifies an actual way of life fit for our world.⁵⁰ I suggest an impossible way of life, in this sense, is the life of the wanton, for such a life has no order (nor save by chance does the spineless' life). *Ex hypothesi*, it is a collection of inconsistent disordered responses. There we should like to say that the human organism lives, but in the diminished sense above (page 109).

The difference between actual and possible relates to my account as follows. The universe might have been different.⁵¹ If it had been, then what makes for a good life would have been different. That is, if the universe had been ordered differently, the structure and normativity given by *measure* would have been different. If the universe had been constituted differently, the structure and normativity given by *proportion* would have been different. I take all the foregoing to be possible. Proportion and measure have no necessary relation to what is actual. Both appear to be "formal" features of a whole. So, we could imagine many *possibilia* solely by reference to structures given by proportion and measure. There is no obvious difficulty in so employing both structure-giving elements.

If that is right, then it is now clear why being *actual* is a crucial quality of the good life—the life that we should actually live. For if the good life were a mixture solely composed of measure and proportion, then it could be intrinsically good but not actual. It would be in some irrelevant sense *true*—to some possible cosmic system—but *non-existent* as a life, since it would not be a living part of the cosmos, viz. reality.

An analogy with geometry may be illuminating. Space might have been different. It might have been Euclidean (planar) or Riemannian (spherical). Actually, space is

⁵⁰Suu Kyi is a non-violent, Nobel peace prize winner, who has spent most of more than a decade under house arrest for pro-democracy efforts in her native Burma.

⁵¹This possibility goes deep. Modern cosmologists countenance the possibility that the mass of electrons might have been different or that the law or force of gravity is not fundamental but emergent.

Lobachevskian (hyperbolic and curved). Euclidean planar geometry is possible but not actual. If space became spherical, then our current geometry would be ill-suited to this eventuality, and our geometry would be possible but not actual. Thus, I should like to say that the ingredients of *the good life can* only be part of the mixture if they are actual, i.e. existent.

4.9 Commonsense Objection Against the Irresponsible Redux

The Plato-derived account of moral metaphysics summarized in §4.3 and elaborated in §§4.4–4.8 permits a vivid restatement of the commonsense objection to the Irresponsible. When he understands proportion he does not understand measure (appropriateness, value, prescriptive norms). Where he does not understand measure it is because he does not understand an independent immaterial order against which things finally have their use, value, or end. His intelligence fails to make contact with reality, with the reality of the ordered cosmos. That is, he does not discern the order of the universe others—the ordered—do. It is unintelligible to him. So whatever pattern he discerns in his life is no such thing, insofar as it lacks structure, because it has neither proportion nor measure *in relation* to the universe, to how things *actually* are.

Adding the considerations from the *Gorgias* (page 121), it is clear that a disordered life, one without limits, is at the limit no life at all. The Irresponsible's ignorance of measure and structure, a condition of absent understanding and folly, allows him to drift increasingly from cosmic order, further from what is *actual*. His "reality" becomes individual, not inter-personal or harmonious, an order unto itself where whatever seems right to him will be right. This is the solipsist's path. More prosaically, it is the path of the gibbering crazy—outsider to all since the world of his making cannot be shared. He becomes increasingly unintelligible to those who *share* some grasp of cosmic order. Surely this is Socrates' pitiable picture of unhappiness, solitude, and madness described as the penalty for fundamental ignorance of the truth of one's life: "He will forever go on living in this world *a life after his own likeness* . . ." ⁵²

Another mathematical analogy may illuminate. Someone who carries out mathemat-

⁵²Plato, 'Theaetetus', in: John M. Cooper, editor, *Plato: Complete Works*, trans. by M. J. Levett, revised M. Burnyeat (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1997), p. 177a7, my emphasis. I return to this idea in §9.9.

ics according to his own practice rather than in accord with the order mathematics really (truly) has (if, as on a Platonist's account, it does) is not doing mathematics. He may be consistent with his own system and uninterested in sharing his "mathematical" results with others, but that will not establish his mathematical doings and practice as real instances of mathematics. One reason we should find his practices bewildering is that he does things we find unintelligible, e.g. divide by zero—things which have no part in our mathematics, no meaning, simply undefined or indefinite. It could be that we were wrong and he was right, but his being able to convince us of that or demonstrate it would depend on his revealing that his mathematics are a (harmonious) part of (mathematical) reality in ways which ours are not.⁵³

Living badly is living less, just as badly mixed glue fails to adhere. (Glue mixed too badly is no glue.) This, on the account essayed, is an intended consequence of several things. First, to live badly is to be unaware of what makes us healthy in a broad sense of the term. In that sense, it is to lack awareness of how to *structure* oneself to make oneself beautiful, perfect, complete, sufficient, etc. Second, it is also to be unaware of how to get on in the world, of what is appropriate to one's actual circumstances, to how the world is. Third, the second is most acute under a social aspect for when I go my own way—a way that is not shared—I become unintelligible. If my life is not ordered in a way intelligible to others, I live my life in separation from others.

4.10 Truth Does Not Exhaust Morality

Even without the extended defense that would be necessary to make the Platonic account compelling in the face of its revisionary implications, I think there is much insight in the Plato-derived account developed for the commonsense objection (and similar objections). However, I shall argue that it is insufficient for exhausting the force of an Irresponsible's challenge. Ultimately, the Irresponsible can grant this metaphysical picture, and still pose his awkward questions.

Yet, I have developed the account because a realist or Platonist metaphysical picture is tempting in moral theorizing. Many philosophical accounts of morality are moved to give primacy to truth, nature, and reality. Insofar as they are similar to the account above,

⁵³I return to these ideas in chapter 7.

naturally I think they are insufficient too. Let me mention some now. Naturalism gives primacy to the truth of natural facts—usually about humankind—suggesting that our moral philosophy will be grounded in, e.g., our (philosophy of) psychology or an account of flourishing.⁵⁴ Rationalism gives primacy to reasoning that is essentially conditioned by a requirement to be *truth-preserving* (as opposed to for instance falsehood avoiding or motivationally harmonious). Thus it claims that moral understanding is reducible to grasp of truths, usually truths about reasons.⁵⁵ If my arguments below are on track, then they will, I think, capture these views in their wake, with due elaboration.

My argument is that there are obviously moral elements considered in our moral understanding that are not explained or accounted for when *all* the explanatory weight is placed on moral truths (so-called) about reality. If that is right then moral truths do not exhaust the objects of our moral understanding; meaning there are facets of moral reality not expressible as moral truths (though what we understand may still be true). When the Irresponsible adverts to these in his challenge, realist metaphysical accounts require external (philosophical) resources to meet the challenge.

I have four independent considerations against the Platonic account. First, why assume that the cosmic order is a good one? Why is the “open” question argument not intelligibly asked of the cosmic order? Second, it is not obvious that existence or living should be paramount in morality. Socrates’ startling claims are not platitudes if it is intelligible that someone actually *could* or *should* choose suicide (real or *de facto*) over injustice. Third, we do not lack further moral understanding when choosing amongst people who have quantitatively morally failed to the same degree. That is, we distinguish moral failure in ways that go beyond simply living badly, beyond simple ignorance of truth. Fourth, and most importantly, even if moral truth were all there were to moral thinking in theory, we must still account in moral philosophy for those whose moral bearing toward the world exceeds mere traffic in truth, even moral truth.

The difficulties with realist accounts derive from the central idea from which they mean to derive their strength: the attempt to assimilate moral truths to metaphysical truths—

⁵⁴See, e.g., G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, in *Philosophy* XXXIII (1958), pp. 1–19; Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵⁵See e.g. Joseph Raz, *Engaging reason: on the theory of value and action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, edited by Onora O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). The latter two are engaged in chapter 10.

thinking that metaphysical truths have a status otherwise unimpeachable. By ‘unimpeachable’ I mean that they are truths whether acknowledged or not. Truths, nor their (motive) force, do not wait on our apprehension, comprehension, or validation. So someone’s particular understanding—including the Irresponsible’s—of them is inconsequential. The accounts continue by demonstrating the gravest consequences from ignorance of such truths and their force. One consequence, paradigmatically metaphysical, is failure to exist *or* to exist morally. This consequence may be weakened to the (purportedly) less extreme charge of irrationality. But the intent is the same: a consequence to which indifference is unintelligible.

“Open” Question Objection

Why suppose that the cosmic order is a good one? Note that this is not the question what *makes* it good, rather it is the more basic question of *whether* it is good. That the cosmos is ordered does not entail that it is good. Having the power to create and order the cosmos does not entail that the intelligence which does so does so well. It seems possible and intelligible that the cosmic intelligence, like our own, is prone to error or feeble with limitation. Even if it were not, why suppose it is disposed to order with a moral as opposed to malign end? The intelligibility of such a question suggests already the *lacuna* in the account, viz. a link between order and morality. These concerns do not prove that the cosmic order is not good, only that we lack warrant for supposing it to be so.

If, however, an ordered universe that is not good is possible, then order can be intelligibly distinguished from goodness. In which case, truths about being ordered or not relative to cosmic order will not of themselves be moral truths about goodness. Malign worlds are possible. Mythology and religion are filled with worlds whose structures are malignantly perverted. More simply, we can imagine our world with the capacity for love absent, i.e. an ordered world, but morally less for the absence of love. The perfectionism internal to the idea of imaginably better worlds is a recurrent thought in moral philosophy.

One could object that an imagined world only seems worse by contrast with our own because the facet of morality missing from the imagined cosmic order (i.e. love) is inescapably integral with our actuality, our world’s order here and now. So the contrast is

illegitimate for us to make, because *ex hypothesi* love or its idea has no role in the imagined world, and is therefore not valuable “over there.”

The objection confuses the (contrastive) epistemic grasp we obtain by means of the contrast with the possible order imagined. The imagined order itself would—in the metaphysical sense essential to realist accounts—be actual and thus bad. Its badness is in *relation* to a different possible order, but *that* order need not be actual for the relation to obtain. This is evident by the ease of imagining the capacity for love disappearing irreversibly from our actual world. To this someone could retort that goodness is still in the world (now without love), and it is the only world we have. That is as may be, but it concedes the idea that facts of morality—an idea available to the Irresponsible—do not limit the grounds of moral facts to the world as it is presently ordered, since another world—and the reality within—*could* be better.

Motivation Objection

Existence is ordinarily extremely motivating. We seek to save ourselves, our health and the conditions on which our lives depend. From this though it does not follow that existence or living is the keystone of moral motivation. This is independent of the intelligibility of choosing, on moral grounds, to live over any other option in any situation. The undeniable intelligibility of someone choosing life does not make unintelligible that they not do so. History and literature are filled with those who have, in full cognizance, chosen death rather than betray their fellows or themselves. This thought is contorted into the idiom of truth when a pacifist refuses to make it “true of himself” that he had killed, even if certain death is the consequence of not doing so. More, it need never have been the case that anyone had chosen death on moral grounds. It is sufficient that it remains intelligible that someone do so.

If so, the Irresponsible may say that existence is one thing, but his bearing is another, and if he lives less well by the cosmic order’s lights, so be it. Indeed, he could allow that he does not live in the moral sense insisted on, but so what? He lives in the biological (or non-moral) sense allowed, and who is to gainsay his fool’s paradise? The question that becomes acute is whose idea of living has the best claim to being a moral one. Specifically, it is not clear what further feature *within* the realist metaphysical account *could* bear in

its favor. Yet we think there is more that can be said for both lives. If that is right, then any considerations adduced must originate in aspects of morality independent of facts of existence since they are granted by both parties. Moral understanding must accommodate these aspects.

Quantitative vs. Qualitative Objection

Assume it is possible quantitatively to measure accord (harmony) with an order. Use an analogy with dance. For a particular dance there will be a choreography specifying steps, positions, sequences and timing. We can imagine dancers who execute all the steps, assume all the positions, in the right sequence, at the right times. Others will misstep, take the wrong position, start prematurely or get the sequence wrong. There are ways to quantify this, perhaps those used in auditions or competitions. However, it is possible for two people to receive identical sub-optimal scores and yet make (many) different errors. The same is true, by analogy, of morality. People may act equally improperly in different ways, indeed these many ways were the foci of judgments in chapter 2. Compare a concentration camp commandant with consistency and integrity in his station and a wanton whose unreliability and betrayals produce misery for those around him.

However in both dance and morality we make qualitative assessments in conjunction with the quantitative. In dance, sequence is vital. We prefer a dancer who gets the sequence right but mis-steps occasionally to one who cannot get the sequence right. Similarly, we generally prefer a dancer who gets the steps right over one whose timing is variable. However, these qualitative criteria do not depend on the individual choreography. They are part of the independent nature of dance, of what dance is. Something similar is true of morality. We would ordinarily judge the camp commandant morally worse than the wanton. We generally prefer a grossly inept but well-intentioned person to an extremely effective deceiver, even if the consequences were in some salient senses the same. The criteria we use in such qualitative judgments are necessarily moral criteria—reflecting our moral understanding's objects—yet it is not obvious in what aspect of the cosmic order they could inhere, for they do not reflect particular facts or their truth, just as the qualitative origin for judgments about dance did not reflect facts or truths about particular dances.

Therefore, the Irresponsible may order moral truths by whatever additional criteria he likes without denying their truth. More importantly, when a commonsense objector presses him to give a particular element in his decision-making a particular weight, he may question the *necessity* of his giving it that or any weight. He may say it remains within the gift of an individual's moral understanding to determine which (moral) truths are (morally) most important.

4.11 Truth Needs Moral Understanding for Its Force

My arguments indicate that moral truth cannot be assimilated to metaphysical truth because it leaves not-determined things which are indubitably moral and determinable.⁵⁶ The arguments show that there is more to morality—what moral understanding comprehends—than truth. From this it follows that moral understanding is more than grasp of truths, even putatively moral truths.

The difficulty is to effect a link between truth and morality that exhausts moral reality and thus moral understanding. If the link is not exhaustive—as identity would be—then even if the Irresponsible *must* acknowledge truths, he is *free* to understand their (motive) force in his individual way, however irresponsible. Therefore, the commonsense objection is insufficient as elaborated.

This inadequacy makes perspicuous a fault in a realist's intuitive motivation for these commonsense objections. Only some of the basis for morally judging others stems from someone's capacity to reason about truths or apprehend reality. Some judgments about someone are critical responses to the motivations—attention, desires and passions—cognitively confronting truth and reality arouse in him.

This partially answers the question, why was Socrates willing to risk or endure so much for the truth? Some are motivated to live in the truth. Holland emphasizes this point in an observation about a related philosophical commonplace that concludes that every society must make a *virtue* of truthfulness if it is to function as a society at all.

The conclusion is soothing to the intelligence as long as you do not enquire into the concept of virtue that is being employed. But ask what concept it is—or to put the question in another way, ask what sort of truthfulness might

⁵⁶'Not-determined' is given a precise meaning in §6.8. For present purposes, it may be taken to mean indeterminate.

be at issue—and immediately your attention is caught by what the argument does not do. For the argument neither claims nor implies that truthfulness must exist to the same degree and have the same significance in all societies or among all the people in a particular society. Well then, if the concern of some of them for truth be such that they would hazard all their prospects for it there is something as yet to be accounted for.⁵⁷

An account of morality must account for how for some people the injunction “not to falsify became a spiritual demeanor” such that they would hazard all for truth. We may refer to this when we say someone has a *love* of truth. It is what we recognize when the actions of others express not only fidelity to (moral) reason but also goodness.⁵⁸ A bearing on goodness of this kind does not emerge solely from recognizing the truth of matters, it also expresses something of the *individual*. One is not an individual because of one’s perhaps unique place on a single scale of goodness, tending at the high end toward perfection. Individuals show their moral sensibility by the way in which their moral understanding shapes their life. Such sensibilities are various and they give rise to (moral) distances and differences which may not be explicable in terms of more or less moral knowledge, more or less awareness of fact, more or less traffic in truth. Diamond summarizes a catalog of examples thus:

The differences and distances I have been laying out are differences and distances of understanding, but also of the desire for understanding, the conception of its use, its place, its limits.⁵⁹

It is because of this individual aspect that we intend and expect our moral judgments to fasten on to someone personally. So, the importance of a person’s moral understanding in decision-making is not avoided by assimilating the ideas of moral truth and reality to a “mere” metaphysical ground.

One object of our moral understanding is our being in or out of order with others. This places an inter-personal emphasis on both the idea of Compositional Reality (page 117) and the idea of a distinctively human life. The distinction then between living and merely biological living was only partially right. The possibility of responsibility of the sort cen-

⁵⁷R. F. Holland, ‘Is Goodness A Mystery?’, in: *Against Empiricism: On Education, Epistemology and Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 107.

⁵⁸For how actions may be expressive of goodness and evil see, R. F. Holland, ‘Good and Evil in Action’, in: *Against Empiricism: On Education, Epistemology and Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 110–125. The idea of goodness beyond reason’s demands is a recurrent theme in discussions of supererogation.

⁵⁹Cora Diamond, ‘Moral Differences and Distances: Some Questions’, in: Lilli Alanen, Sara Heinämaa and Thomas Walgren, editors, *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 226.

tral to moral judgment depends on a life inter-personally composed, for being improper (inappropriate, disordered) is not of itself morally salient. Disorder *qua* impropriety is morally salient when it affects people—those who would judge—and their lives, inter-personally considered, by diminishing the reality of value (appropriateness) in their lives (or person).⁶⁰

It is not inconceivable that someone should know what is proper and ignore part of it, without being morally harmful or wrong. Einstein and Nietzsche in their own ways were anomalous, maybe sceptical, without being morally incontinent or destructive. That someone goes their own way does not immediately make them morally bad, even if it may make them unintelligible. Inattention may make them bad, but that is different, since it is a matter of attention not understanding. One is rarely sceptical—morally or generally—without being attentive. (Inattentive scepticism is more likely shallowness.)

Moral understanding is then part-constituted by our ability to understand and negotiate our place in the cosmic network of inter-personal relations. In that mode, the object of our moral understanding is inter-personally composed reality. It is misunderstandings of this object that indicate a diminished moral capacity and character. But characterizing these misunderstandings in decision-making as misunderstandings about fact or truth has been shown inadequate. The problem has been that facts are in an important sense inert. Rather, we need a more robust idea of how our moral understanding is personal before we can account for the normative force of the ideas of moral truth and reality. I shall turn therefore to how morality becomes personal by what happens when we decide or respond.

⁶⁰I elaborate this in §9.9.

5 Cognition, Possibility and Individuality

Albert Brown was not, let it be repeated, of an imaginative or romantic turn of mind. It is doubtful if he experienced any of the conventional thoughts as England vanished from sight, or if emotion of any sort came to him. . . . His intense love for his country, his delight and pride in her naval might, his glory in her past and her ambitions for her future, were real enough and solid enough; they were a living and essential part of him. But they found no voice. Brown had no use for words in relation to them, and they were too deep to raise any surface disturbance, any facile emotion. Brown turned solidly to his duty, while the relentless thrust of *Charybdis's* screws bore him away from the land for which he was ready to give his life.

Brown on Resolution
C.S. FORESTER

5.1 An Internal Solution

In considering decision-making as a prototype of moral thinking, several questions have concerned us. The most important of these has been with regard to personal responsibility for the forms of decisions and the questions they decided. In chapters 3 and 4, "external" solutions were sought by appeal to the independence of facts in one's life and in the world. These solutions foundered on the undeniable gap between facts taken as hard or simple and the same facts taken as soft or interpreted. Personal responsibility, on which our critical moral judgments of others depends, seemed to fall into the individual freedom afforded within the gap. Peter Winch noted that an external solution implies a relation between a person and his will that produces a problematic relation between a person and the world:

What seems to be implied is a very radical dualism. A man, considered as a moral being, is an active centre of consciousness. As such he is not really *in* the world at all: the world, that is, in which actions in the ordinary sense and their consequences occur. This is something which he contemplates and, [in a

mysterious way], may sometimes causally affect.¹

In this chapter and the next I shall develop an “internal” solution: a characterization of individual moral understanding that closes the gap between hard and soft facts. By describing how a person’s ongoing cognitive confrontation with the world is expressive of his individuality, I aim to make responsibility a feature of any actions intelligible as his own. The features of cognitive confrontations that express individuality I focus on in this chapter are related to possibility and necessity; and individuality and actuality. I will argue that an individual’s understanding of his actual situation is expressed by the limits on his responses stemming from his understanding of that situation. In the next chapter I will focus on the cognitive qualities of errors, determination of the not-determined, and meaning.

One problem with the previous discussions of truth taken simply was that truth had a universal character that, if taken as the sole basis for cognitive significance, squeezed individuality out. Consider the example from §4.11. It could be true that truthfulness is needed in every society and anyone living with others necessarily had an interest in being truthful. But this universality may not ground an individuals’ understanding of that truth—e.g. when one’s understanding is expressed in a demeanor bordering on the saintly—though it could. When understanding or its objects are conceived as having a universal—as opposed to, say, general—character, then individuality is limited by the extent of the demand for universality (or “universalizability”). I shall therefore argue for a greater scope for individuality of moral understanding by attacking the assumptions about moral reasoning’s universalizability.² For if the Universalizability Principle in moral reasoning described here does not hold, then any characterization of moral reality—i.e. the object of our moral understanding—must permit the possible significance of the individual or particular qualities of situations, individual people, and individuals’ understanding of that situation. This will go some way toward closing the gap into which personal responsibility fell since the salient individual or particular qualities of the person deciding can implicate personal responsibility.

Personal responsibility will be implicated by developing a conception of how one’s cognitive relation to reality enables one’s attention, understanding, and will to move one to

¹Peter Winch, ‘Trying’, in: *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 137.

²In chapter 6, my attack on universalizability will have application beyond moral reasoning.

responses (actions) that are intelligibly one's own. By 'cognitive relation', I mean the relation that obtains between mind and world when one's thoughts are world-directed and non-empty. I do not mean a relation that is "factive" in the moral cognitivist sense, i.e. relating to truth-evaluable propositionally-structured facts. I shall call the facts to which the mind is related when the cognitive relation obtains, "facts of actuality." Ordinarily, it is sufficient to speak of the cognitive relation between mind and world or mind and reality. 'Actuality' emphasizes the particularity of a moment in reality.

The shift to speaking of our understanding of reality rather than truth is important for the emphasis it places on individuality. Understanding truths is different from understanding reality, not least because the conditions for understanding a truth are different from those necessary for understanding a moment in reality. In principle, anyone can fully understand any truth even if such understanding is only of the conditions for the truth or falsity of the statement. A blind man can understand truths he is, because of his blindness, unable to verify. Truth is universal, insofar as being in principle accessible to all.

Reality is not. Understanding some aspects of reality is beyond some for contingent reasons, e.g., being blind, born in the wrong age, being male. The blind cannot understand some aspects of color. It is not that reality is "in principle" inaccessible, but rather that some cognitive routes to aspects of reality are blocked for that person in ways that are effectively insuperable. If that is right, then someone's understanding of reality may be individual to the extent that his contingent nature is individual.

I shall develop this idea by describing and extending Winch's account of how decision-making can amount to finding out something about one's individual nature—viz. what is possible for one here and now—without in so doing finding out what *anyone* could do. If in decision-making one need not find out anything about anyone besides oneself, then there is no basis for a claim that in deciding I always commit myself to (universal) judgments about what anyone else similarly placed should do. Rather, to the extent that decision-making is individual and cognitive, it is free from any universalizing constraints, however proper. The universalizability refuted can then be seen to have been a consequence of general ideas about reason; conceptual necessity; or specific ideas regarding human nature. Whereas, the understanding mooted below is constituted by one's ability to discern what is possible for oneself (in one's life with others).

Winch's idea can, I think, go some way toward an answer to the Irresponsible. Recall that the Irresponsible is someone who denies that he must take an attitude to decision-making that implicates his responsibility in a way that licenses personal judgments of him by others. A conclusion in chapter 3 was that if one lives *at all*, one's life is unavoidably unfolded by action (or inaction). So whether someone takes responsibility for the character of his life, that he acted is undeniable. The response expressed by decision or action does not obviously demand a commitment to or endorsement of the form of the decision and its question. But a response must reflect someone's understanding of the situation (i.e. the actual reality) from which the question arose. For if it did not, our explanatory grip on his cognition would be evanescent since it would be unclear about *what* he (i.e. the Irresponsible) is being irresponsible. Indeed, if response is not mediated by something outside mere cause and effect, we shall have little ground for describing the effect, e.g., bodily movement, as an action of his. Since his understanding is cognitively grounded and therefore individual, any reflection of his understanding is a reflection of him *qua* individual person. If it is right that a response to reality part-expresses an individual understanding and any response is thus revelatory of the individual, then that individual may thus be judged. That, at least, bounds the scope for an Irresponsible's intelligible disclaiming. If he claimed *never* to find out anything about himself in making decisions, then we should begin to doubt whether "his" decisions were even candidates for the critical judgments given above (chapter 2).

Some things *are* universal, but the number—and concomitant consequences—are, I shall argue, fewer than supposed. That does not mean I am arguing for the position known as particularism.³ I am arguing against universalism, but I mean to arrest the slide toward particularism with an intermediate position I could call "generalism" thus slowing a universalist's intuitive movement away from particularism. Nor am I arguing against universalism because I prefer an analysis in terms of second-order moral concepts such as principle or duty. Rather, I am "going lower" by focusing on the most basic levels of a person's cognitive relation to the world, to other persons, to his possibilities for action. Nor by attacking universalism am I endorsing pluralism about value. Not only do I disclaim any commitment on this point, I have explicitly rejected the complexities of an account based on the "cognition of value" (page 43n4). Additionally, while the arguments below

³See, e.g., Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993).

resemble arguments about motivational internalism and externalism, my conceptions of willing and desiring are sufficiently distant from those arguments to obscure any contributions I may unintentionally make. Lastly, ‘universalizability’ should not be confused with ‘impartiality’. The latter is principally a politico-legal notion, while the former is principally logico-conceptual (though the distinction is usually obscured in consequentialist moral frameworks).

The emphasis on a person’s individual understanding of reality is only one locus of resistance to the universalizing impulse. Another is found in the individual character of particular situations and the things of which they are composed. Situations and things may be individuals because they are *inter alia* unrepeatable, irreplaceable, or unique. Being individual in these ways does not preclude descriptions with general or universal warrant. A snowflake may be unique because of its history or qualities but be no less a snowflake for it. Everything generally and universally true about snowflakes may be true of it. But some qualities of the snowflake—viz. the ones that make it individual—may not be exhausted by these descriptions. Moreover, some situations or things may not admit of descriptions with any universal import or many generalizations. The extent to which they resist generalization and universality licenses a standing receptivity to anomalousness. Individual people are prime examples.

I discuss below the reality of people and its connection with the basic explanatory elements of action: attention, understanding and the will. I shall argue, elaborating from Winch, that people constitute reality principally as individuals. So our understanding of them is not best explicated as toward other situations or things of a general or similar kind. Instead, our understanding of how people constitute reality is anchored in a basic mode of cognition—an awareness—not readily assimilated to ordinary epistemic categories. Because other people’s individuality demands an individual rather than general understanding, our responses to them is—like what we find out about ourselves in decision—also expressive of our individual and personal understanding.

5.2 Universalizability Principle

I begin with an attack on universalizability to “make room” for individuality. Peter Winch was interested in the plausibility of a Universalizability Principle (UP) in moral thinking.⁴ He used Sidgwick’s formulation, though he thought something similar was central to many accounts in moral philosophy. The UP is paraphrased as: “if in certain circumstances I judge an action right for a third party, A, then I am committed to judging the same action right for any other third party, B, given circumstances not relevantly different.”⁵ Accepting the principle entails that if we judge an action (or indeed a decision, in my sense) right, then it is right for anyone who is not relevantly different. This formulation is entirely from a third person perspective on judging whether A and B are in relevantly different circumstances. The third person could be anyone, as could A or B.

Winch presses the application of the principle from a first person perspective. Put this way, the principle transposed would say that if I think that an action is right for me in some circumstance, then I ought to judge it right for anyone else in circumstances not relevantly different. It follows from accepting this principle that if someone chooses a different action to mine in similar circumstances, I should judge them not right but wrong. (For precision, this requires the rider that I also take it that there is only one right thing to do.)⁶ Winch argues against this principle. Consider examples that seemingly deny the UP; where people are in relevantly similar circumstances, decide differently, yet are *plausibly* unwilling to judge that the other’s decision is right or wrong.

War Suppose we are both Israelis whose membership in the military reserves is legally obligatory. The government, in response to terrorist provocations, decides to invade occupied Palestinian territories. We both feel obliged to serve, doing our duty as reservists and patriots. We both agree that Israel has aggravated the situation in the territories by treating the Palestinians badly during occupation. In consequence, we agree that invasion has a limited justification. However, we both feel that civil life in Israel is genuinely threatened by the ongoing terrorism. Suppose we agree in all

⁴Peter Winch, ‘The Universalizability of Moral Judgements’, in: *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 151–170.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁶For a utilitarian like Sidgwick, the hedonic calculus could yield equally right actions. Sidgwick’s own formulation of the UP in his *Principle of Justice* is both more strict and more loose: “whatever action any of us judges to be right for himself, he implicitly judges to be right for all similar persons in similar circumstances . . .” Henry Sidgwick, *The methods of ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 379.

relevant ways short of what to do. In the end, I decide to serve, you decide to join with others who refuse to serve in the invasion. I contend that I could think I made the right decision without thinking you made a wrong (or right) one.

Abortion Suppose we both become pregnant unintentionally. Suppose we share religious beliefs that contain no strong injunction against abortion. We agree that abortion is the killing of an unborn child, itself no small tragedy. We both agree that abortion is a woman's decision to make. We have similar reasons for considering abortion, e.g. we are both young and unmarried. Both fathers have agreed to accept our decision to have the child or not. Suppose we are in relevantly similar circumstances in terms of career, money, age, etc. In the end, only one of us decides to abort and the other does not. I contend that I could think I made the right decision without thinking you made a wrong (or right) one.

Family Suppose I discover that my father is embezzling money. I recognize that it is illegal and wrong. I may wish for my father to be caught, to end his ignominy. Indeed, I may selfishly want it to end so that my shame can end with it. However, I know the harm it would do my father if I were the one to report his crime. The harm could be irreparable and in any case would likely deepen the misery consequent on his being convicted. I decide that I, his son, cannot turn him in, precisely because he is my father and I am his son (even though I think it would be different if he were merely a co-worker). Later, I read about a case in the papers that, so far as I can tell, is relevantly similar to my own, but where the son turned in his father. I contend, that though I think I did the right thing, I need not think the person in the article did the wrong thing.

There are many things we might add by way of explanation or clarification. There are several things that should be avoided, by supposition if necessary. Any resistance to judging another wrong in these cases should not be explained by concerns of prudence or humility that urge a resistance to asserting that two situations or two people are (ever) relevantly similar. That can be right, but it need not be. Nor should the difference in these cases be explained by failure of nerve. That can also be right, but it need not be. Moreover, the fact that I decide in favor of one obligation in a circumstance with conflicting obligations, does not of itself nullify the unhonored obligations or my sense of being bound by

them (expressed, e.g., in regret).⁷ For this and other reasons, there are many ways I might respond to a decision different from my own. I could say, “My decision is right, and . . .”

1. his decision is also right. (Implication: more than one right option.)⁸
2. his decision is wrong.
3. *therefore* his decision is wrong. (Implication: only one right option.)
4. I do not think his decision is either wrong or right.

The examples above are plausible, I think, just as given. I take them as data requiring an explanation, even if the explanation is that their plausibility does not threaten the UP. Explicating various responses to situations may take care, but it is not impossible and the care required is another motive for thinking the UP a coarse principle. Number 4 is the one Winch uses to support the idea that in withholding judgment one both expresses and recognizes individuality. It will be my focus too, since, dialectically, being unwilling to judge another’s decision is consistent with denying the UP.⁹

5.3 Billy Budd, Captain Vere and Winch

Winch focuses on a similar situation confronted by Captain Vere, commander of H.M.S. *Indomitable* in Melville’s *Billy Budd*. Winch’s summary of the story so far:

Billy Budd, a foretopman of angelic character, is impressed into service on the *Indomitable* from the merchantman *Rights of Man* on the high seas. He is persecuted by the satanic masters-at-arms of the *Indomitable*, Claggart, in a campaign which culminates in Claggart’s falsely accusing Billy, before Vere, of inciting the crew to mutiny. In the stress of the situation, Budd is afflicted with a speech-impediment which prevents him from answering the charge. Frustrated, he strikes Claggart, who falls, strikes his head and dies.¹⁰

The difficult dilemma concerns how to deal with Billy. On the one hand, as a Naval officer, Vere is required to administer justice as specified by the military code. Military

⁷For this point, see Bernard Williams, ‘Ethical Consistency’, in: *Problems of the self: philosophical papers, 1956-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 172–173.

⁸I do not intend any covert reference to indexicals in moral judgments. See, e.g., Gilbert Harman, *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2000), chapters 1–4, 13.

⁹Affirming the rightness of another’s decision depends on issues discussed in chapter 8.

¹⁰Winch, ‘Universalizability’, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

justice demands capital punishment for Billy. On the other hand, Vere thinks Billy “innocent before God,” by which we are to take it that natural justice demands his acquittal. Thus the dilemma admits no compromise between the opposite demands of military and natural justice. The dilemma is for Vere deep, not merely a formal conflict between conflicting sources of justice. Vere’s obligation to uphold military justice is deeply held and moral, not a formality. It stems from his oath of loyalty as an officer and from his sense of what military company demands.¹¹ Similarly, Billy’s innocence before God is no less compelling to Vere for whom the demands of natural justice are plain—demands alive in his and his fellow officers’ sense of propriety.¹² Winch characterizes the situation thus to prevent the dilemma from appearing as merely a conflict between one’s public role and one’s private conscience; or between one’s commitment to institutional justice and one’s inclinations. Vere’s dilemma is intrinsically moral because the demands of justice on both sides are for him moral. Winch says, “I have laboured these points because it is important to my purposes to establish that Vere is faced with a conflict between two genuinely moral ‘oughts’, a conflict, that is, *within* morality.”¹³

Within either military justice or natural justice taken separately, it is clear what Vere ought to do. However, Vere faces the question outside either narrower context, but still *within* morality. This is crucial, since we could grant for dialectical purposes that the UP applied within military or natural justice. The example focuses on the UP’s applicability to a broader conception of moral questions, rather than focusing on arguably different notions of justice or value.¹⁴ If the principle holds in this broader sense, then any judgment (like Vere’s) against Billy carries a further commitment to thinking that those who would acquit him judge wrongly.

Vere finds against Billy. Winch claims that he could not have found against Billy in conformance with military justice, but that he does not think that Vere acted wrongly—i.e. Winch denies the applicability of the UP to this moral question. Since he does not think this question is morally exceptional, albeit rare, his view is a rejection of the universal char-

¹¹Cp. chapter 3.

¹²Cp. chapter 4.

¹³Winch, ‘Universalizability’, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

¹⁴For instance, in discussing Winch’s Vere example, Thomas has explained it in terms of inherently perspectival facts about the values cognized by Winch and Vere. My focus, following from chapter 4, is on actuality and possibility, and, following from chapter 3, someone’s understanding of himself. Thomas criticizes this focus in Winch as “psychologistic.” Alan Thomas, ‘Values, Reasons and Perspectives’, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* XCVII (1996), p. 77, and *passim*.

acter of the UP. The challenge is to characterize plausibly the nature of the disagreement while retaining the rejection of the UP consequent on Winch's refusal to judge Vere wrong. Plainly they disagree on something: what to do. Yet, they do not disagree in a way that Winch takes as warranting his assertion that Vere is wrong.

Though the example is fictional and Winch's claim about his decision is hypothetical, I am depending on their verisimilitude to make the point. This leaves me vulnerable, but I shall take the example as if it really happened, and Winch's attestations as genuine.¹⁵ I intended the same in the examples in §5.2.¹⁶ I return to this below. The philosophical force of these examples depends on the explanatory elaboration they are given. Winch provides a starting point and a focus on willing subjects instead of characterized situations, but as with my treatment of Plato, the account below is as much creative elaboration as exegesis.

5.4 General, Arbitrary and Exceptional

A consideration in favor of the UP is the seeming sense it makes of the *modal* character of discourse involving 'ought' and 'should'.¹⁷ 'Should' and 'ought' seem to describe and enjoin *necessary* transitions from how things are now to another state: how they should be or ought to be.

- It's five o'clock, you should be at the bus stop, not here.
- I ought to visit my mother and not watch television.
- Vere should not acquit Billy, he should find against him.

'Should' or 'ought' are only words, neither causes the transition. Each only expresses it, for I can without contradiction say, "I should visit my mother, but I can't be bothered."

Ordinarily, these injunctions apply *generally*. For anyone relevantly similar, I am warranted in asserting the injunction applies to them. If we both have to be on the five o'clock

¹⁵The question of the applicability of the UP is similar to questions about the applicability of the Law of Excluded Middle and the Principle of Bivalence. In both cases the unrestricted application of the principles are taken as *a priori* non-tautologous truths. So, for any meaningful statement, we can say in advance that it is either true or false, and likewise, for any decision in context, we can say in advance that it is either right or wrong. Denying either claim does not turn on logical form—as Hare would have it—but on what cognition and understanding comes to in making these claims *in advance*. For Hare's view, see R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 176 and *passim*.

¹⁶Someone may claim that fictional characters are not individuals, because any knowledge we have of them is by description and not by acquaintance. I cannot discuss the ontological status of fictional or imaginary objects here. The challenge regarding whether fictional examples can play the cognitive role I intend is at best a skirmishing point not a genuine threat, because the examples above could, I claim, be matched with real cases. Indeed, their plausibility derives from that modest claim.

¹⁷Though the terms are different, see Bernard Williams, 'Practical Necessity', in: *Moral luck : philosophical papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 124–131.

bus, we should leave now. Unless there is a basis for an exception from the general—e.g. I walk faster than you—we take the ‘should’ to apply as much to me as you. The scope of these injunctions does not seem *arbitrary*, rather they apply to anyone in similar circumstances. For anyone who has to take the five o’clock bus and is a ten-minute walk from the bus stop, if it is now 4:50, they should leave now. This warrant for that assertion follows without exception from the similarity of circumstances; but it is only a warrant, and its defeat by anomaly is not indicative of, e.g., conceptual error. The assertion the warrant justifies is *independent* of those to whom it applies. In this way it seems similar to causal necessity. For anything round, located at the top of an incline, we are warranted in thinking it should roll to the bottom, if unobstructed. Squares are excepted, but not on a case-by-case basis—all squares are excepted.

Winch is not saying anything like, “I should judge Vere as wrong, but I can’t be bothered.” Rather, he does not judge Vere wrong, though Vere decides the opposite of what Winch finds it right to do. Winch is also not saying it is too difficult to judge or that he cannot judge because the facts of the situation are unclear. *Ex hypothesi*, he and Vere are trying to find the right thing to do in the same situation. *Ex hypothesi*, they accept all the same facts, are aware of all the details of military justice, etc. Winch grants *ex hypothesi* that innocence and military duty are as important for Vere and him.

Winch bases his decision to acquit Billy on the actuality of the situation, on, we may say, the reality of Billy’s situation. So does Vere. Is Winch being arbitrary and dismissing the UP generally? No, his rejection is neither arbitrary nor general. The principle could hold within military justice or within natural justice. If it is accepted generally, why make an exception for Billy’s situation? If Winch may make arbitrary exceptions then little will remain of a relation between the situation and the judgment about the right thing to do in *that* situation. For if arbitrariness has no non-arbitrary oversight, then Winch may judge as he likes regardless of the actuality of the situation or what is generally true. Then, of course, he may feel no further need to think Vere right or wrong—it would only be more arbitrariness. If decision-making permitted arbitrary exceptions, then an extreme Irresponsible is right, and the relations between response and reality are insufficient for intelligible explanations—even to oneself.

Matters are not like this though, not even sometimes. Situations admit of the serious attention characteristic of moral decision-making, precisely because what is right is not

arbitrary. If the discussion of decisions in chapter 2 was on track, then decisions can be judged in a variety of ways including as right. Nothing about Winch's view suggests that he denies that *his* decision of the matter is not answerable to criticism. Winch would, I suspect, allow just this: he aims to find the right thing to do, and if he found later that the right thing to have done was convict Billy, then he would have been wrong. The time that passed may be offered as salient, but it need not be.¹⁸ This is a brief statement of the implications of "aiming to find the right thing to do." More will emerge below.

Simply acknowledging that you and I may disagree on a moral matter—while both agreeing that neither of us is wrong in so doing—does not require a further acknowledgment that my judgment of the matter is made right by my judging it so. Whether the decision is right or not is *not* a product of my judging it so. Thinking it right will depend in part on whichever ideal is taken as appropriate to decisions in this domain, e.g. those based on concepts of truth, pragmatism, etc. Nothing in Winch's view denies this. Nor does Winch's position entail that there is no right or wrong thing for Vere to do. Winch does not say that *nothing* governs his decision-making (though in rare cases that might be so). There are answers to the question of what is right for Vere to do. This is precisely why Vere agonizes over the dilemma. He is seeking a right answer. If he believed that whatever he did would be right, then his agonizing would take on a merely histrionic aspect and not command our sympathy.

The claim here is that what I decide is right for me to do can be different from what you decide is right for you, though the considerations in deciding used are the same. It is a claim in support of individuality because it opens the possibility that remaining differences should be sought in our individuality, rather than further decision-making considerations. It is not a claim about what specifically makes a decision right. The use of 'should' does not of itself entail a commitment of the kind claimed in the UP or consequent on laws of causation, for it admits of exceptions. This is a logical point. The point will depend on answering the question of why in this situation Winch's 'finding out the right thing to do' does not include finding out that Vere's doing otherwise is wrong. (Vere too is trying to find out what is right.) One answer begins with differences in deciding, judging, and finding out. Winch discusses 'finding out' as follows:

¹⁸Compare Sidgwick's uncompromising Principle of Prudence, "... the mere difference of priority and posteriority in time is not a reasonable ground for having more regard to the consciousness of one moment than to that of another ..." Sidgwick, *The methods of ethics, op. cit.*, p. 381.

A man in a situation like Vere's has to decide between two courses of action; but he is not merely concerned to decide to *do* something, but also to *find out* what is the right thing for him to do. The difficulty is to give some account of what the expression 'find out' can mean here. What I have suggested is that the deciding what to do is in a situation like this, itself a sort of finding out what is the right thing to do; whereas I think that a writer like Sidgwick would have to say that the decision is one thing, the finding out quite another. It is because I think that deciding is an integral part of what we call 'finding out what I ought to do' that I have emphasized the position of the agent in all this.¹⁹

I shall take Winch's 'finding out' as a 'decision' in my sense, though the latter term encompasses more than the former and so some detail is at risk. With regard to the account in this thesis, finding out is a sort of decision. My account of decision-making in chapter 2 is agnostic with regard to Sidgwick's two-step and Winch's one-step approach insofar as it accommodates both.

Winch thinks that Sidgwick's approach does not apply in "a situation like this." What then is important about a situation like this? Just that, it is a situations where we need not judge as wrong those who do other than we do. But leaving it there is question begging.

5.5 Moral Modality

What is our understanding of what we are doing in our decision-making about moral situations? Winch answers the foregoing question as follows. In deciding I aim to determine the right thing to do. The right thing is what it is possible for me to do or what I must do. Winch calls the modality—signaled by 'must' and 'possible'—of deliberating in these situations: moral modalities.²⁰ Developing this idea of modality will partially characterize what it is about the situation Vere and Winch face that reveals the UP's inapplicability.

The root claim is that, in some situations, when I decide *rightly* I find out something about myself. That 'something' is what is right for me to do. What this does not entail—what I have not found out—is what is right for others to do in similar situations. The rejection of universalizability rests on this claim. It needs development, because it is not, e.g., intended as a bald assertion of relativism. Further, in some cases, I understand, in

¹⁹Winch, 'Universalizability', *op. cit.*, p. 165.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 168.

finding out, what is right for me to do because it is what I must do. Put differently, in these cases, understanding what I have found out just is understanding what I must do. The Billy Budd case is one such case. In other, weaker, cases, I understand what is possible for me to do. These are cases that exhibit moral modalities. That they do explains why Winch is not making an arbitrary exception. The exception stems from the morally modal character of the situation.

What then are the objects of your understanding of what you have found out? The only answer Winch can give is a restatement of the considerations that led to this discovery, to this decision. And these considerations are expressible only in terms of the ideas and concerns which moved the decision in the first instance, viz. the situation. Winch says, "I express my understanding of what I must do in this situation by doing it." Put technically, we could say that the cognitive significance of what I have understood about the situation (or my understanding the situation) is identical with the impetus to act in a particular way. (Even if as in this fictional case the possibility for Winch to act is blocked, the impetus to act ordinarily eventuates in action). No further motivational precondition need be mooted such as a desire.

It is reasonable to ask after the cognitive significance of the situation that moved one to act. Winch supplies that in restating his considerations. It is much more to demand that the cognitive significance be decomposable into (e.g. conceptual) parts. Such decomposition may elide modes of combination amongst considerations or concepts which, at the limit, may have combined to have the significance they do.²¹ In any case, what justifies the demand for self-knowledge that admits of this decomposition? If it were to introduce vagueness *in some cases*, why think it unacceptable?

This may seem opaque. What, one might insist, is found out? I will consider three possible conceptions and accept only the third.

Hidden Considerations

Perhaps Winch finds a hidden difference, a nuance of the situation which turns Winch one way and Vere the other. There are two reasons to doubt this conclusion. First, there is no interesting sense in which describing the new fact as hidden is more correct than

²¹Recall type (iv) deviations, in type y judgments, in Table 2.2, page 68.

saying it was not previously considered. Nothing is hiding it. It turned up by a closer examination of the situation. In this respect it might have been discovered by any other cognitive enterprise, e.g. forensic investigation. Saying it was found out by decision adds nothing. Second, positing a hidden fact does nothing for our understanding of the example as Winch intended it. If a fact comes to light which sways Vere and Winch differently, then they will not agree on the facts of the case in all relevant ways while coming to different conclusions—*contra hypothesis*. Any difference may be explained by the weight Vere gives the newly discovered fact. Any restatement of one's considerations will turn up the difference and judgments of right or wrong may then turn on consideration of that fact. The "hidden fact" explanation therefore does nothing to explain the cases at issue (in §5.2). It might in some situations. The focus here is on "hard" cases that may reveal details of our moral understanding. Another reason for focusing on hard cases is that they are essential for genuinely describing some cases as disagreements. Broadly, we must agree on the facts of the situation, if we are to disagree about the same states of affairs. For disagreement, there must be something about which we disagree. If we cannot agree about what we disagree about, then we had better say first that communication has broken down rather than that we disagree.²²

Hidden Mode of Consideration

Perhaps Winch finds out that the facts of the case strike him a particular way, differently than Vere. There are two ways to take 'strike' here. Only one serves Winch's purpose. One sense of 'strike' is something like giving something a particular weight as a consideration in my decision-making. Winch may be more impressed by the fact of Billy's innocence before God than is Vere. If that is right though, there is no need to labor the point and Winch need not say that all he can do to explain the difference is restate the considerations used in deciding. Moreover, he should be able to say, by reference to an appropriate decision-making ideal, that Vere was wrong to have given Billy's innocence less weight. After all, a decision does not make something right. Correctly describing something as wrong (or right) demands standards of correctness (e.g. an ideal in decision-making) with which to pinpoint where in the decision things went wrong.

²²This idea is elaborated in chapter 7.

But this is a covert way of saying that they do not agree about everything since they disagree about the importance of Billy's innocence. And the weight of innocence is precisely the sort of thing that critical judgments of decisions focus on, as when we say critically that Billy's innocence counts less for Vere. This is sometimes a good explanation but it still misses the intended force of the examples above. Winch does not say of Vere that innocence counts less for him. He insists that they agree expressly about everything they state as bearing on the matter: the importance of Billy's innocence, the need to maintain military order, etc. That is why Winch feels he is not merely being difficult by deciding that he could not sentence Billy to death while offering only the same considerations, with the same weights, as Vere.

In any case, neither of these options explain why the situations are plausibly described as demanding a response to moral modalities. They are so far only suggestions about differing considerations, their import, their modes of consideration. To be sure, these explain many disagreements. However, in these examples we are trying to resist this sort of explanation, impressed by the possibility that there are cases where these explanations are not satisfactory.

Modal Difference

There is another sense of 'strike' in "how the facts strike me." What strikes me about the situation is what is possible for me in responding to the situation. That is what I find out: the possibilities for my response. What is it to find a possibility though? It is, for instance, to discover that there is a route from here to there, i.e. from this state to another. I can checkmate in one move from here (this position). I wonder how to rescue the cat from the tree and discover that the ladder will reach the right branch. Indeed, if the ladder is the *only* way to rescue the cat, then to rescue the cat I *must* use the ladder.²³ Finding possibilities includes not only that *there* is accessible from *here*, but also the route or means of that access. I can checkmate by taking the Rook with the Bishop. I can rescue the cat by using the ladder.

Sometimes we find a possibility only by moving from here to there. I did not think I could hit a one-handed blind backhand—but I just did. I wondered whether my nerve

²³Williams, 'Practical Necessity', *op. cit.*, pp. 124–131.

would hold on the witness stand, but it held without my even thinking of it. These are, I think, faithful simplifications of what Winch is talking about when he talks about finding out what is possible for me or what I must do. Billy's situation strikes Winch in a way that moves him to acquit. He finds out that it is not possible for him to find against Billy. That is, attention to Billy's situation will not move him to find against Billy. The actuality of Billy's situation strikes Winch such that he cannot get from here to there, i.e. finding against Billy.

Assuming there are two choices only, Winch discovers not only that acquittal is possible, but that he must. This 'must' is as much a function of the impossibility of finding against. Why can Winch not simply remain agnostic? In the situation with Billy as presented, an actual decision is required. Sometimes no action is required, and sometimes we can mistake that requirement.²⁴ But sometimes the present state is not stable, or is necessarily short-lived. A mountain climber hanging from ropes as a gale comes in will not consider his present situation to be a stable one. Indeed, if he hears his supports giving out, his situation will be a short-lived one: "here" will cease to exist. The situation can necessitate a response if remaining in the situation is impossible.

5.6 Reality Moves Us

It is possible to think of the world as (in a sense) constituted by all that is possible. We encountered one sense of this above. A ruined life was constituted by certain possibilities being foreclosed, by the impossibility of certain responses. In this sense, the modality Winch finds is also a discovery about the world, about the reality of the situation. Of course, this must mean that Winch discovers something about himself *and* his situation, i.e. himself *in* the situation. Specifically, he discovers that he is moved to acquit by Billy's situation.

'Moved' can be used with the sense above (p. 147) to mean 'strike'; characterizing how a particular consideration sits with me. The difficulties with that characterization were discussed. 'Move' describes how we move from one state of affairs to another possible (accessible) one. But, movement is something we do. I effect the move from here to there by my will. Ordinarily when I move, I do so by so willing. My willing is often though—I

²⁴Recall the mode of asking, p. 54.

suggest in way I think consonant with Winch—a response to a situation. We may say that understanding the situation engaged my will. More directly we may say that the situation engages my will. Adding to this, we can say that my willed response is an expression of my understanding in the situation. The difference between ‘moving’ and ‘being moved’ is not in the effective cause, since it is my will in both cases. The difference is in the origin of the will’s engagement. Note I have not said my understanding *of* the situation. I am not focusing on understanding’s characterization of its object, but rather on understanding’s engagement with its object.

Now we can say what is found out in deciding. I find out that I am moved (albeit by the effects of my will) to act by the considerations in question. This is what is meant when Winch says that the basis of his response are the considerations in decision-making; and that his decision just is his response. Recall Winch, “...I think that deciding is an integral part of what we call ‘finding out what I ought to do’ ...” My formulation makes clear how it is integral: the *result* of decision-making (i.e. the finding out) is the *impetus* to acquit (i.e. the decision).²⁵

It is important to emphasize Winch’s idea that discovering the possibilities, including impossibilities, for movement is a discovery about the world. For instance, the intellectual dislocation caused by the horrors of World War I originated in the unsettling discovery that astonishing progress by humanity in the nineteenth century was no proof against the bestiality of a war produced by geopolitical banalities. Those who thought that “modern and civilized” nations could never again war discovered possibilities to the contrary. Or suppose that while I am on a business trip an attractive colleague makes a none-too-subtle offer regarding some extra-marital amusements. Suppose I initially follow, but that as the reality of going through with cheating on my wife crystallizes, I find myself unable to continue. I may then have found out that whatever fantasies I had of myself as a lothario capable of such amorous adventure, I am actually constitutionally ill-suited to being one. In clarifying the sense of ‘constitutionally’, it seems plausible to include my inability to carry off an affair, that for me it is insufficiently tempting. It is even the kind of discovery one could be proud of *without* thinking of it as the result of self-disciplined action. It

²⁵This idea with regard to action may be unfamiliar, but it is similar to the philosophical principle of transparency of belief—considering whether I believe that *p*, just is considering *whether p*—enunciated by Ramsey and developed by Evans in e.g. Gareth Evans, *The varieties of reference*, edited by John McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 225–226.

is rather the discovery that this person (i.e. me) is insufficiently moved by such things. Perhaps more could be said about precisely why I am unmoved, but it can be enough for explanation (and justification) that I am.

Similarly, if one finds that one is weak in the face of injustice or easily moved to the venal, one could lament this as a discovery about the world by thinking that one's weakness is a blight on the world (however small); at the extreme, the existence of one's corrupted will is another limit to the world's possibilities for perfection. One's mere existence can be a stain.²⁶

Now we have a basis for characterizing the difference between Vere and Winch. *Prima facie*, they differ in their response to the situation. Each finds out different things in deciding. Each finds out different things about themselves as individuals in this situation. And, as part-constituents of the situation, each finds out what each can (must) do in that situation given (because of) who they are.²⁷ By 'who they are' I mean how they respond to this situation, by which I also mean, how they are moved to respond, or what *can and does* engage their will. That is, Winch, in deciding, realizes his response to Billy's situation, in both senses of 'realize'—doxastic and causal. So, the similarity of situations demanded in the UP has been undermined by showing that what must be similar is the composite of person and situation, taken irreducibly as person-in-situation. Put coarsely in this hyphenated pseudo-language, Vere-in-situation and Winch-in-situation are not similar. So when a situation is dissimilar on this basis, the difference may be only expressible by how each is moved to respond. This is how the defeat of this version of the UP makes room for individuality-in-situations (that exhibit moral modalities in decision-making).

A decision-making ideal by which Winch might judge himself (and Vere) right or wrong applies but finds no purchase when applied to Vere's decision. Why? Because each is seriously attending to the situation, neither is being cavalier or denying the urgency or gravity of the question. *Ex hypothesi*, they are weighing the same options. *Ex hypothesi*, they are using the same considerations, accorded the same weights (or modes of application). Both respond to the situation; neither has a failure of nerve, neither finds decision-making inconclusive, or is unresponsive to the decision made. All the differences on which a critical

²⁶These ideas are familiar in one facet of the philosophical problem of evil. If God wills all that happens (\approx occasionalism) or has constructed the world and our wills, then these are facts about how the world is, facts about how God made the world, viz. that we can be moved to do evil. Why could not the possibility of our doing evil have been removed, thus making a better world?

²⁷Cp. §4.6, and the idea of Compositional Reality.

judgment of the decision *itself* could focus are empty.²⁸ They differ solely in the result of their decision-making, viz. the move to acquit or convict.

Now, much can be said about Vere that does not spring from any decision-making ideal applied to the situation (as *ex hypothesi* conceived). We can say, simply enough, that he was a man who decided against Billy; that the situation moved him to convict; or that he was moved in this situation to convict. But to assert he decided wrongly in this situation requires a basis for so asserting. Winch offers no basis with which to make *that* assertion. Nor does Winch have anything further with which to assert that he, Winch, is right *beyond* the considerations he and Vere both employed.

If this is right, one way to see the situation is as one which is ill-suited to universalizability. The situation may lack what is needed for a universalizable judgment, e.g. its character is unsuited to our (present) capacities and concepts in the way required for a judgment of Vere by Winch.²⁹ An explanation is that we needed to add something individual to the situation to establish a difference that explains the UP's inapplicability. The obvious analogy is with matters of taste, though I am not saying morals are a matter of taste. Rather, taste is one area where it is familiar to suppose that individuality is a concomitant. The analogy is limited, because there is no thought that disputes about matters of taste *could* be resolved by more serious attention to the disputed situation. That is one reason for emphasizing the cognitive character (i.e. world-involving) of the understanding in question in moral matters. Also, our tolerance for disputes in taste is at odds with our tolerance in moral disputes.³⁰

There is a danger that this account seems passive. Someone approaches a decision and in some situations simply responds. This appearance is not entirely incorrect. Part of the point of emphasizing how decision-making and decisions are integral re-affirms that on this description at a certain point decision-making concludes in a response. This is meant to contrast with Sidgwick's two-step process, viz. decision then action.

However, passivity is not indicative of arbitrariness. Recall the context. Each is seriously attending to Billy's situation. Each is seriously engaged in trying to find out what to do. Each decides with the understanding that his decision is answerable to critical scrutiny, perhaps his own. It is not excessive to claim that each has invested something of himself

²⁸Cp. §§2.5–2.6.

²⁹This thought is developed in §6.8.

³⁰This thought is developed in §9.2.

into the decision. When decision-making concludes in a response expressive of his understanding of his decision—itsself an expression of his understanding in the situation—it seems correct to describe the decision as also expressive of him. He responded *that* way to *that* situation. That defangs, I think, any pejorative connotation to the passivity this account suggests.³¹ It also underwrites the idea that an individual is importantly identified with and by what he does, by what moves him. That is the origin of the answer to the Irresponsible sketched above.

5.7 Hypothetical Decisions

It begs the question against Winch to insist that we can only act *after* we have decided what to do. Why can it not be integral? What warrants asserting the *necessity* of a *prior* motive that is conjoined with a decision to eventuate in action, or indeed vice versa?³² An obvious Sidgwick-ian objection is that one is sometimes deciding in a hypothetical situation, not an actual one. In hypothetical situations one may decide what to do, but the hypothetical nature of the situation precludes the expression of decision in action. At most these decisions can result in an intention, requiring a two-step account.³³

Extending Winch, a hypothetical decision is different from a decision in an actual situation. The reason is given above: the reality of an actual situation may impress itself upon us differently than when considered hypothetically. Whatever one's metaphysics, there is one difference between real and hypothetical situations: the former is actual. Since Winch claims that our decisions are a response to reality, *prima facie* there is reason to expect differences in responding to different realities, viz. actual and hypothetical. But this point only masks the deeper point that assertions of similarity between actual and hypothetical situations are imperfectly grounded. First, the "modes" of asking between hypothetical and actual questions are different, i.e. they arise differently.³⁴ Second, when comparing hypothetical and actual situations, what of their realities makes them similar? Just stipu-

³¹It certainly seems no more passive than the philosophical compatibilists' account of free will, viz. he acted for those reasons—had they been different he would have acted differently.

³²It is not an assertion that is not challenged in debates about moral externalism, cf. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) and Christine Korsgaard, 'Skepticism about Practical Reason', in *Journal of Philosophy* 83:1 (1986), pp. 5–25.

³³We might wish to allow that, *mutatis mutandis*, decisions of abstract questions might be expressed in the adoption of principles applying to classes of situations. Not much turns on this point even if universalizability applied universally to such decisions. Winch's argument is only that the UP is not everywhere applicable and therefore not itself universal.

³⁴Cp. §2.6, p. 54.

lation undermines the standards of correctness required for making any comparison (potentially) insightful. The standards of correctness must fasten onto the verisimilitude of the hypothetical situation, but that is precisely to reinforce the thought that real decisions are the root phenomenon requiring explanation, while hypothetical ones are derivative. If that is right, then the Sidgwick-ian objection misses the ground of my Winch-derived account.

The point is that an actual situation can strike one differently than a similar situation hypothetically considered, because in the former the cognitive relation is direct (world-involving), while in the latter it is indirect (*via* an understanding of verisimilitude).

When situations strike one differently, then decisions expressed by intention will be distinct from those expressed by action—i.e. they will express different understandings.³⁵ Of course, the Winch/Vere example is vulnerable to an objection from this direction. I have to depend on its plausibility and verisimilitude. Perhaps, *per impossible*, Winch would have decided differently if he were actually in Vere's shoes (though those too are fictional). I think the situations discussed above (§5.2) are plausible. I may decide to have an abortion, but when it actually comes down to it, I realize I cannot do it—it is not right for me—and change my decision. (This change need have no bearing on whether I think it wrong for you.)

In this sense, it can be that the only way to find out the right thing to do is actually to decide in the situation. Sometimes no amount of hypothetical consideration is decisive or indeed useful.³⁶ Sometimes only attention to the actuality of the situation will clarify one's understanding, because, e.g., one will cognize from actuality what was not-determined in the situation hypothetically conceived.

5.8 Direct Responses to Reality

The account developed in §§5.3–5.6 emphasized the individuality expressed in one's response in and to the reality of a situation. The individuality expressed is the individuality of how one understands a situation; especially, in morally modal cases, one's understand-

³⁵The distinction between an action that is not completed and an intention is difficult. I believe I have not committed myself on this matter in the account given.

³⁶Williams famously said "reflection can destroy [ethical] knowledge," Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the limits of philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 148.

ing of what is possible for oneself in that situation. One form of the expression of that understanding is expressed by the engagement of one's will.

In the discussion of hypothetical situations, the actuality of a situation is the ground of one's moral understanding's object. For that reason, responses to actual situations are the root phenomenon for which we need to account. Perhaps this conclusion can be resisted though. Why not think that one's reaction is best explained, in the first instance, as a reaction to a situation understood as falling into a general class of situations? This objection would, in another way, block the individuality discussed above that undermined the application of the UP. Therefore, I shall argue against it below.

Sidgwick's two-step model urges this generalizing intermediation between reality and response. First, one characterizes the situation as, e.g., betrayal. Second, one decides the reaction appropriate to *all* such situations (viz. betrayals)—hence the place of the UP. This treats every response as like every other insofar as it is explained as a response to one instance of any in a class of situations. If correct, this view would eliminate the scope for an individual understanding and response to *this* situation, since the explanation of a response would be exhausted by reference to the prior characterization in general terms. Any claim that an individual understanding was being expressed in response to the situation would be psychologistic (i.e. a reference to peculiarities of an individual psychology), since the object of one's understanding could not be anything further about the situation—since the content of the situation was exhausted in the prior general (and thus shared) characterization.

I shall argue against this that one reacts to the situation itself, in the first instance, not its class. The dialectical balance is not clear, even if the disagreement is. The claim placed in Sidgwick's mouth is roughly that our response is principally to generalities and similarities; while I claim the approximate opposite for some situations. The class membership of a situation is not the issue. No one denies that there are things generally true of, e.g., betrayals and an instance-of-betrayal's constituents. The issue is whether one's response *qua* cognitive engagement with a situation is exhausted by the fact of its membership (and that of its constituents). Another gloss is to ask which is primary: one's cognitive relation to the possibilities for oneself in a situation or one's capacity to bring a situation under a general description of how it is similar to other situations? I shall argue that in some cases the former is primary. A supporter of the UP argues that the latter is *always* primary.

One argument for this is that only the latter provides stable criteria for intelligibility, criticism, praise, etc. Dialectically, it is sufficient to motivate just one counter-example, viz. a case where the cognitive engagement with the situation is primarily in individual terms that are still intelligible candidates for praise, etc. In discussion below, I shall call this requirement “the counter-example.”

Using more of Winch’s work, I will offer positive considerations in favor of the individuality to which the Sidgwick-ian account does violence. A principal consideration in favor is the thought that understanding people, including oneself, is not like the characterizations we give in terms of generalizations or similarity. Rather we understand people as individuals. When someone constitutes a situation, his individuality may become the object on which differing understandings diverge. Other situations may be similarly resistant. My focus is on people, for it is a commonsense idea that people are irreducibly individual. Having married one twin sister, she cannot be replaced later with her twin. There are other senses of individuality that mark similar distinctions. Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* is an irreplaceable individual. Similarly, the Holocaust was a unique moment in history, because subsequent genocidal events have a familiarity that the Holocaust could not.

I have emphasized the fundamentally cognitive character of the understanding we deploy in decision-making, to avoid the dismissal of some facets of some considerations as sentimental, or psychologistic. By ‘fundamentally cognitive’ I mean that our engagement with the world is responsive to the world such that the possibility of error, mistake, deception, etc. remain. The form of engagement is not arbitrary: it is correct when it does not distort the world’s actual character.³⁷ No doubt the capacity for some reactions depends on possessing certain affections. One can acknowledge this while correctly describing responses as cognitive, if a satisfactory answer can be given to the question Winch frames as, “How are the moral concepts that inform [our] reactions related to the facts of the situation towards which [we are] reacting?”³⁸ In discussion below, I shall call this explanatory requirement “the fact-concept relation.” The counter-example I shall provide that satisfies the fact-concept relation is one’s attitude to other people.

The impulse I am arguing against assumes that the use of the term ‘moral concepts’ leads to a *generalized* characterization of the relation that informs our reactions. Possessing

³⁷Cp. the idea of truth given on page 28.

³⁸Peter Winch, ‘Particularity and Morals’, in: *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 172.

a moral concept like 'betrayal' enables identification of members of the class of situations, any one of which is a betrayal. Conjoining this with a concept of 'wrong' whose members include betrayals explains my reaction to a particular betrayal as the logical consequence of the concepts under which this particular falls. For Sidgwick, when I realize that the facts of a situation make this an instance of betrayal, I react to those facts because they are constitutive of betrayal. This is a characteristically rationalist conception of the moral—it is the rational liaisons that hold between concepts that warrant my deciding which response is appropriate.

This type of reasoning explains my decisions in some situations. But it is a much stronger claim to say that my reaction to an actual betrayal is explained as a reaction to my *recognition* of it as being like all betrayals. Why accept *that* claim?

I can assert that my reaction is to being betrayed now and that it is wrong. I am intelligible without citing the rational relations that may obtain between relevant moral concepts; indeed I may be unaware of them. It seems a distortion to explain my reaction to an actual betrayal by reference only to what is common to all betrayals. My response is rather shallow if it is solely to the betrayal and not the person betrayed. Denying this particular focus on our moral responses leads to what Bernard Williams has called, "one thought too many." In his example, a man rescued his wife because, "it was his wife and that in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one's wife."³⁹ It reads like dry humor precisely because the implicit ratiocination strikes us as absurd where the matter involves rescuing one's wife from death. Consider an imperfect analogy: is the nausea resulting from discovering one's spouse unfaithful a reaction to her and her infidelity or the class of things to which her infidelity belongs?

In this characterization, the immediate object of my understanding and reaction is the actual betrayal. Whether I have background beliefs about the class of betrayals or knowledge of a series of past inferences seems beside the point, because they could also be absent. More importantly, my background beliefs, knowledge of past decisions or inferences, are logically compatible with my now acting differently on no further basis than that I think this situation is different from past ones.⁴⁰ I may recognize two decisions as

³⁹Bernard Williams, 'Persons, character and morality', in: *Moral luck : philosophical papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 18.

⁴⁰This paraphrases a point made in Lars Hertzberg, 'On Moral Necessity', in: Raimond Gaita, editor, *Value and Understanding: Essays for Peter Winch* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 116.

betrayals while condemning only one without being able to *articulate* the difference. That might place me in a weaker position with regard to explanation or justification, but it is not immediately unsupportable or unintelligible; whereas an unrelenting demand for linguistic expression of the difference may (quickly) be so. The difference might be correctly described as in my *attitude*. But ‘attitude’ is still cognitive—admits of error, and so on. Unlike the Irresponsible, in deciding previously I am committing myself to acting the same way in the situation later. However, in the example, I am claiming the situations are not the same. My claim is about the world, and turns on my understanding of situations *as not the same*, even if the only evidence I can offer for my claim is my unwillingness to act on one as before. This provides a first approximation of the fact-concept relation.

5.9 Attitudes to Persons

Winch presses the cognitive character of his alternative, “It is this way in which the application of moral concepts is connected with our awareness of the reality of human beings that I want to emphasize.”⁴¹ Put plainly, when it is *this* betrayal to which I am reacting, the betrayal must in part be constituted by the people who are betrayed and those who betray. That must be the (uncontentious) minimal case if we are to sustain any link between responses and reality. How though do we characterize our understanding of (the reality of) another human being in a way that underwrites their individuality?

Suppose that among the irreducible objects of our moral thinking in actual situations are the persons involved. Just this does not entail that our understanding of persons is fundamentally different from other things about which we have general beliefs, expectations, etc. Perhaps I must focus on a person’s peculiarities and my beliefs about them are informed by, say, “person concepts.” These may be perfectly general though. To the extent that one concept is true of a person, it may be true of another. By ‘person concepts’ I mean concepts that apply to persons, such as sexuality, handedness, ethnicity, profession, etc.⁴²

Using person concepts one might be tempted to introduce the UP “by the back door.” Winch finds aspects of this temptation in some of David Wiggins’ work. Winch says, “For Wiggins, entertaining such expectations, applying such concepts, etc. is classifying the

⁴¹Winch, ‘Particularity’, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁴²These concepts function in the sense of the distinction between persons and lives in chapter 3.

being with which we are confronted as belonging to a certain 'natural kind', namely as being a person."⁴³ This, Winch thinks, is what moves Wiggins to write that a being so classified is:

... a persisting material entity essentially endowed with the biological potentiality for the exercise of all the faculties and capacities conceptually constitutive of personhood—sentience, desire, belief, motion, memory and the various other elements which are involved in the particular mode of activity that marks the extension of the concept of person.⁴⁴

Winch characterizes Wiggins' position thus, showing it congenial to Sidgwick's two-step picture of decision and action:

On this view, then, reacting to someone as a person is in the first instance classifying him as belonging to a certain natural kind and this in its turn involves having certain quasi-theoretical beliefs about him. Anything that is peculiar to our attitudes towards and treatment of persons flows from and is justified by the beliefs we hold about what properties persons ultimately possess; and what justifies those beliefs is ultimately scientific investigation.⁴⁵

The mistaken temptation, according to Winch, is to explain the *regularity* in our reactions to people—and moral situations—by locating it in Wiggins' kinds of *generality*, i.e. derived from classifications of persons using selected theoretical or conceptual structures. On this view, correctness of response depends on correctness of classification. An assimilation of regularity to generality that grounds universalizability is the root mistake that obscures individuality. Winch contrasts this picture with a Wittgenstein-ian one:

"I believe that he is suffering."—Do I also believe that he isn't an automaton? It would go against the grain to use the word in both connexions. (Or is it like this: I believe that he is suffering, but am certain that he is not an automaton? Nonsense!)

Suppose I say of a friend: "He isn't an automaton".—What information is conveyed by this, and to whom would it be information? To a human being who meets him in ordinary circumstances? What information could it give him? (At the very most that this man always behaves like a human being, and not occasionally like a machine.)

"I believe he is not an automaton", just like that, so far makes no sense.

⁴³Peter Winch, "Eine Einstellung zur Seele", in: *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 150.

⁴⁴David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 160.

⁴⁵Winch, 'Eine Einstellung', *op. cit.*, p. 151.

My attitude towards him is an attitude toward a soul [*eine Einstellung zur Seele*].
I am not of the opinion that he has a soul.⁴⁶

The crucial difference is in characterizing my understanding of a person as an attitude toward a soul. This is the origin of the counter-example. ‘Attitude’, as above, contrasts with having a belief in the quasi-theoretical sense attributed to Wiggins. Beliefs bring a generality that is, on this alternative view, better avoided. Both attitudes and beliefs are cognitive modes of thought. Characterizing the difference between them will further refine the fact-concept relation.

“I believe she is suffering,” and, “I am suffering,” are expressions of something we do from which we may validly conclude that suffering is something that humans generally do. There is a regularity here. It is exhibited in our openness to the possibility of others’ suffering. The regularity is not however based on or caused by *beliefs* about people.

Regularities, on Winch’s view, are found in our shared life—in the life we have shared with other humans. The regularities have made these expressions of generality intelligible as suffering as *we* have experienced it. So an inversion is true, beliefs that someone is in pain depend on regularities, not the other way around; and regularities are interdependent with the possibilities in our shared form of life. ‘Form’ is precisely a byword for the common regularities amongst lives which was the condition for calling them shared (cp. §3.8).

The inter-dependence of regularities within a shared form of life limits the scope for ordinary doubt, i.e. doubt that does not call into question the conditions for language, belief, etc. *tout court*. Doubts about being an automaton just would be doubts about the existence of the regularities that make lives shared, rather than solipsistic. This is the destructive agenda of a traditional sceptic. But the issue here is not the sceptic’s bold agenda, but rather ordinary understanding of people and the doubts about them we can entertain. When would we informatively or ordinarily say, “He isn’t an automaton,” without meaning it rhetorically or ironically? It sounds brittle, lacks verisimilitude because it lacks an intelligible place in a conversations about someone with whom we are both acquainted. In what circumstance, would such a reminder have been appropriate? What could be the warrant for its assertion or denial? “People are not generally automatons,” or, “I haven’t

⁴⁶Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edition (1953; reprint, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), p. 178, IIiv.

known any people who are automatons." If this is right, and intelligible, then here is the counter-example required.

This is a deep difference with belief. Speaking of beliefs is already to introduce the possibility of warrant and doubt, something signaled in other languages by the use of the subjunctive.⁴⁷ In specific discussions of *particular* seeming episodes of suffering, we may sensibly doubt, believe, know, or justify the content of our assertions; even some universal ones. But there is no similar possibility for a discussion about people as automatons. Understanding people in this way is not like belief, because it may not be doubted in the ordinary epistemic sense of that term. Nor is it analytic that people are not automatons. The matter is not conceptual in that sense, for it is contingent and world-involving insofar as it depends on a contingent and mutable form of life. These are the reasons for calling our understanding of people an 'attitude', in the foregoing sense that highlights individuality (*contra* generality) as primary in cognitive engagement. While these are the reasons, the point is developed below beyond this initial expression.

5.10 *Einstellungen* and Awareness

Winch expands this with the following argument. Imagine that my general conception of persons was based on valid inferences from various observed human behavioral episodes. The resultant conception would permit any number of inductive doubts. I might well wonder whether someone is not usually an automaton because though observed to suffer, he could be an automaton when unobserved. It is hard to imagine the serious expression of this doubt. It sounds absurd—not far from the question of whether I receive telepathic messages through my dental fillings. If it is absurd, then things are, as above, reversed. Most general beliefs about people are not open to this kind of doubt, because they are not based on that kind of inference. We may doubt that he is suffering on this occasion, but we do not doubt that he is capable of suffering in general—as we do not doubt whether he is *not* an automaton. Doubt does not arise as long we take him for and understand him as a (normal) person. Outside science-fiction, circumstances where we could so much as

⁴⁷Contrast, e.g., *Je pense que c'est . . .*, and *Je crois que ce soit . . .*. The possibility for doubt in belief is well trod in, e.g., J. L. Austin, 'Other Minds', in: J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, editors, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 44–84; J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, edited by G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

doubt whether someone is a person are so rare as to be safely dismissed.

The distinction is not based on the thought that he is conscious and automatons are not. Then, seeing him conscious would warrant thinking he was not an automaton. But, I do not take someone in a coma or catatonic to be an automaton any more than I could intelligibly think an automaton was conscious yet still an automaton. Winch suggests we conclude, “that his not being an automaton is not a generalization *from* his states of consciousness at particular times, so much as a *condition* of his having (*or not having*) any states of consciousness at particular times.”⁴⁸

What is the sense of ‘condition’ here? It is not a replacement for (epistemic) justification. The conditions for having a belief are rarely the justification for that belief. A *condition* for believing that he is suffering is that he is a person. If he were a teapot, he could not suffer. The *justification* for believing that he is suffering is his inconsolable weeping, not his being a person. If I see someone weeping, I may decide his behavior justifies believing he is suffering. But it is a condition of my interpreting someone’s behavior as justifying my belief that he be a person, i.e. have the capacity for suffering. Any justification I supply will depend on conditions for belief, insofar as there can be no question of justification until the conditions for believing have been met. Yet if I were to advert to the condition explicitly (“You know, he is a person, therefore he can suffer.”) as underwriting my justification, one might wonder again to whom this could be informative. The condition is shown in a shared *attitude*.

‘Attitude’ should not be taken as something which I might change, as I could change my opinion. The difficulties in translating ‘*Einstellung*’ make Winch suggest that any connotation ‘attitude’ has regarding easy mutability in English ought to be taken lightly.⁴⁹ An *Einstellung* can change, but in particular circumstances it is not something I *choose* to bear toward people.⁵⁰ An *Einstellung* is a condition of many beliefs, common or ordinary beliefs, e.g. that she is suffering. It would be awkward then to refer to the justifying aspects of one’s *Einstellung* explicitly since doing so would be nothing more than confirming the ordinariness of the circumstances.

That an *Einstellung*’s content is not informative while still being a condition for common beliefs suggests that we ordinarily share much of our *Einstellungen*; or that our *Einstellun-*

⁴⁸Winch, ‘Eine Einstellung’, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

⁴⁹I would translate *Einstellung* as ‘bearing’ in any case.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 149.

gen are such that deep differences are few and infrequently noted. When differences were noted, we would find hitherto unremarkable beliefs—curiously—now questionable. For Winch, we have broadly functionally identical *Einstellungen* because we share a (form of) life. Shared forms of life inter-depend on the commonality of *Einstellungen* for those living together in that form of life. In one sense, the *Einstellungen* are what is shared. In another, the commonality of *Einstellungen* are why individuals' lives and (inter-personal) relations unfold in (generally) similar ways, as noted in §3.9.⁵¹

An *Einstellung* is not like dogma. Dogma is a belief held impervious to reason, while an *Einstellung* is not epistemic in that sense. One could say it was *innate*, though that term clarifies little.⁵² It could result from “conditioning” that produced unreflective responses.⁵³ But rather than having an affective ground, an *Einstellung* is more basic and cognitive due to its limited role in making beliefs possible. The closest analogy is to a perceptual capacity, such as the ability to hear, which is both cognitive and a requirement for perceptual beliefs about sound. An *Einstellung* provides a cognitive constraint—on which beliefs may be meaningfully formed—without being a component of our theoretical, biological account of humans. Here the perceptual ability analogy breaks down, for an *Einstellung* is not an ability for believing, but rather a cognitive background against which some beliefs are meaningful, i.e. cognitively significant.

Calling it a ‘cognitive background’ deliberately suggests a mode of thought—or an awareness—that is an originating element in the cognitive processes which result in beliefs or other meaningful thoughts (about people).⁵⁴ An *Einstellung* constitutes a gamut of possibility within which our cognitive awareness of others may become meaningful thoughts. In this sense, we might say its content was all the expectations I have of what is intelligible as human—as the activity of a soul. One's *Einstellung* as much reflects one's *world* as it does one's expectations for what *others* may do and mean within that world. This obviously relates to the above remarks about interdependence with forms of life.

⁵¹*Einstellungen* are not of course numerically identical. Between persons, they are somewhat divergent; between cultures, potentially more so. I discuss this in §10.9.

⁵²See Richard Samuels, ‘Nativism in Cognitive Science’, in *Mind and Language* 17:3 (2002), pp. 233–265.

⁵³I have in mind Wittgenstein's remarks concerning *abrichtung*, poorly translated by Anscombe as ‘training’. Wittgenstein, *PI*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁵⁴In this sentence, I mean ‘meaningful’ in a sense close to the technical sense of having intentional content (insofar as that clarifies).

Only what shares our world, can share our meanings.⁵⁵ Understanding inter-personal relations of the sort described in chapter 3, depends on bedrock like *Einstellungen* as a condition for communities' more mutable shared beliefs.

The elaboration in the above sections is, I think, the counter-example to the idea that our thoughts are in the first instance general, because the fact-concept relation, while depending on regularities, is cognitively attentive to the facts of actuality, some of which are elided by general or theoretical categories. This licenses a standing receptivity to anomaly in our understanding of persons, in their responses or motivations. It is a corollary of this chapter's focus on individuality.

5.11 Samaritans and Motivation

There is a connection between the discussion above of decisions' modality (§§5.3–5.6) and the elaboration of our cognitive engagement with actual situations involving people (§§5.8–5.10). Winch used the parable of the Good Samaritan to focus on how one's understanding of individual persons in a situation can move (necessitate) one to act. In the parable, three men pass an injured traveler at different times, and only the last of them, a Samaritan, stops to help. Winch is interested to explain why only the Samaritan stopped. Jesus says of the Samaritan that he alone "was neighbor unto him that fell" injured.⁵⁶ What did Jesus mean that only the Samaritan was neighbor to the traveler?

Clearly he cannot mean 'neighbor' in the ordinary sense of person who lives nearby. Winch renders Jesus' sense in this context as, "fellow human being."⁵⁷ Winch suggests we explain the Samaritan's actions by saying that he alone bore himself to the traveler as a fellow human being to the traveller. This alone is insufficient. All the men in the parable are *ex hypothesi* human beings—none is a Martian. The crucial term is 'fellow'. For Winch, the explanation is that only the Samaritan regarded the traveller as a fellow, so expressing himself in his bearing. Recognizing someone as a fellow (i.e. peer, equal, comrade) recognizes a *reciprocal* relation in fellowship. (In the ordinary sense, one cannot be the neighbor of someone who is not likewise your neighbor.) Is this a satisfying explanation though?

⁵⁵This is connected to Cavell's idea that when philosophers' language is removed from experience it may "deny the human" in language, leaving something which is no longer language. Stanley Cavell, *The claim of reason: Wittgenstein, skepticism, morality and tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), Parts II & III, *passim*.

⁵⁶Luke, 10: 25–37; King James version.

⁵⁷Peter Winch, 'Who is my Neighbour?', in: *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 155.

Ordinarily, seeing someone as a fellow is not an explanation of action. So the Samaritan did not only see a fellow; he bore himself as a fellow—with fellowship—in his response to the traveller. Winch claims that in important senses “recognizing another as a fellow human being” is inseparable from “behaving towards him as a fellow human being.” His claim is based on a claimed conceptual impossibility of characterizing or expressing what is constitutive of recognizing-a-fellow in any terms besides behavior constitutive of treating-as-a-fellow.⁵⁸

Here is the link to the above discussion of Vere and moral modalities. There, Winch argued that he could give no further basis for the impetus he felt to acquit Billy (and the impossibility of finding against him) beyond the facts in the case (expressed with similar decision-making valences as Vere). The difference was in his attitude to the situation—expressed by the impossibility of finding against Billy—not about the situation, but his place in the situation. Similarly, the difference between the others and the Samaritan is his being moved to aid the traveler, even if any expression of that difference in language *about* the situation could only be of the empty kind above, “You know, he is a person, therefore he can suffer.” But his impetus to aid the traveler is the expression of the same difference outside language. His recognizing-a-fellow and treating-as-a-fellow is an expression of his understanding of the facts in the situation, to his place *in* the situation. To this we could add a further more schematic gloss, e.g. that is the nature of the connection between his moral concepts and the reality of which the traveller is a part—echoing points made above about the fact-concept relation and the counter-example.

It is tempting to give a Wiggins-like account of the *conception* under which the traveller is recognized as a fellow while insisting that any such understanding need have no practical implications for action. The conception might specify conditions reasonably exhaustive of fellows—sufficient for distinguishing non-fellows. Nothing in that specification need include practical implications. But what does the specification come to if it does not acknowledge the *reciprocity* of the *relation* of fellowship? It is equivalent to asserting that he is my neighbor but I am not his. Still, neighbor need not have a practical dimension (though it often does, e.g. borrowing flour). Is there anything left of the idea of fellowship though if it does *not* include practical implications? If the concept is purely descriptive then it is inert, for what can the existence of the relation under that concept come to if it

⁵⁸Winch, ‘Neighbour’, *op. cit.*, pp. 156–7.

does not come to action in some circumstances.⁵⁹ Part of fellowship is the *expectation* that, if I were in need, you would help me and vice versa. Even if the expectation were not met, if it is properly expected then the concept has practical implications. So foreclosing practical implications eviscerates the idea of fellowship the Wiggins-like specification meant to capture.

If that is essential to the idea of fellowship, then failure to act in line with recognizing someone as a fellow ordinarily suggests that either the relation does not obtain or one *cannot* really have recognized him thus. A viable and complete explanation of the Samaritan's response is that in recognizing the traveller as a fellow (human being), he *had* to help him. The others discerned no such necessity, and doing so expressed their understanding of fellowship insofar as their understanding did not move them. The difference in understanding is cognitive insofar as it is explicable as a difference in the nature of the relation actually obtaining between someone's concepts (mind) and the facts (world). For the Samaritan, in that situation, that relation was one with a modal character, so he was moved, by his willing engagement.

5.12 Intermediate Conclusion

Neither the Vere or Samaritan examples make a psychological point, whose justification could only come from the mysterious assurance that one "really" could not find against Billy, or had to help the traveler. One's moral understanding has an object in these cases. Hertzberg describes it this way, "... in claiming to be unable even to try to perform some action one is giving expression to an understanding of what it would mean to perform it, or, as we might say, of what one would become by performing it ..."⁶⁰ For oneself, the expression (and constitution) of this understanding is in the impossibility (or necessity) of so acting. For a possibly critical spectator, the understanding expressed is not a motive or reason for action flowing from the situation itself, but the observed individual's understanding of himself in that situation. There should be nothing unsatisfying about this though. Taking someone as making his decision includes taking his words as expressing (and part-constituting) his engagement with the situation, and the kind of engagement—

⁵⁹This point is renewed in §8.6.

⁶⁰Lars Hertzberg, 'On Moral Necessity', in: *The Limits of Experience*, volume 56 (Helsinki: Societas Philosophica Fennica, 1994), p. 233.

including the morally modal—is in the meaning of what he can say about it *or not*.

His engagement may therefore be resistant to expression in terms of propositional facts. Instead his engagement with the actual facts of the situation may show itself only in its effect on his motivational bearing, in his use of moral categories such as the unthinkable or corrupt. ‘Motivational bearing’—roughly one’s disposition to act—is the base-level explanatory amalgam of attention, understanding, and the will. Each is cognitive. So, willing can also be understood as a mode of cognitive engagement with the world.⁶¹ This is a reason for calling this account “internal.”

Avoiding “intermediation” or an “external” account—and its attendant place for the UP—is important, for the failure to do so distorts our understanding of the will’s limits. “Naturalistic” accounts mistakenly try to divide motivations into those involving humankind’s reasoning and merely physio- or psychological impulses.⁶²

A naturalistic account of moral necessities, then, would be one which treated them as limits on the possibilities of an agent’s achieving ends which, either as a particular individual or, at the other extreme, as a member of the human race, he is presumed to have. Roughly speaking, this is to treat such modalities as imposing limits not on what someone may will, but on what the will is capable of carrying into effect, given its presumed fundamental motivation.⁶³

The background assumption is that accounts of morality must answer to accounts of psychology that account for practical rationality in terms of adapting human means to human ends, i.e. responding to reasons for action, insofar as they serve human ends. Human ends though will be specifiable only universally, in relation to humankind generally.

The “fundamental motivation” is consequently expressible only in the same terms, viz. humankind. As Winch puts it, “the conception as a whole is that morality is somehow based on and perhaps derivable from (an independently graspable) human nature.”⁶⁴ Whereas, the point of the foregoing discussions was that while humankind is regular, any individual is potentially anomalous—an expectation our inter-personal understanding must accommodate. If Winch’s characterization is correct, the premiss under attack

⁶¹Attention is also a cognitive, albeit more passive, engagement with the world. ‘Attention’ and ‘will’ as used here are similar to Kant’s distinction between receptivity and spontaneity. The amalgam of attention, understanding and will would be central elements in a theory of action I cannot here undertake to give.

⁶²Winch attributes naturalistic accounts to Anscombe and MacIntyre: G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, in *Philosophy* XXXIII (1958), pp. 1–19; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue: a study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

⁶³Winch, ‘Neighbour’, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 159.

in this chapter is that there could be an *independent* grasp of human nature whose generalizations, while squeezing out individual understanding, are necessary or sufficient for our purposes. But the premiss neither seems necessary for all explanations, nor does it explain intuitive cases *contra* universalizability *pro* individuality. And there are other well-known difficulties. What is the data for research into an independently graspable account of humanity's nature? Is it a scientific account of a human organism or the lives humans live? The latter risks circularity, the former vapidness.

The idea of an independently graspable account of human nature is, I suggest, another attempt to assimilate morality to a body of truths. It is not obviously immune to the criticisms above. Suppose there are psychologically fundamental motivations everyone possesses. Holland's point (§4.11) about the (moral) respect we accord those for whom pursuit of those motivations approaches a spiritual demeanor remains untouched. Such demeanors underline the implausibility of assuming that consideration of a general idea is a necessary precursor of our responses. Notwithstanding a premiss about human nature, this chapter has focused on the moral understanding of situations that preserves the individuality of *what is understood*—'what' being deliberately equivocal between the understanding and the understood—against the temptations to universalizability from generality. This offered a basic response to the Irresponsible. Peter Winch's work was extended liberally above, but in a way consonant with his summary:

The direction in which the argument has led shows that what is at issue is not just a local question about what is involved in one sort of application of moral concepts. It concerns our understanding of the concept of a human being and its relation to concepts like those of rationality and action.⁶⁵

⁶⁵Winch, 'Particularity', *op. cit.*, p. 178.

6 Determination, Error and Authority

I was stupid and callous enough to go and see an execution this morning ... the spectacle made such an impression on me that I shan't get over it for a long time. ... When I saw the head part from the body and how it thumped separately into the box, I understood, not with my mind, but with my whole being that no theory of the reasonableness of our present progress could justify this deed, and that though everyone from the creation of the world, on whatever theory, had held it to be necessary, I knew it would be unnecessary and bad...

Letter & Confession
LEO TOLSTOY

6.1 Making the World One's Own

I argued above that the engagement of one's will is often expressive of one's individuality. By 'individuality' I meant what contributes to someone's possibly unique perspective on the world. I argued that sometimes nothing more characterizes someone's understanding of reality—his perspective—than his responses to actual situations. This was the basis of what I called an "internal" account whose explanatory focus was on internal differences in people, not states of affairs. This internal dimension provided one response to the Irresponsible by suggesting that being moved to action implicated him personally because the action came from "within."

However, the internal locus of the impetus to respond was not indicative of an individual arbitrariness that would undermine the sense in which someone's response to an actual situation is intelligible as his own. I emphasized that one's motivational bearing— one's attitude and its practical implications—was cognitive, where that was understood as involving (actual) mind to world relations. One's thinking, one's decision, one's response were all assessable in relation to a minimal notion of cognitive error—roughly, the condition of having an inaccurate or imperfect mind-to-world relation, i.e. when one's world-directed thoughts do not match the world's actual character. Understanding of error provides a low-level constraint on the individuality of understanding. A first goal of this chapter is to elaborate the critical understanding we have of error in ourselves and

others by reference to some of the realizations of error characteristic of moral understanding, viz. shame, regret, remorse, etc. The next chapter will add a further, higher-level, constraint on understanding through the role of argument and the idea of being correct, rationally speaking.

In chapter 5, I focused on the will as the source of the impetus to act even while indicating its inter-relation with attention and understanding. I argued that in some cases—especially the morally modal—it is important that the will is understood to operate directly and not *via* intermediation. One reason for that is a desire to avoid an understanding of the will central to the philosophical problem of weakness of the will. On this view, one makes a decision independently of the will, after which the will is used as a tool to realize that decision in action. On this view, any personal individuality is to be found in the content of the decision. The will is individual only insofar as a hammer's hammering properties make it individual. A weak hammer will not hammer well. This usage of 'weakness of the will' is taken as ordinary. It may be, but it is not the only one.

Consider the example of the seducing colleague (page 150). Suppose I follow through with her invitation. A natural expression of my regret is that I have been weak. And when speaking of someone who finds these temptations especially challenging we often say he does so because he has a weak will. In so doing we intend something personal and individual about him which may not be revealed in a comparison of the principles, beliefs or capacity for reasoning with those less susceptible to temptation. Two people may sincerely state essentially identical views about infidelity yet find their actual decision-making in and responses to actual temptations strikingly different. This too seems a case of weak will, even though the content of individuals' decisions are not the same. Any insistence therefore, that all or even most characterizations of weak wills fit the model of prior decision-making followed by misfire in realizing that decision seems unfounded. The will and understanding can be integral in the way described in chapter 5.

Moreover a benefit of allowing decisions to engage the will directly is a better understanding of alienation or estrangement. I do not mean alienation as an incapacity for finding common sympathies with others. I mean the sense of being alienated or estranged from oneself. Alienation arises when we lack a mediating role in what moves us. It is expressed by saying, "I don't know how it happened—it just did." One says this partially seeking exculpation, disclaiming responsibility for what, in the interesting case, one un-

questionably did. One seeks, as it were, to deny one's authority for what was done even though by one's own hand was it done.

It is like denying responsibility for what was done with one's stolen tools. The idea of the will as a tool for realizing decisions *after* they have been made fits this idea. But it is peculiar to suppose that one's body is a mere tool that can be stolen. One's sense of autonomy and control is expressed in the deep idea that anything properly called *one's* movement must originate in oneself. The challenge is to elaborate this idea in a way which is true to our sense of acting with authority when we do, while retaining the possibility for being alienated from ourselves.

A second goal of this chapter, beginning in §6.5, is to continue the discussion of how understanding mediates the relations between individuality and reality. It continues from the thought that an "external" account of personal responsibility falls short of explaining the morally modal character of some of our confrontations. Neither embedding normativity into reality nor identifying the moral with the normative was sufficient for explaining the phenomena in question. Supererogatory responses are one notorious difficulty. The non-moral yet normative character of prudence is another.

The solution lies not only in implicating someone's responsibility for his response at the "automatic" level of the will, but implicating his understanding of the situation as having a character to which his response is appropriate. Someone's understanding of a situation—expressed in his determination of its character—contributes to making the situation "his." Someone's authority—as expressed in those determinations—is how a situation's being his is more than his inclusion in it. For, when he acts, his action and its effects, are also his in a sense far beyond the causal, *because* both his understanding and will are implicated. The loop is closed when his understanding of a situation has as one of its objects the effects of his will and understanding (and attention). The effects of a confrontation between the world and someone's motivational bearing results in effects that become the constituents of the reality with which he is next confronted—a confrontation that itself produces effects, and so on. In this way, someone makes the world his own. If he is engaged in what we can understand as a response to the world, then he becomes responsible for the world which he creates of himself.

So, our understanding of ourselves and others includes as its object someone's (ongoing) willed effects on reality. That is, one object of one's understanding is one's impact

on reality, which of course includes effects on oneself. The same is true of understanding others. It is these objects of the understanding—error and impact—that are critically and personally indicated by shame, remorse, regret, reconciliation and the other responses I discuss below. This complements the idea essayed in chapter 5 that individuality involves a finding oneself in the world or—using the idea of authority—a putting of oneself into the world. Both are aspects of the same thing: the personal responsibility on which critical moral judgment depends.

The discussion draws a lot from Raimond Gaita's work. As with Winch, my goal is not exegesis but interpretation and development. This chapter will also go as far as I think we can in meeting the challenge the Irresponsible poses to our judgments of others. However, the response is not perhaps as comprehensive as might have been hoped, since the Irresponsible's passage toward unintelligibility simultaneously dissipates the meaningfulness of anything offered as reproof. I will return to this disappointment in §9.9.

6.2 Realization and Reality Intruding

First, let me give an example of reality intruding, where one finds out one's beliefs without attending directly to the truth of those beliefs, but rather as it were discovering them. My example is from Saul Bellow's *Henderson The Rain King* where Henderson is discussing morality with King Dahfu. Henderson had been resisting the idea that one could return good for evil.

Then I cut out the reproaches. I said to him, "You want to know something, Your Highness, there are some guys who can return good for evil. Even I understand that. Crazy as I am," I said. I began to tremble in all my length and breadth as I realized on which side of the issue I stood, *and had stood all the time*.

Curiously, I saw that he agreed with me. He was glad I had said this. "Every brave man will think so," he told me. "He will not want to live by passing on the wrath. A hit B? B hit C?—we have not enough alphabet to cover the condition. A brave man will try to make evil stop with him. He shall keep the blow. No man shall get it from him, and that is a sublime ambition. So, a fellow throws himself in the sea of blows saying he do not believe it is infinite. In this way many courageous people have died. But an even larger number who had more of impatience than bravery. Who have said, 'Enough of the burden of wrath. I cannot bear my neck should be unfree. I cannot eat more of this mess

of fear-potage.’¹

In what sense is reality intruding here? Caught up in rhetoric, Henderson believes himself not to believe that there are people who return good for evil. He marshals arguments to the king in favor of thinking the claim false. Then something happens. He does not see that he has made an error, or remember something further. Rather, he realizes not only that the king is right, but that all along he, Henderson, has believed the principle. I should like to say that the idea forces itself on him, that its truth reveals itself to him now as self-evident.

Why cannot this sometimes be the case? It is important that the context is one of conversation, that it is only in confrontation with the king that Henderson discovers something about the world, viz. that there are such people. When one is *imagining* how the world is, the reality of what one has imagined cannot intrude. How could what one made in one’s mind intrude into one’s mind? It only makes sense to speak of intrusion or of something’s forcing itself on one when that thing is independent of that into which it intrudes. We speak this way when we *realize* something. It is distinct from coming to believe it, though one usually believes what one realizes.

‘Realizing’ refers to a particular mode of discovery only appropriate for success, i.e. only when something has been realized.² Ordinarily, one cannot realize the truth of a hypothesis only *after* having assembled all the evidence for it. Ordinarily its truth would become more certain with each supporting piece of evidence. Evidence produces belief but not, properly, a realization. Indeed, in cases where the evidence does not increase one’s warrant, what may be realized is that the evidence was a “red herring.” For instance, in a criminal investigation the putative evidence for a hypothesis may prove so elusive that one eventually realizes that the basis for the hypothesis is comprehensively ill-founded.

Realization then is a way of discovering something not by the usual epistemic routes. Henderson was cognitively blocked, perhaps by self-deception, fear or inattention to closure under implication. Either way he was in error about himself and about the world. When he becomes cognitively unblocked, contradiction can become evident; or what was formerly inert becomes indicative of truth or actuality or propriety; or an aspect dawns in

¹Saul Bellow, *Henderson The Rain King* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 214, my emphasis.

²Technically, ‘realize’ is a “success word” in Ryle’s sense, like ‘notice’. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1949; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), pp. 125–126.

his attention like a gestalt shift.

Often what we discover in our realizations is something we might better call the *meaning* rather than the fact. Gaita remarks:

Lucidity about meaning—understanding what it means to grieve truly, what it means to do evil, what it means that this person is hungry—is personal in the way I have indicated even when it is achieved *unreflectively*.³

For Henderson, we may say that the words he used in discussion were at first inert, with little meaning. His realization was of what he was saying and what it meant. Realizing the meaning of his words and their relation to reality unblocked the route for his discovery about the world. In that sense the words' meanings were independent of him; as independent as the reality of which his words, when they are true, are expressive. The meanings, and the reality behind them, can, if I am right to characterize it this way, intrude in our thoughts. Their intrusions are the objects of our realizations.

Realization is a mode of discovery, but that does not of itself tell us anything about the understanding we have of what is discovered. Specifically, there are distinctions between the understanding characteristic of certain realizations. I consider below our understanding of shame, regret, apology, remorse and reconciliation. I shall begin with stipulated definitions of shame *et al* and buttress them with examples I think show that the definitions are not dissonant with ordinary impressions. The distinctions amongst them depend in part on differentiating what is understood when feeling, e.g., ashamed. There are some obvious internal relations between understanding and the possibility of realization. But, less obviously, I shall argue that a condition on realizing our relation to the reality of what is understood is having an understanding of the appropriate kind.

Clarifying the relations between the objects of understanding and reality will further refine the idea of individuality. The connection with reality, individuality, and understanding may be put this way. Reality *can* intrude because one has a particular understanding— one's understanding is expressed in one's reality. This may seem opaque or, worse, ephemeral here, but subsequent sections should make the idea clearer, more substantive and less idealist.

³Raimond Gaita, *A common humanity : thinking about love and truth and justice*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 277, my emphasis.

6.3 Shame, Regret and Apology

Shame

Shame is how one feels when one is revealed to oneself or others as having a particular character or identity, usually undesirable. Shame is often thought to require that one be revealed for what one is publicly, but Bernard Williams has argued persuasively that one can feel shame in secret by being exposed to what he calls our internal figure or watcher.⁴ The object of shame—what is understood in shame—is what one is and how so being lacks merit or excellence. Sometimes people are ashamed when revealed as coarse, when for instance they have been profane in conversation. A better example is being revealed as a fraud. One may have pretended to achievements or understanding that one in fact lacks, for instance about wine or success in the stock market. One can surely feel ashamed of being a fraud without having been found out. Being found out just increases the shame, while adding to its consequence. This is more acute when the fraud is more severe as when one is revealed as a liar or a thief. Sometimes too, one's shame can be necessarily private to the extent that it depends on an idiosyncratic, private standard. Eichmann's son in chapter 3 is a potential example of this.

The proper object of shame is what one is, and that it is of limited or no merit. Consequently, one may not feel shame if one does not accept the reality of what one is. Or one may accept that one is an "insider" in one's stock dealings and yet not accept that so being is poor. Thus, one expresses one's understanding of shame *both* by what one is able to reveal oneself to be *and* by the judgments of what one is revealed to be.⁵ So too when others exclaim that one ought to be ashamed. They mean for us either to recognize ourselves for what we are, e.g. a deceiver, or that this is no way to be, or both. And when we call someone shameless we mean to mark out the individual and his blindness to his own demerit.

⁴Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 219–223.

⁵Of course, judgments of character by others must themselves wait on the authority of the judge to so judge—something I take up in chapter 8.

Regret

Regret is different. Regret is the feeling one has when one wishes that an action had or had not occurred. One may or may not have been the cause of the action. When one is, ordinarily regret weighs more heavily, an idea captured by Williams in the idea of agent-regret.⁶ The object of regret is an action or event. Someone may express regret for an action which is not theirs. Someone may say, I regret that you had to go through that. We may say, I regret having mentioned him. This is often put impersonally as, “It is regrettable that ...” Sometimes we may feel that the effects of regret’s object can be ameliorated by compensation or an apology. Importantly there are some regrets whose consequences cannot be reversed or assuaged.

Illuminating cases are those where the sense of regret is formed by the responsibility one feels for an action as its cause. Williams’ distinction between regret and agent-regret turns on this point. He considers a lorry driver and his passenger who, through no fault of theirs, knock down and kill a child with the lorry. Simple regret is a wish that something had not happened where one feels no responsibility even though one is involved in the event. This is the passenger’s regret. Agent-regret is the thought that it matters, even if I am *not* culpable in a legal or moral sense, that it was I who was at the wheel.⁷ This is similar to the discussion in chapter 3 of how lives may be marked. It is now part of the life of the driver that he killed a child, albeit non-culpably. No amount of compensation to the parents—even if they and everyone else were satisfied—will erase this event—viz. the death of the child—from the world. It is permanent, the immutable cause is the driver. The sense of consequence on which agent-regret turns is in part a product of how the world has been changed and by the driver’s judgment that he is in some way author of that change.

To repeat though, giving a weight to one’s impact does not require a judgment of culpability in any sense of having *done wrong*. This sense of propriety about what one is author of—even where there is no question of its being wrong, unseemly, illegal, etc.—is not so strange. There are not many who would step up readily to being an executioner, even if a proponent of judicial execution, with a criminal whose crime is heinous and guilt

⁶Bernard Williams, ‘Moral Luck’, in: *Moral Luck: philosophical papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 27.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

is certain, and having to do nothing more than press a button. It matters that one will have killed. Less dramatically, an aspiring epidemiologist may channel her research into fields that will not involve animal vivisection not because she is squeamish, not because she loves bunnies, but because she wishes to avoid becoming inured to the death of animals. It matters to her that *she* not become jaded about the death of animals even as she accepts the necessity of vivisection as the unavoidable path to medical progress. Solzhenitsyn, referring to the lies that shield the repulsiveness of violence, offered a courageous commandment to keep clean hands, “Let the lie come into the world, even dominate the world, but not through me.”⁸

An *action* (or omission) with unwelcome consequences is, then, the object of regret. Understanding the action as a proper object of regret requires also a judgment of the import of one’s having been the cause of the event. This judgment has many forms. One may not feel at all responsible. One may feel responsible but feel that the consequences are repairable. Or one may feel responsible and think that being the cause disfigures one’s life in a way that is irremediable independent of whether the consequences are in some lesser sense repairable.

Apology

Apology is a natural partner to regret, though apology may not be possible for some regrets. An apology is made to someone affected by an action that is regretted. It is an acknowledgment of regret. One cannot apologize for that for which one is not responsible. So only some kinds of regret are proper objects of apology. Nor can one apologize to someone who is not affected by the consequences of the regretted action. Apology’s direct object is the regret; its indirect object is the action which is the regret’s object. One could not apologize for the action directly without the surrounding context of the understanding under which the action is regrettable. This is important if we are to understand why it matters to apologize and why it can matter that the apology is accepted.

One apologizes so as to recognize the victim *as* a victim by communicating a common understanding that the consequences are adverse. So an apology is an attempt to communicate something of the basis of one’s regret: that one is the cause *and* one’s understanding

⁸Alexander Solzhenitsyn, ‘*One word of truth...’*: *The Nobel Speech on Literature 1970*, trans. by BBC Russian Service (London: The Bodley Head, 1972), p.27.

of the specifically damaging character of the consequences for the person affected. An apology may be rejected if it is felt that the acceptance of responsibility is insincere, e.g., if it is motivated solely by avoidance of a lawsuit. Moreover, an apology may also be rejected because the victim does not accept the understanding proffered as common or doubts that one is even being proffered. Under political pressure a politician may apologize for the harm done by racism while betraying no understanding of what the consequences of racism are. A father may compel his son to apologize for what the son rightly acknowledges as his responsibility, but whose consequence he does not understand. Such an apology may be dismissed. Indeed, children often cannot genuinely apologize because they lack a sense of what it is that they have done and why it was, e.g., harmful to someone. The kind of person we are is shown by the breadth of our capacity for apology (and regret of course), that is by our understanding of possible consequences to others. Often those who do not, or cannot, apologize—or whose apologies are rarely accepted—reveal their blindness to the harm they do. This is one clear illustration of the inter-relation between individuality, reality, and understanding. It is worth noting that one may apologize for actions which are not one's own, e.g. a parent for a child, a leader for a nation's past. In this case, what is proffered is still an understanding to be shared about the nature of the regret.

When an apology is made and accepted, a communion is effected on the basis of a shared understanding of the character of the regret that characterizes the apology. The communion unifies that aspect of reality for the victim and apologizer in the shared understanding of the object of apology. On this basis, agent-regret is a perfectly suitable basis for apology. Indeed, when an apology is accepted for something which has occasioned agent-regret, it is often on the basis of the shared understanding of the regret as rightfully agent-regret that the victim may pity the apologizer. The parents of the child killed may well pity the lorry driver for his misfortune. In that context the victims' pity for their victimizer is not the least bit counter-intuitive. This possibility of community is something which distinguishes regret from remorse. There is an isolation that is important to remorse, that obviates community through apology.

6.4 Remorse

Remorse and regret are not exclusive. They take different objects. One may apologize when one regrets what one has done. One may be ashamed for what one has done. The object of remorse though is the person who was wronged, and the meaning of what one has done in wronging them, not necessarily any harm that may have been done. Gaita adumbrates remorse thus:⁹

... I take remorse to be the pained recognition of the meaning of the wrong one has done—characteristically, of what it means to have wronged someone.¹⁰

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Another way of characterizing remorse is to say that it is the recognition of what it means to be *guilty* of having wronged someone.¹¹

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If we understand guilt-feeling to be a pained acknowledgement of the wrong one has done, then there is no significant difference between guilt-feeling and remorse.¹²

Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is often given as a paradigm of remorse. Unwittingly fulfilling a divine prophecy he kills his father and marries his mother. This is revealed to him by turns with tragic inevitability. The consequences are grave. His father is dead by his hand, his mother commits suicide at the revelation. Oedipus blinds himself, declaring himself unfit to see his father in the afterlife or see, in this life, the children of his incestuous union. He did not know what he did when he did it, yet he will not deny his culpability, nor the meaning of what he has done, viz. how he has wronged his father and mother and even his children. Remorse, characteristically, can exact a terrible price in what we are moved to do in our efforts to atone for our wrongs or restore what has been lost.

Less dramatically perhaps, Vere too is gripped by something like remorse at the end of Melville's story. Mortally wounded in battle, Vere slips out of consciousness muttering Billy's name, haunted by him, his innocence before God, and Vere's decision against him.

⁹Deigh, notably, distinguishes guilt from remorse; saying that remorse is consequent on the destruction of value ("evildoing"), while guilt is consequent on infringing standards ("wrongdoing"). However, he stipulates this meaning for remorse as he claims the word has fallen into disuse; and he bases guilt's meaning on the word's legal connotations. Moreover, Deigh's distinctions between values and standards is based on a Freudian psychological framework—no small theoretical commitment—that is incompatible with my moral psychological project. John Deigh, 'Love, Guilt and The Sense of Justice', in: *The Sources of Moral Agency: Essays in Moral Psychology and Freudian Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 48.

¹⁰Gaita, *Common Humanity*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 34.

The object of remorse is the person wronged *and* the meaning of it. Oedipus' remorse is focused on his father and his unworthiness to see him, on how he has polluted the lives of his children. Vere's remorse aims not at his decision or what he did, but at Billy, at how Billy in his innocence was wronged. Characteristic of remorse is its inability to take something other than a person for an object, unless indirectly. An example may bring out the contrast with regret. It might have been that some of the crew of the *Enola Gay*—which dropped the first atomic bomb—came to regret their part in creating the atomic age, without feeling remorse. But it might have been that only upon seeing the victims of “their” bomb that they perhaps also felt remorse.

A particular kind of attention to the particularity of one's victim is internal to remorse. I cannot feel remorse for a poor mathematical calculation, unless of course people's lives hang on the outcome. The man who hangs himself for a poor calculation of no consequence to others has lost his grip on sanity, not merely his understanding of remorse. That is one reason to think that remorse is a hallmark of the moral. Gaita refines this focus as follows:

In remorse, we respond to what it means to wrong another, which involves a new and terrible shock at their reality. Far from being intrinsically self-indulgent, lucid remorse makes one's victim vividly real.¹³

In this context it is clearer how our capacity for and understanding of remorse reveals reality through our realization of what we have done and what it means. Passively, the capacity for remorse permits the reality of another to intrude (into our awareness). In remorse, unlike shame or regret, what is realized is the reality of another. The sense of 'reality' here is whatever *more* it is about them on which my understanding of how I have wronged them depends. It is connected with the sense of realization offered above: as a way of coming to know. Possible 'realities' are also conditional on the bearing we have towards others more generally, in a sense similar to *Einstellungen*.¹⁴ Gaita again:

Our sense of the reality of others is partly conditioned by our vulnerability to them, by the unfathomable grief they may cause us. It is also conditioned by our shocked and bewildered realization of what it means to wrong them. Remorse is that realization.¹⁵

¹³Gaita, *Common Humanity*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁴See §5.10.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 34.

A less grave example can be the realization of condescension. Suppose, I imagined that I treated men and women equally in my business dealings with them. One day, I observe at a distance a female colleague for whom I have the greatest respect interacting with another businessman. I notice his body language is visibly less attentive toward her than it was when he was speaking to a man. There is an insouciance to his demeanor that suggests he gives less weight to what she says, and that what she says simply demands less effort. With growing dismay and a little bit of shock, I recognize aspects of my own behavior. What I had thought of as an attitude of familiarity I realize is in fact nothing less than an underlying constraint on my responses to what she says. In that realization, an entire history of interaction with her is presented to me under a new aspect, an aspect shaped by my diminished attention. It does not overstate the point, I suggest, to say that something more of her reality was revealed to me. That additional (aspect of) reality was necessary for realizing what I had done in treating her as I had. It is not that I now realize that I had condescended to her. Rather, I realized my interaction with her *as* condescension. That realization is required for remorse as I am describing it. And that possibility, the possibility of realizing my action is condescending, depended on a change in my understanding of who and what she was. It is an extension, we may say, in my understanding of how the possibilities for the worldly phenomenon of condescension relates to persons.

6.5 Isolation of Remorse

Remorse is different from shame and regret in ways which show how it is isolating. Remorse is not like shame where you *and* others may realize what you are or what you have become. Someone else may recognize that you are remorseful, but they may not share the object of your remorse which is the person whom you have wronged indivisibly integrated with the meaning of what it was for *you* to wrong them.¹⁶ Others cannot share the realization of what you have done from the perspective of he who has done it. That aspect of reality is closed to them, it is “yours.” Remorse is not like regret either since the object of remorse is the person wronged, not the action which wronged them. Remorse necessarily requires responsibility in a way that was only essential to agent-regret. However,

¹⁶Technically, we might say that there are true sentences describing what you have done and they contain your name, not a variable.

unlike agent-regret, remorse also requires a sense of one's culpability for the wrong in the action. In agent-regret what is essential is that it was done by my hand, without its being necessary that I feel culpable for wrong. Remorse requires also the realization that one has wronged another. The sense of what it is *to wrong* is intimately tied up with culpability in part through the understanding of what it means to wrong *another*. The possibility of remorse conditional on the possibility of doing wrong is only one hallmark of morality.¹⁷ But remorse's dependence on understanding makes it most obviously cognitive in contrast to an arguably affective hallmark of the moral like resentment.

Central to remorse, unlike regret, is a realization about oneself, viz. that one was capable of the wrong one did and the meaning for oneself of having done it, where this last may be in terms of what one has become.¹⁸ Like the finding out in the previous chapter, one has discovered something about how one can be and has been moved. One's understanding of the situation moved one to the wrong one did. One's remorse depends on the realization of how things actually were; how one misunderstood them; and the effects of that misunderstanding. More precisely, one realizes the deformed character of one's understanding of reality at the time of the wrong. One realizes how reality was not as one understood. Certain kinds of error, e.g. cognitive misfire, may be mitigating, but that is not a case rightly described as deformed understanding. Understanding the nature of the deformation is inter-dependent with understanding the meaning of the wrong one realizes one has done. The relation between one's understanding and one's will is both singular and close in the wrong done because the will was engaged by that deformed understanding. One might have hoped to be immune to acting on such deformed understanding. One's realization dashes that hope.¹⁹ Remorse has been associated with the irreversibility of one's impact. Rosthal succinctly endorses this view, saying, "As Kierkegaard has perceived remorse is associated with a desire to nullify a past actuality."²⁰ Remorse, expressed in that desire, gives rise to a hallmark of genuine remorse which is the impetus to repent, atone, or likewise—as in Oedipus' case—expunge not the deed, which is irreversible, but its origin in oneself.²¹

¹⁷I shall say more about being and doing wrong and its meaning in chapter 9.

¹⁸Cp. §5.12.

¹⁹Cp. the idea of being a stain on the world in chapter 5 on page 151.

²⁰Robert Rosthal, 'Moral Weakness and Remorse', in *Mind* 76:304 (1967), p. 578.

²¹See also Irving Thalberg, 'Rosthal's Notion of Remorse and Irrevocability', in *Mind* 77:306 (1968), pp. 288–289.

Having been among the many who had not been moved to do this wrong, there can be no fellowship in being informed that we are all potential heirs to such deformations. For while others were heir, only some (possibly only one) actually inherited. The difference is that possibility in all was actual in oneself. The mere fact of being equally heir, while no doubt true, is too general to ground the disclosure of something individual about oneself, viz. the deformed understanding one had that originated the actual wrong done. The particularity of it shows in the demonstratives most naturally expressive of the individuality in question: *that* wrong to *that* person is uniquely mine.

The point is important and once again points to differences between possibility and actuality.²² An analogy with pity may partially characterize the difference. We all live with contingency and the possibility of misfortune, and the acknowledgment of it may bring solidarity. But in confronting someone whose actual misfortune rightly elicits pity—where possibility has become actual—our solidarity instinctively often remains with those *still* like ourselves, whose possible misfortune is non-actual. The pitiable and the remorseful feel the impossibility of that solidarity.

One's impact is in that sense a radically singular part of the world, as in agent-regret, but a part of the world that bears a unique relationship to my will and the understanding I had. The differing conditions on culpability between agent-regret and remorse turn on this point precisely. In remorse I understand the meaning of what I have done. I understand how I impinged on reality—the facts I have wrought. Loosely, one could say I have remorse for the mark I made on another's life.

6.6 Acknowledgment and Reconciliation

The idea of reality I have been working with to elucidate these forms of understanding is one whose character is closely linked with meaning, perception, and understanding. In chapter 4, I spoke of reality and truth as being closely linked to a conception of independence. Williams glosses an intuitive idea of reality as “what is there *anyway*.”²³ The idea of reality I have worked with, albeit less stark, does not conflict with this for I have been arguing for taking ‘anyway’ to mean ‘independently’ in the relevant senses of ‘re-

²²Cp. §4.8.

²³Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 64.

ality'. Claiming to understand is acknowledging that how reality appears—how things seem—is how it is. Of course we often know that things are other than they *initially* seem as when we ignore the Müller-Lyer illusion.²⁴ In the right contexts though, we are open to the intrusion or discovery of that which we did not and could not foresee from how matters seemed. Deciding our beliefs on the model in chapter 2 is one involved way of responding to appearances. Other times our belief and thus our acknowledgement is immediate and effortless. Sometimes, however, our acknowledgement of how things seem is tortuous. Often we may not want to acknowledge how things seem or we are cognitively blocked. We may engage in various self-deceptions or what existentialists call 'bad faith' in the sense of an awareness of reality (quasi-) deliberately unacknowledged. I may not wish to acknowledge the ass I was on some occasion. The consequences of acknowledgment though may be great. Gaita relates a description he was given of

... the response of Adolf Eichmann's son to the fact that [his father] was one of the architects of the genocide of the Jews and gypsies. The oppressive and in-eradicable gloom of that condition was neither shame nor guilt, but more like the condition the ancient Greeks described in their tragedies as 'pollution'.²⁵

Acknowledgment in these cases I call 'reconciliation'. Eichmann's son knows he is his father's son, but he must reconcile himself to the meaning of it. His acknowledgment and partial reconciliation produces the pollution mentioned. Reconciliation is also a kind of understanding, whose object is a fact and that fact's meaning. In this sense, reconciliation is another way one realizes an independent reality. It is similar to the way the other forms of understanding work. Shame may reveal one as a liar. Regret reveals one's action as having a definite form. Remorse reveals a person to us in a way that illuminates what it means to have wronged him, and vice versa. It is worth noting that shame, regret, and remorse are all centered around people as a part of reality, their actions, their character.

Reconciling oneself to a fact about oneself is something like accepting the meaning of that fact. One is presented a fact as having a particular meaning, that one is polluted, that one is ruined, that one was a racist. The meaning of the fact is crucial to how that fact will figure in other beliefs, inferences, trains of thought, etc. Sometimes it makes sense that a putative fact is rejected on the basis of its being false, other times the fact's meaning is rejected. In a case of bad faith, e.g., one acknowledges that one sent Jews on trains to

²⁴See page 60n24.

²⁵Gaita, *Common Humanity, op. cit.*, p. 94.

Poland, but refuses to accept it as an instance of murder, but rather of following orders. In this case, I suggest, the facts are not at issue, but rather the meaning of the facts. Must the ruined man, Robert (chapter 3), acknowledge his ruination? Willfully to deny it seems another case of bad faith. Failure to do so may reveal a lack of understanding of the sort that might mark him as shallow, i.e. blind to aspects of reality. It does not undermine the fact of his being ruined.

Of course, how he responds in his acknowledgment will be of the first importance for the meaning of the fact. In *that*, he will mark himself as an individual. A man may never mitigate the effects of what happened because he cannot reconcile himself to them. He may be unable to fathom their meaning and is paralyzed in pressing ahead. For instance, genuine penance may wait on reconciliation. Others reconcile, even make a strength of it. Still others continue thoughtlessly oblivious.²⁶ Gaita presses the point in matters like remorse, “The reality which is disclosed only in works of love, justice, and pity, is as R. F. Holland noted, the reality of meaning, not of fact.”²⁷

Realization I suggested is a discovery; but it is better characterized as a discovery of meaning rather than fact. In the kinds of understanding I have been describing, it is not principally new facts—a new reality—that are presented but rather some facts are presented for consideration as having a particular meaning or are seen under a new aspect. One’s understanding makes possible such realizations by including the possibility of facts with such meaning. Therefore, what may be realized is dependent on one’s individual understanding, and in that sense reality is individual. This is an extension of the way the individuality of one’s cognitive capacities could make individual the world with which one has a cognitive relation.

In the discussion of *Einstellungen*, I attempted to capture this idea by describing an *Einstellung* as a gamut of possible expectation for what may be revealed in a human life, in a human mind. An *Einstellung* is then also a species of understanding in the genus I have been describing. A condition on realizing the meaning of some things is that we have an understanding (e.g. *Einstellung*) within which such meanings are possible (e.g. grief).

The foregoing provides examples of how understanding relates to reality by the forms under which our errors and their impact present themselves in our realizations and re-

²⁶Cp. Arendt quotation on page 30.

²⁷Gaita, *Common Humanity*, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

flection. The claim I am developing below relates these forms of understanding to our responsibility, as follows:

Meaning, Understanding & Individuality Relation When we realize something we are presented with seeming-facts—the world seems a particular way. That same fact can appear to us with different meanings at the same time. Our understanding controls the possibilities for a fact’s meaning *and* whether we accept the fact as having one or more meanings. (Compare: our linguistic understanding controls the possibilities for a word’s meaning and whether we accept the word as having one or more meanings.) So our response to a fact as a fact with *that* meaning expresses our understanding of that fact, and so of that moment in reality.

This is important, I have stressed in chapter 5, because our understanding of the fact is directly connected with how we are moved to respond to reality. We are thereby implicated in our actions by our understanding.²⁸

I mean to keep integral Winch’s two elements in action: finding out and deciding. On the one hand, one finds out that the world seems a particular way, on the other one only does so because of one’s understanding (as it informs decision). On the one hand one is reacting to the world, on the other hand one’s actions are one’s response to the world, to how the world moves one. There is an echo here of the discussion in chapter 3 of how our lives are in part shaped by what we do and in part by what we understand to be part of our lives whether we did it or not.

I should not want to suggest that the meanings of all facts are ones which are as obviously and directly tied to the distinction between seeming and being. There are some (putative) facts whose meanings do not depend on seeming in the perceptual sense of that term. One could derive a theorem in geometry from axioms. If theorems are facts, or if they are truth-apt, then here one would have discovered a fact from general, i.e. non-individual, principles. But the distinction between seeming and being is not inapplicable here either, for one may only seem to have derived the theorem. The mere seeming may be revealed by the discovery of an error in the proof. Moreover, the interpretation of the

²⁸This originates in a famous Fregean idea: reference to facts of itself does not explain someone’s action, sense does, i.e. his imputation of significance (meaning, import) to those facts. And, the idea continues, since such sense originates in the individual’s understanding, his actions in response to the sense he gives the world are his own. Gottlob Frege, ‘On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*’, in: Michael Beaney, editor, *The Frege Reader*, trans. by Max Black (Blackwell, 1997), pp. 151–170.

theorem may be far from self-evident. Famously, intuitionist mathematicians have challenged the “self-evident” interpretation of claims regarding infinities. In this case, where mathematical symbols are mapped to independent reality, a similar pre-eminent role for the individuality of one’s understanding emerges.

There is a further caveat that I wish to note but not pursue. I have spoken as if one were presented with a “bare” fact, i.e. a fact without a meaning of any kind. I don’t think that is ever the case. How the world seems is always loaded with at least one meaning, albeit a potentially skeletal one comprised solely of things like chairs and tables. But to take something as a table or chair is already to have taken the world one way, possibly foreclosing taking it otherwise. The matter is important, but I cannot address it further here.²⁹

6.7 Independence, Error and Fear of Madness

However, the above has added little to the idea of reality as independent. The emphasis has been subjective, dependent, personal. An important part of the idea of independence must, as I said in chapter 5, be the denial that my judging it so makes it so. One way of buttressing that idea is through the concept of an error.³⁰ Specifically, when the conception of error is external to the individual—i.e. independent—then reality’s conception as independent is reinforced. Discussing the impact errors can have and the nature of our response to such errors will reveal another facet of reality’s independence.

My discussion follows chapter 5 in focusing on errors at the cognitive level. Errors in reasoning, incorrect inferences, invalid transitions are all “errors in correctness” by reference to some shared standards, e.g., legal, mathematical or practical.³¹ The forms of these errors are many and higher-level than more immediate “cognitive errors,” such as misperception. The distinction is not sharp. Criticism of an assumption as unsound or a demonstration as inconclusive are borderline instances. Even cognitive errors—which focus on deformations or infidelities in the cognitive relation of worldly apprehension—come in

²⁹Technically expressed, my view is roughly that modes of thought are distinguished by the *logical* properties on which the possibility of reference or meaning (*Bedeutung*) depends. This view, of broadly Tractarian provenance, denies all existentially-committed statements about “bare particulars” or “objects as such” taking them as pseudo-concepts—minimally, composites of logical properties. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by C. K. Ogden (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), §§3.221, 4.1272 & 2.0121–2.0124.

³⁰Cp. chapter 2.

³¹I discuss these errors in chapter 7.

many guises beyond the familiar ideas of cognitive misfire or mere misapprehension of the illusory as the real. The nature of the misapprehension, the character of the deformation of the real into the illusory can matter to an error's import. Realizing some errors may necessitate greater attention, as when one realizes that one is badly placed (e.g. color blind) or misinformed (e.g. false testimony). Other errors necessitate conceptual revision, as when one is (repeatedly) confronted with what was taken as impossible (e.g. a black swan).

To begin with contrastive examples, if one gets a mathematical task, such as calculating net depreciation, wrong, one will not lament it excessively. One may lament that one should know better, or that one once did. An action that prompts remorse, such as callous indifference, is altogether different, though in both cases one would admit a mistake or error. However, the expression of that error in remorse is typically severe, archetypally "What have I done?" or "How could I have done it?" One cannot say this seriously about mathematical errors. What is it about an error that prompts remorse such that its realization arouses bewilderment or self-castigation, not excepting the condemnation of others?

I suggest that our response to such errors is born principally of fear, and that fear is at the limit of madness. By 'madness' I mean wondering whether one is going crazy, whether one can believe one's eyes, one's memory, even one's judgment. This madness is the madness of losing touch with reality, of being at sea in one's own mind, without bearings or anchor. Madness in this sense and its accompanying fears depends on a conception of reality as independent; a conception that makes possible being anchored, taking one's bearings. Bearings wholly imagined in my mind are no more bearings for getting home than a hallucinated oasis is a salve for thirst. My claim is that attending seriously to our world and ourselves depends internally on the idea of an independent reality. That idea is, I have said, compatible with and important for my accounts of understanding, realization, and error. Gaita elucidates one manifestation of this fear in relation to the reality of the moral and of evil.

To be morally serious, [...], is to fear to doubt the reality of evil because that fear is inseparable from understanding what evil is. If that is so, then the fear of doubting the reality of evil is quite different from the fear of having one's pet theories, cherished assumptions, or entrenched prejudices overturned, yet it is almost always assimilated to them. Those latter fears, like all fears of facing

painful truths, do not belong to the nature of the conceptual content of such theories, assumptions or prejudices. But, the fear of doubting the reality of evil is inseparable from an understanding of the very nature of evil because it is central to our understanding of the *kind of seriousness* that we attribute to any morality informed by a sense of evil. Kierkegaard expressed the point when he said that just as the logician most fears a fallacy, the ethical thinker most fears to fall away from the ethical. There can be no more serious way of falling away from the ethical than seriously to doubt its reality.³²

The thought is that the kinds of understanding on which I have focused above—principally moral—depend on the idea of an independent reality to which I can *seriously* attend, about which my realizations are. It under-describes the nature of the fear of losing touch with this reality if it is understood only as fear of a loss of perceptual acuity, as if one were worried about one's sight diminishing. That is, we may say, solely a loss of fidelity not of substance or possibility. Nor is it like fear of combat, where the reality of combat's dangerousness is not in question. The fear, in the extreme form highlighted is of losing the distinction between when my thoughts are about the actual world, and when they are not. The loss of that distinction includes the loss of the possibility of knowing things as they actually are. My examples of the importance we attach to the truth (§4.2) are apposite here. The fear is of a disorientation, of a solipsistic mire, where one may not know who or where one is. Gaita describes what is at stake, in the moral case:

The fear of thinking that perhaps there is no such thing as evil is not, as is the fear of thinking the earth might be flat, a fear that one is losing one's capacity for sound judgment. It is the moral fear of becoming the kind of person who seriously doubts the reality of evil. At stake is nothing less than one's moral being.³³

More generally, the fear is not only of losing contact with the world, but understanding the import of what one cognizes. A beetle has a kind of (causal) contact with the world, but it does not understand it. The sense of understanding at stake is not only of contact with the actual, but understanding the meaning of reality. One's being—in this case, one's moral being—is dependent on maintaining a relation with the world that is possibly normative, at least in a sense of 'normative' integral to meaning (and import). By 'normative' I mean providing a guide for action or inference. 'Meaning' in this case means, broadly, knowing

³²The quotation recalls the way the disordered man drifts away from order in §4.9. Gaita, *Common Humanity*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 178.

what is appropriate, understanding what sort of response can or should be demanded: knowing how to go on. (This sense of ‘appropriate’ is consonant with that in chapter 4.) Conversation is possible when people’s understanding of the meaning of what is said is partially constituted by their understanding of which responses will be appropriate and relevant to what has been said.³⁴ This is the truth in the pragmatist idea that the idea of truth as such is empty, what matters is the ability to continue.³⁵ Fear of evil is in part fear of isolation. As one leaves the order of men, one’s responses increasingly tend to unintelligibility: one’s evildoing progressively diminishes one’s intelligibility. Evil removes one from the rest, from being *with* us. Evil separates, and separation is among the most basic fears.³⁶

My oblique appeals to a cosmic order connects with the discussion of Plato (chapter 4). It is not meant to endorse the idea that all puzzles about meaning are the search for pre-existent norms or that morality is coextensive with the normative. That conclusion will be shown unsupportable below. But the idea of reality as independent of oneself is one bulwark against madness, for on it rest our hopes against madness and one’s aspiration to sustain faithful contact with reality and its meaning (or order, if it has one that is not just meaning). The difference between what I *think* is actual and what *is* actual inter-dependes with the possibility of error, with resetting one’s bearings. For someone to consider clear-sightedly doing wrong and understand it as wrong, Gaita argues, “They must hope to feel remorse once they have done the deed because that is the condition of them understanding, after the deed, what they did.”³⁷ His remark illustrates the nature of the inter-dependence.

‘Error’ in this case is more like an epiphany, like an intrusion of reality where it can make sense to greet it with a sense of horror. “Intrusion” is meant to lend weight to the external and independent character of reality I have been making explicit, though it may be that characterizations like external and independent, intruding are all that talk of reality will eventually yield. The reality that intrudes need not be the reality of an unrecognized fact, but rather of the meaning of a fact already dimly grasped. Anscombe said that even con-

³⁴Meaning’s role in guiding conversation and life is expanded in the idea of secondary sense in §7.4ff.

³⁵I am recapitulating something of the idea that a non-conceptual (e.g. causal) “given” is of itself no *possible* ground for thought that bears the hallmarks of the normative, viz. judgments of accord and error (deviation). See, e.g. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994).

³⁶I return to this in chapter 9.

³⁷Raimond Gaita, *Good & Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 233.

sidering the judicial punishment of the innocent for some other beneficial end shows “a corrupt mind.”³⁸ Someone may seriously entertain such a thought before being gripped by a kind of horror that he could *even* have thought it, have seriously thought it a possibility. Though he has not done anything besides have the thought before being called to order by its meaning, by the fear of the corruption it prefigures. It as if one glimpses that this way madness lies (or in the guise of being, this way to inhumanity or non-humanity).

It is not sufficient to suppose that I might be imagining a dialog with someone “inside my head” who is not me, where it is solely he evincing a corrupt mind. When I conduct an internal dialog, my outrage at the other’s ideas is not safe because it is “in” me. I am the *author* of the other. I am not a simulation machine running someone else’s program. Because my complicity in what I imagine *could* be a serious dialog about what to do is inescapable, I *can* fear what I think, what I imagine to be possible, even when spoken by “internal voices.” Williams discusses shame in response to “the imagined gaze of an imagined other.” There he seems to allow that such an encounter does not require the thought that the shame is grounded outside my head.³⁹ Notwithstanding my earlier remarks about personal shame (which was idiosyncratic but not ungrounded), I have meant my comments as an objection to any presumed safety within one’s head. One crippling consequence of severing a link to what is independent is the possibility of disintermediation between what I want and what one of my imagined others wants. Then we will have to assume that one’s will is a tool with which to overcome the internal other. But that anthropomorphism begins to approach farce as we detail any such “battle.” I argue in §10.6 that this way of speaking conflates inter- and intra-personal grammar.

The crucial point though is that it is not merely that one has made a mistake as with cognitive misfire, the horror lies in realizing how one’s judgment has failed, how it failed to distinguish the false and corrupt from the true and right.⁴⁰ Shame, regret, *et al* are a *retreat* to comprehension, to sanity and reason as we strive to understand them. They are acknowledgments of the meaning of the reality of the circumstance, of what reality demands or of what would accord with reality.⁴¹

³⁸G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, in *Philosophy* XXXIII (1958), p. 17.

³⁹Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

⁴⁰This is a comment on the question of whether it can be wrong to think an evil thought. Wrong need not enter into it directly, its surrogate ‘error’ whose magnitude is amplified by its connection to our fears of madness is sufficient to ground a normative response away from the mere entertainment of such thoughts.

⁴¹I say ‘accord’ to avoid the philosophically more loaded—because implicitly representationally content-oriented—‘correspond’.

Gaita goes some way toward underlining how reality as something to which we can become disconnected is the ground not only of understanding as I have characterized it but of reason itself:

The lesson of madness is, I think, that reason is not what determines what it is to be 'in touch with reality'. Rather, being in touch with reality is a condition for the sober exercise of those critical concepts which mark our sense of what it is to think well or badly, concepts whose proper application is what we call the exercise of 'Reason'.⁴²

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Something counts as assessing the evidence, carrying out an investigation, constructing a proof and so on, only within the ranks of the sane and the sober, amongst those who are 'in tune with reality'.⁴³

It has been a fashionable anti-intellectual posture to admit to being shallow. But this must be mere posture if the sense of reality as independent I have been sketching is right. Seriously to strive to be shallow would be to hope that reality did not intrude, that one's errors or misunderstanding were not made manifest; just as seriously wishing to be gullible would be to hope that one was often taken in by the deceptions of others. Could someone seriously hope for this? To feign indifference to how things are "anyway"—where that means other than one takes them to be—would include indifference to that which Gaita has described as a need of the soul, expressed in rhetorical questions of whether someone could be indifferent to whether one was in love or merely infatuated, or whether one's grief was genuine rather than self-indulgent.⁴⁴

6.8 Under-determined, Indeterminate and Not-determined

The idea of reality refined above clarifies the independence between thinker (cognizer) and world (cognized) on which the character of error depends. One difficulty with this idea of reality is that it is too strong. It lacks the subtlety of the inter-relations with dependence and interpretation in §4.6.⁴⁵ The fear described above seems to imply a certain philosophically realist conception of reality where in every situation, there is a determinately right thing to do. On this view, decision-making is really an effort to make complete

⁴²Gaita, *Common Humanity, op. cit.*, pp. 165–166.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁴⁵Summarized in table 4.1 on page 120.

contact with the situation's reality, i.e. understand it perfectly, and *thereby* know what to do. The realist's idea, as I shall use it here, is that questions about reality have determinate answers even if no one is able, even in principle, to know it. (A different kind of realism, about reasons, is addressed in chapter 10.)

I shall argue that the realist's idea, as far as it goes, does not apply to the above discussion. Restoring the subtlety of §4.6, I shall demarcate a role for the concept of authority in the relation between ourselves, our understanding, and reality. The demarcation will clarify the above sense of "individualizing reality;" preserving a central aspect of our response to the Irresponsible. One's authority's mediating place between reality and oneself—as expressed in one's understanding—is central to the individuality of understanding exemplified by remorse, reconciliation, etc. Authority, a higher-level explanatory counter-part of the will, reinforces the thought that the Irresponsible by acting at all, implicates himself personally.

We are sometimes resistant to an individualizing role for authority, since it can seem to make what is right dependent on individuals contrary to our intuitions about the independence of error—intuitions I have sought to accommodate above. The realist's impulse is to underwrite this resistance with an "external" account. Stanley Cavell captures this motivation and its bearing on morality:

It is as though we try to get the world to provide answers in a way which is independent of our responsibility for *claiming* something to be so ... in a way which is independent of our responsibility for choice.⁴⁶

The independence between responsibility and the world is a pivot on which the Irresponsible's objection turns. My "internal" account seeks to limit the characterization of such independence so as to remove the Irresponsible's pivot, while keeping independent what must remain so.

Simone Weil expressed a consequence of Platonic realism when she said:

What is sacred in science is truth. What is sacred in art is beauty. Truth and Beauty are impersonal. All this is too obvious.

If a child does a sum and does it wrong, the errors bears the stamp of his personality. If he proceeds in a perfectly correct manner, his personality is absent from the whole operation.

⁴⁶Stanley Cavell, *The claim of reason : Wittgenstein, skepticism, morality and tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 216.

Perfection is impersonal. Personality in us, is the part of us in error and sin.⁴⁷

The problem for individuality (and our response to the Irresponsible) is realism's strong claim that everything is determinate, including arguable topics such as comedy and morality. When morality is determinate—if the thrust of Weil's above sentiment is right—then getting it right allows nothing of the individual to stand behind or within *being* right. The converse, where one is an individual by dint of chronic or systematic error, is counter-intuitive and a strong, discomfiting moral claim at odds with moral praise's focus on *singular* fidelity to moral demands.

This conclusion can be resisted, since, as I shall argue, much is constitutively *not-determined*, the scope for putting something of oneself into the world *by one's determinations* within the not-determined is open. Within that scope one's individuality can be a part of reality, in the sense of reality's being individualized by the meaning one takes it to have. This is an extension of the "Meaning, Understanding & Individuality Relation" above (page 186). The thought is that one is part of reality when one (part-)determines reality. So moral perfection—in that situation of which one is a part—is part-constituted indivisibly by oneself and one's individuality. So there is an important sense in which moral perfection is not impersonal, and moral praise may correctly highlight the singular.

To repeat in a different way, my partial-determination of a situation *I am in*—expressed in my response—effects a link between how a situation is and how I have taken it to be. But I am also part of that situation, so my taking the situation that way is itself part of the situation. This circularity is not I think problematic (indeed it may be a condition on reflection). If this is on the right track, then as long as the account of what is not-determined below is acceptable, then the pressure from realism should diminish without suggesting a slide toward, e.g. nihilism.⁴⁸

There are at least two ideas of anti-/realism. There is the Platonic idea which I discussed above which is implicit in Weil's remarks. There is also the semantic idea, initiated by

⁴⁷Simone Weil, 'La Personne et La Sacré', in: *Ecrits de Londres, et Dernières Lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 55, my translation.

⁴⁸The relation between determination and authority I develop is similar to, though different from, the conceptual relations, particularly in Kant's philosophy, between judgment and freedom where correctly judging is in the right circumstances a free act, an exercise of freedom. The idea of mediating these relations with what is not-determined in reality is anti-realist only to the extent required to remove the universalist—and so anti-individual—grounding realists take as an article of faith. The Kantian insight about the relation between judgment and freedom is not, I think, disturbed by my maneuvers.

Dummett.⁴⁹ His debate is about the correct formulation of semantic principles. I do not want to rule on that debate below, for I do not think it is applicable to the account I have so far developed. I have been arguing for a conception of cognitive relations—relations between mind and world—that are *truth-evaluable* without assuming a structure for those relations and their *relata* that make them *truth-functional*. The absence of structure in the (theoretically) posited elements comprehended by a cognitively grounded understanding makes those elements unsuited as legitimate substituends in semantic principles. I am not ruling out the possibility of structure or suitably formulated and inclusive semantic principles, but I do not think that my use of ‘cognitive’ requires either. My use is consistent with the term’s long-running use in moral philosophy.⁵⁰ Hence, my focus below is on Platonic realism.

There are two species of the genus not-determined I want to consider. The first, ‘in-determinate’, is when the possibilities for meaning within our language or categories do not seem to extend as far as our experience. The second, ‘under-determined’, is when, as I shall say, reality runs out; when there is not enough reality to which we could be responding (or understood to be responding). There are other variations too such as ‘undetermined’ in contrast with determined or pre-determined. The two types I discuss are sufficiently refined to ground an adequate account of the not-determined.

Of the indeterminate, there have been many examples in Holocaust survivors’ literature. They have said that no one can understand the meaning of the Holocaust. They too are uncertain about what it means at least *in toto*. Our understanding must grow so as to assimilate the fact of it to our lives. Put normatively, it is not clear how to go on from the Holocaust. Theodor Adorno, famously, said that writing poetry after Auschwitz would be barbaric. Gaita describes these thoughts this way:

They spoke as they did because, when the facts of the Holocaust became known, they felt that the meaning of those facts could not be captured adequately by existing, legal, moral, or political categories.⁵¹

Robert Nozick was grasping at straws when he said that he did not know what the significance of the Holocaust was except that it would not now matter if humanity were ex-

⁴⁹See Michael Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978); Michael Dummett, *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

⁵⁰See Christopher D. Green, ‘Where Did the Word “Cognitive” Come From Anyway?’, in *Canadian Psychology* 37 (1996), pp. 31–39.

⁵¹Gaita, *Common Humanity*, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

tinguished.⁵² Imre Kertész, a Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winning writer, argues that no language could comprehend the Holocaust without being corrupted by it.⁵³ Those voices that urged patience before erecting a memorial to the dead of the World Trade Center in New York were mostly motivated by the thought that we need first to come to an understanding of the meaning of their deaths. ‘Coming to an understanding’ is a way of saying that we must re-define our concepts in an attempt to determine the reality of it, or at least make determinate its meaning. It does not mean, e.g., collect further information about what happened, or analyze in greater detail what we already know.

The point is not merely linguistic. Great evil can ablate the order on which our thoughts depend. What was a great wrong may be diminished by a newer undreamt of evil. When that happens, new moral categories are needed such as genocide or Holocaust that—if they are not rendered meaningless by misuse—function as a *reductio ad absurdum* of claims. Order is restored, when we have (re-)determined what is unthinkable or evidence of a corrupt mind.

Of the under-determined, I suggest the unsatisfying outcomes of decision-making, such as uniform demerit, trivial merit, incommensurables, and dilemmas discussed in chapter 2.⁵⁴ Vere’s situation is an example. Here is another. Suppose I am unhappy in my marriage. My wife is a fine woman, decent, caring, convivial, and responsible. I don’t doubt her love for me. However, her idea of what a marriage is differs irremediably from mine. Her marital involvement follows her conception and a result is that I feel alone. On the other hand, in getting married I decided, barring major misdeed on her part, to be with her forever. The question is whether to stay or leave. Is it right to insist that the facts of the situation, the reality of the marriage and the marriage partners determine a right thing to do? Does the question—should I leave?—have a definite ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer? I think not. Rather a determination is demanded, though we may well call such a determination a decision. The determination is of what the situation demands; the decision is of what to do—each an aspect of a passive/active whole. In situations like these, I suggest that determination and decision are integral—possibly not logically separable—in exactly the manner in which decision and finding out were integral above (chapter 5). We may call it

⁵²Robert Nozick, ‘The Holocaust’, chap. 20 in: *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), pp. 236–242.

⁵³Imre Kertész, ‘The Language of Exile’, in *The Guardian* (October 19 2002), (URL: www.guardianunlimited.com) – visited on October 21 2002.

⁵⁴Summarized in table 2.1 on page 68.

a decision in part to mark the introduction of my *authority* into the determination.

For the purposes of my argument, I suggest that situations of epistemic constraint or grossly inadequate warrant may be treated as constitutively not-determined, though I cannot discuss the relevant technicalities here.⁵⁵ Similarly, if there are ontologically vague objects or categories, in the metaphysical sense, these might also require *pro tanto* determinations for practical purposes.

6.9 Determination and Authority

“Making a determination” is interestingly equivocal in philosophical debates about realism. The same equivocation exists in “making a judgment.” ‘Determination’ can mean making a measurement—I am determining the car’s wheelbase in inches. Or it may mean deciding—I am determining where we are going on holiday. In both cases, I attend to the item that requires determination. In the latter, I have the authority to make the determination. In the former, I am answerable to the authorities that govern our measures and the ideal of magnitude they aim to quantify. In the former, I am “reading off” the answer from reality. In the latter, I am “writing” the answer “into” reality.

This distinction is not as clear as it seems. At Wimbledon a ball appears to strike the line. The line judge calls it in. The umpire calls it out. Balls deform on impact, lines are imperfectly made, is there a determinate fact of the matter? Perhaps not, perhaps so. Nevertheless, the ball is determinately out for the purposes of the game because the umpire has the authority to call it out. Similarly in the law, both the letter and the spirit of the law—if there is such a distinction—may be not-determined. Judges regularly make determinations of what the law means when its meaning is not plain. Indeed, judges bridge the gaps between the law’s intent and letter by making case law. They are able to do so because of their authority as judges.

Using one’s authority has personal consequences that one accepts when one makes determinations. The judge attests that his judgment is consistent with the law as far as it goes. However, he may be overruled. If he is overruled often enough, he may be dismissed. So too for the umpire, whose judgments are answerable to the rules governing tennis and

⁵⁵By epistemic constraint, and the issues related to anti-realist accounts of the determinate, I have in mind the discussion enjoined in Crispin Wright, ‘On being in a quandary: Relativism, vagueness, logical revisionism’, in *Mind* 110:437 (2001), pp. 65–66.

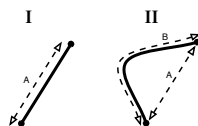
the judgment of his fellow umpires. So too for the man making measurements, e.g. a customs inspector. Frequent or egregious errors in measurement—as discovered by discord with others—can undermine his authority and his pronouncements. It is conceivable for someone to misunderstand what it is to measure length in inches, e.g. that it cannot be done with flexible elastic rulers.⁵⁶ Sometimes measurement procedures do not cover new cases. Suppose I have a measurement procedure for measuring lines, all of which have been straight. Is it obvious that when measuring a curved line, one should follow the path of the line or follow the most direct route between the head and tail of the line?⁵⁷

I shall have more to say in chapter 8 about this authority, which I shall call ‘independent authority’. For now, I want to offer a gloss on how to understand authority in the context of individualizing reality above. Authority and ‘authorizing’ must be understood as something like “giving my imprimatur.” In making a determination, even where I imagine myself to be “reading off” from reality, I am authorizing that fact. By ‘authorizing’ I mean not only putting my mark on it, but also putting myself into it—recall Weil’s “bears the stamp of his personality” above. By ‘putting myself into it’ I mean also to bring in the points I have emphasized about the will (chapter 5). “Putting oneself into something” is like committing oneself—taking on the consequences knowing they may be permanent. Attending seriously to determination by refining and defining reality may entail knowing that I lose my innocence by taking this decision. What was, in my innocence, not-determined is made determinate (is determined) by my decision, so that a future decision on this matter will not have the not-determined quality of never having been confronted.

I cross my Rubicon. I accept that it is I, through my will, that is determining (determines). My determination—when genuine, i.e. authorized—bears my imprimatur be-

⁵⁶This is a recurrent example in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, edited by R. Rhees, G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), e.g., p. 38, I-5.

⁵⁷In this diagram:



the question is whether after measuring I, it is obvious whether to follow A or B in measuring II? The idea that there are no underlying physical magnitudes—only measuring procedures—figures in the work of Carnap, Wittgenstein, and recently Nancy Cartwright, *Nature's capacities and their measurement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

cause that is how I am moved to respond in deciding the question in the situation in which I decided. Of course the two—determining and responding—are integral because they may spring indivisibly from my understanding. So, in brief, my understanding of reality includes a determination of reality *with* my authority. When I understand what I am to do, and do it, I do so on my authority, on the basis of how I have determined things to be. This is no more than the platitude that when I do what I think is right I am doing so *in response* to how I take things to be. Otherwise, there could be no sense of ‘right’. What is it that I would be right *about*?

The equivocation in ‘determination’ does not bite here because the idea of authority is the central one in the platitude and authority applies in both the “reading off” and “writing in” notions of determination—albeit (potentially) differently. The idea of authority is crucial in mediating the “Meaning, Understanding & Individuality Relation” that makes one’s actions, errors, and decisions *intelligible* to oneself and others as *one’s own*.

6.10 Seriousness

A related facet of authority is suggested by Gaita’s discussions of scepticism and compulsion by reason. Gaita wonders whether we can make sense of someone’s claim that he is compelled by reason to believe a conclusion that is ordinarily criterial of madness, such as that there is no external world or that there are no minds but his. Such compulsion bears on the discussion above because were it genuine (cognitive) compulsion then someone might well try to repudiate their authority in the matter.⁵⁸ I have already suggested that this might be irrelevant since any determination involves authority, including the determination of being compelled (where compulsion is exculpatory). Dialectically, though, it is at least an open question how to determine the priorities of compulsion, the judgment of compulsion, and the response to compulsion. The scenario Gaita considers is one where someone has put a proof on the blackboard of a conclusion that is ordinarily a *reductio ad absurdum* of the question, or indeed of madness as described above. The proof seems faultless, valid and sound, except that the conclusion is crazy.

What makes that seriously his conclusion rather than merely a ‘blackboard conclusion’, a conclusion that the rules of inference compel him to write after

⁵⁸Compulsion—especially rational compulsion—is discussed in §7.7.

the 'therefore' sign, but which he cannot unequivocally profess as his.⁵⁹

... the conclusion of an argument is something one must seriously be able to *conclude*, that is, to profess seriously in the first person.⁶⁰

If this is right, the senses of "to conclude," "to profess" and "seriously" need explication. I am not suggesting an explication with criteria for being serious or genuinely professing. Perhaps such criteria could be uncovered, and when they were they would indubitably be oriented toward how someone acted on what they seriously professed or concluded. Such action would include not only what they did, but how they responded to criticism of their judgments and actions. (Indeed these issues receive detailed treatment in the next three chapters.)

Instead, an explication is implicit in the answer to the Irresponsible we have been developing: he is not serious, he is not genuine. The Platonic challenge from chapter 4 can be restated by shifting the focus from saying that the Irresponsible does not live, to saying that he only *seems* to understand, make decisions, respond and so only seems to live. Precisely because his authority is absent from his determinations and responses, he is not serious. Lacking seriousness, in this sense, makes him unintelligible as deciding, responding, etc. Therefore, insofar as he is unintelligible he is not a challenge to our practice of critical judgments. Our judgments of others depend on their actions being serious, though of course we may criticize those who don't take matters seriously too. The latter sort of judgment is of another type, employing another authority, that I will address in chapter 8. Note though, that for someone who is unintelligible, it is far from clear whether our exhortations to be serious can reasonably be expected to have any effect. Gaita refines the thought:

The idea of being seriously responsive to the claims of reason means nothing unless people can seriously and without equivocation stand behind what they claim reason compels them to conclude. That is why a conclusion must be someone's conclusion in a sense more substantial than is suggested by the fact that they feel compelled to write it at the end of a piece of reasoning on a blackboard.⁶¹

On the internal account completed here, then, serious decision-making must include something of oneself in it if one is to comprehend one's understanding of and response in

⁵⁹Gaita, *Common Humanity*, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 180–181.

⁶¹Gaita, *Good & Evil*, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

shame, remorse, regret, and so on. That something, I have argued, is captured in the idea of authority. My authority is what makes me responsible for the considerations I employ in the decision-making intelligible as my own. They are my considerations insofar as I am prepared to stand behind them by accepting the personal consequences attendant on the exercise of my authority, e.g. shame. My authority is implicated at the lower-level by the way my actions and reactions are themselves expressions of my individual understanding, will, and attention. Our critical practices depend on these inter-relations so that being right, being wrong—and much else that is critical—is personal in a way that resists the implications of Weil's stark realist picture and rebuts the Irresponsible's challenge.

6.11 Individuality and Community

The internal account developed in response to the Irresponsible inter-relates authority, reconciliation and someone as the author of his life. In chapter 3, I showed that there were obvious cases where someone sets the course of his life based on his specific decisions. On the other hand, I showed that there were other forces at work setting the circumstance and character of one's life. In particular, one of the key thoughts of that chapter was that lives are shared because they are importantly connected with others, in what I called patterns of systematic engagement. I discussed Eichmann's son there as well, asking whether he had to accept the meaning or implications of being his father's son. I have said here that Eichmann's son must reconcile himself to this fact about himself, and in particular the meaning of it. Of course, by 'must reconcile himself' I mean make a determination as I have been describing it. However someone may ask whether *this* sense of 'must' is misplaced. Why must he make such a determination? Indeed, it may well be that much is not-determined, but that of itself does not demand of me or anyone else that we should make determinations.

There has been a certain individualistic thread running through the exegetical and elaborative paths I have followed through Gaita's and Winch's work in developing the internal account. By 'individualistic' I mean that my account has not depended logically on the existence of or interaction with others. It may be acknowledged that left alone we may have need of some determinations. Certainly Robinson Crusoe may have applied himself to measuring out branches while building his shelter, or to determining whether it was

more important to plant vegetables or dig a well. Many projects may be of this kind, giving rise to our *seeking* another's help in making determinations. This may be motivated by our unfamiliarity with what we are attempting or by a sense of our own fallibility. Or it may be motivated by an inadequate perspective on some matter, from being, say, too short, or male, or middle-class. Sometimes we may seek another person's help in assuaging our fear regarding some project or countering our lassitude. We ask them to help us harden our resolve, to screw our courage to the sticking post, by reassuring us that we are right in what we have determined to do. These are all instances where I have reason to approach another, but I *can* carry on without them if I am for instance isolated.

However, I may approach another and really require their help, e.g., when the gravity of the issue is too great to proceed alone or when I *need* to coordinate my actions with theirs. Still, these are all instances where I have a motive to approach *them*. My having a motive is one way in which the need for joint determinations arise. By 'joint determination' I mean a situation where two or more people attempt a determination of the same thing, whether it is a measurement, a judgment, a principle, or an action. This class of situations by itself would show that the ideas of authority, realization, and determination do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, they often, like our lives, occur in conjunction with others. Indeed, language and meaning is often thought to depend on community.

Moreover, there is another class of circumstances in which the need for joint determination arises: when our lives collide, when we disagree, when we work together. The circumstances in which this occurs are the subject of the next chapter. In chapter 5, I argued for a special place for people in our understanding of reality. In the next chapter I will extend the idea germinated here, in the discussion of apology, that convergence among people is a basis for the meaning comprehended by our moral understanding.

7 Rationality, Argument and Conversation

Example is the school of mankind, and they will learn at no other.

Letters on a Regicide Peace
EDMUND BURKE

7.1 Joint Determination, Logic and Convergence

In chapter 6, I argued that in one's life one determines what to do or how matters lie. On some, perhaps many, occasions determinations require one's authority, tacitly or otherwise. One's authority may be required where the determination is of a kind that explicitly depends on designated authority, as when one is a judge or referee. It may also be required when the situation itself is not-determined (e.g. indeterminate or under-determined, see §6.8) because our concepts are unsuited; or because, as I put it, reality runs out—when the situation is inadequate for commanding a specific response. I suggested that the Holocaust was an example of indeterminacy and that Vere's judgment of Billy Budd (in chapter 5) might be an example of under-determination.

The idea of *one's* authority, and the limits allowed for its application, is, I argued, central to understanding someone's willing as both responding to the world and deciding his life. Combining these conclusions from chapter 6 with the elaborations in chapter 5, a so-called "internal" account of moral understanding has been adumbrated. Within the account, the sense in which one is (morally) responsible—in which one's actions are one's own—that legitimizes personal (moral) criticism is less problematic than it seemed on the external account.

However, the internal account is too individualistic to be an account of our actual moral understanding. The constraints within the account are sufficient for someone living alone. But, as I argued in chapter 3, we are not alone. Rather, our experience and understanding

of living a normal life encompasses our relations to others—or as I put it: our being with others, having lives that are shared. Moreover, in chapter 4, I argued that our understanding of our place in the world—of what is appropriate—is of how reality is composed by those with whom we share the world. These were the strands in an external account. So, while I have said nothing yet that logically requires using authority and making determinations in conjunction with others, if the above characterization of our understanding of life and reality is right, then it is true that we actually do so. If so, then an account of moral understanding that does not take account of this will be signally incomplete.

In this chapter, I shall add to the account of moral understanding; moving it to a median position between the internal and external. Chapter 5 constrained our moral understanding to the cognitive. Chapter 6 limited it further with the role of error. In developing the account toward a median, the constraints that motivated the external account are needed, viz. the actuality of one's life with others here and now. This chapter will integrate these elements by adding some critical practices arising in community: rationality, argument and logic. Chapters 5 & 6 might appear to undermine rationality and argument as the cornerstones of moral understanding in favor of brute awareness and the cognitive and moral responses such as remorse. This chapter will partially redress that appearance, making clearer how others can and do criticize and correct through *joint determination*. This chapter begins to describe how moral understanding functions as constituted by our conversations, arguments, and demonstrations.

When a criticism is accepted or a correction made, a new determination is made. I call determinations made with others, joint determinations. In this chapter I describe joint determination and its role in our lives. Joint determination is like determination except that it is always an activity, always involves more than one, and uses more than individual authority.¹ The principal location of joint determination is in conversation. It is not the only one, but I will focus on it because it is the most common and is crucial to how we live together. David Cockburn expresses a role of conversation as follows:

Conversation is a form of contact with another; and taking seriously the words of another in a conversation involves expectations for how my life with this person may go on. If too many such expectations are disappointed I may begin to take her words lightly; and at the limit, where I learn nothing about her from

¹My use of 'joint determination' is distinct from a more basic idea of "joint intending." It is broadly correct to say that all joint determinations are joint intendings, but not vice versa. See, e.g., Michael E. Bratman, 'Shared Cooperative Activity', in *The Philosophical Review* 101:2 (1992), pp. 327–341.

anything that she says, my relation to what she says will be quite different from that which is normal.²

I shall use ‘conversation’ and ‘discussion’ interchangeably. I shall argue that the context and aim of a discussion are closely related. The aim of conversation need not be joint determination. It may be humor or invective among others. Argument in conversation is joint determination, indeed it is probably the archetypal form.³

My motivation for discussing conversation goes beyond the requirement to adjust my account of moral understanding for a shared world. It is also to augment the Compositional Reality claim (made in chapter 4) and further refine foregoing distinctions between fact and meaning. Joint determination is one means by which we harmonize with others, how we compose reality.⁴ As I show below, criticism in argument is a central part of joint determination—or, our understanding of criticism is central to our understanding of joint determination. If I am right in arguing that there is much that is not-determined, it will not always be sufficient to acknowledge that it is so. Rather, in seeking to do what is proper—what is in accord—joint determinations of how matters stand are (typically) required. In the next chapter, this point will be at the root of one’s understanding of the character of inter-personal relationships.

I shall argue in this chapter that the goal in argument, what one is arguing *for*, is to bring about a sufficient degree of accord or convergence to permit the argument to lead those arguing to the conclusion. Put differently, the purpose of argument is to agree the meaning of things or, better, a common understanding. In defense of that, I argue that argument, criticism and persuasion are rarely about the acknowledgment of facts but rather the conveying of the logic internal to a point of view. Convergence in understanding is, broadly, sharing a point of view. Arguments in moral understanding aim then at a shared moral point of view. Two examples of convergence (in chapter 6) were apology, where victim and victimizer converge; and reconciliation, where delusion and lucidity converge.

By ‘logic’ I mean whatever makes it natural and acceptable to infer from one thought to another, from thought to intention, or thought to action. By ‘point of view’ I mean the rela-

²David Cockburn, ‘Language, belief, and human beings’ (2002).

³My discussion of conversation is distinct from its use in theories of communicative action, e.g., in Raimo Tuomela, ‘Collective Goals and Communicative Action’, in *Journal of Philosophical Research* XXVII (2002), pp. 29–64.

⁴Tuomela makes similar points with his related notion of “collective acceptance” creating social institutions, such as money; Raimo Tuomela, ‘Collective Acceptance, Social Institutions, and Social Reality’, in *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 62:1 (2003), pp. 123–165.

tion between someone and a situation such that we might say they were well-positioned to assess a matter. Speaking of logic often portends a formal discussion, one limited to a few permissible logical maneuvers within the terms of an explicit symbolism. This contrasts with ordinary discussions which may appeal to varying logics and considerations ranging from the factual to the emotional and much else.⁵ Because of this contrast, it is often thought that the austerity of logical argument gives it a credibility or vindictory power superior to ordinary discussion. As such, it should be a model for argument. I should like to undermine this presumption, in favor of the primacy of ordinary discourse (see §7.6) and its logical grammar.

My argument, in brief, is that any formal logical argument wants an interpretation or a model, and arguments about which of those is proper cannot, at the limit, be resolved by reference to the formal logical symbolism or machinery. This is not an attack on logic itself, for there is a logic to ordinary conversation and conversational grammar—as I describe below. But it is an attack on the idea that the paradigm for objects of (moral) understanding ought to be drawn from formal logic or the formal techniques of linguistics or philosophy of language.⁶ Insofar as some positions identify rationality with formal logic—as opposed to soundness or a minimal framework for conversation—it is an attack on that idea of rationality as well.

An argument is, I mean to establish, a process where people work together to hew shared meanings. This is linked precisely to the above idea of joint determinations of how things are, of reality. The important shift I am trying to draw attention to is the possibility of an argument as an activity between people where what is made is a joint determination of the subject-matter of the argument, not something that asks or commands a particular interpretation. It is in this way that we compose moral reality.

Consequently, this bears on our moral understanding in three ways. Our moral understanding, if I am right about the role of joint determination, is partially constituted by our ability to grasp arguments, demonstrations, and conversations. The objects of our moral understanding are those elements of arguments in their secondary sense, the sense of their

⁵Some philosophers inclined toward formal logic acknowledge this, "...ordinary language has no exact logic." P. F. Strawson, 'On Referring', in *Mind* 59:235 (1950), p. 344. Moreover, some logicians argue for relative logics between cultures and conversations. See, e.g. Gert-Jan C. Lokhorst, 'The Logic of Logical Relativism', in *Logique & Analyse* 41:161–163 (1998), §§IV-V and *passim*.

⁶See, e.g., R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); Stephen Toulmin, *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950); Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View*, Abridged edition (New York: Random House, 1964).

role in a particular point of view or life (see §7.4ff). Lastly, (§7.5) our personal responsibility for our arguments depends on the inalienability of our actual point of view (in the same way our authority was inalienable).

I shall proceed iteratively using an example conversation to produce several layers of structural and functional analysis of conversation and argument. My approach is intended progressively to elaborate the consequences and conditions for agreement or disagreement in conversation.

7.2 Conversational Dynamics

In this extract from Stoppard's *The Real Thing*, Henry, a writer, and his wife Annie, an actress, disagree about her taking a part in a play by a would-be political prisoner, Brodie. Annie suggests to Henry that perhaps he could fix the play, leading to this argument:

Henry: It's no good.

...

Annie: You're bigoted about what writing is supposed to be like. You judge everything as though everyone starts off from the same place, aiming at the same prize. Eng. Lit. Shakespeare out in front by a mile, and the rest of the field strung out behind trying to close the gap. You all write for people who would like to write if only they could write. Well, sod you, and sod Eng. sod-ding Lit.!

...

A: You're jealous of the idea of the writer. You want to keep it sacred, special, not something anybody can do. Some of us have it, some of us don't. We write, *you* get written about. What gets you about Brodie is he doesn't know his place. You say he can't write like a head waiter saying you can't come in here without a tie. Because he can't put words together. What is so good about putting words together?

...

H: It's traditionally considered advantageous for a writer.

A: ... More well chosen words nicely put together. So what? Why should that be *it*? Who says?

H: Nobody says. It just works best.

A: Of *course* it works. You teach a lot of people what to expect from good writing, and you end with a lot of people saying you write well. Then somebody who isn't in on the game comes along, like Brodie, who really has something to write about, something real, and you can't get through it. Well *he* couldn't get through *yours*, so where are you? To you, he can't write. To him, write is

all you *can* do.

H: Jesus, Annie, you're beginning to appall me. There's something scary about stupidity made coherent. I can deal with idiots, and I can deal with sensible argument, but I don't know how to deal with you. Where's my cricket bat?

...

H: [(*He produces a cricket bat.*)] This thing here, which looks like a wooden club, is actually several pieces of particular wood cunningly put together in a certain way so that the whole thing is sprung, like a dance floor. It's for hitting cricket balls with. If you get it right, the cricket ball will travel two hundred yards in four seconds, all you've done is give it a knock like knocking the top off a bottle of stout, and it makes a noise like a trout taking a fly ... What we're trying to do is write cricket bats, so that when we throw up an idea and give it a little knock, it might ... *travel* ... (*He clucks his tongue and picks up [Brodie's] script.*) Now, what we've got here is a lump of wood of roughly the same shape trying to be a cricket bat, and if you hit a ball with it, the ball will travel about ten feet and you will drop the bat and dance about shouting 'Ouch!' with your hands stuck into your armpits. (*Indicating the cricket bat.*) This isn't better because someone says it's better, or because there is a conspiracy by the MCC to keep cudgels out of Lords. It's better because it's better. You don't believe me, so I suggest you go out to bat with this and see how you get on. 'You're a strange boy, [Brodie], how old are you' 'Twenty, but I've lived more than you'll ever live.' Ooh, ouch! (*He drops the script and hops about with his hands in his armpits, saying 'Ouch!'*.)

A: Oh, Hen ... can't you help?⁷

What is the discussion about? Well, in the first instance, whether Brodie's script is any good and what makes for good writing. But also, whether something is good because of its intrinsic qualities or because a cabal asserts it to be so. And of course, the background is whether Annie should act in Brodie's play.

How did the discussion become an argument? In part because Annie considered taking a part. That by itself might not start an argument if it were not also true that Henry cares about what Annie does, which parts she takes. In part, it started because Annie asked for Henry's help and opinion. She wanted him to improve the play. However, the argument gathers its own momentum. Henry provokes Annie to further, more explicit argument by offhandedly dismissing the play as irreparable. She provokes him in turn by suggesting that his judgments are based on jealousy and self-interest. He is provoked further by her presentation of "stupidity made coherent." The argument concludes when, the point

⁷Tom Stoppard, *The Real Thing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), pp. 49–52, abridged.

conceded, she returns to appealing for his help simply because she needs it.

The initial focus of the argument is Henry's view of the play's merits. Annie attempts to undermine Henry's judgment by suggesting that his claims are motivated by his self-esteem, rather than merit. He is bigoted about writing; closed to other forms it might take; jealous that writing should become too egalitarian thus undermining his writer's sense of superiority. In sum, she suggests his judgment is impaired by these psychological shortcomings—i.e. he is not well placed to judge; his relationship to the question is distorting; he has the wrong point of view.

Beyond undermining Henry's supposed objectivity, Annie develops a general claim about writing. Writing is not about linguistic form—about how words are put together—but about whether someone has something to say through their writing. So the argument's subject now includes the claim that writing is not valuable in virtue of form, but voice. She adds that since it is not form that counts, there is no scope for expertise. Thus, so-called "best opinion" is no guide. Henry's support for best opinion, Annie implies, stems from his being recognized as amongst those having best opinion.

Henry responds that linguistic form is intrinsic to the aim of writing, which is to get ideas to "travel." And that—whether words depend on form to travel—is not something that depends on best-opinion, but just on whether they actually do travel. He offers a supporting analogy with a cricket bat, and its role in cricket. So, his appeal by analogy to an independent matter is meant to refute any claim that he is ill-placed to judge because *his* judgments are here irrelevant. His response turns solely on the analogy that good bats and plays make balls and ideas travel; bad bats and plays hurt. He adds a demonstration: reading out a passage that hurts.

A more schematic look at the argument, reveals elements familiar to any argument. Annie tries, I suggest, to win the argument by *undermining* Henry's putative objectivity, by criticizing his capacity to make *objective judgments* in this matter. Saying his motivations are (merely) psychological is used as a *criticism*. Notice though, the criticism is no judgment about the status of the matter at issue—the play's merits—rather Annie's target is Henry's judgment of that matter, the suitability of the point of view from which he judges the matter. She also aims to undermine any claim that judgments of these matters admit of best opinion—Henry's or anyone else's. So, she further undermines the weight that judgments from his *perspective* may carry by claiming that the *appearance* of Shakespeare

as supreme is *illusory*, based only on a self-appointed self-interested cabal's *dicta*.

Henry responds with an *analogy* between a play and a cricket bat. Seeing what is central to cricket, one will see why cricket bats and not cudgels are used. Seeing that relation demands an understanding of cricket, at least the bat-involving part, such that seeing what is central to writing, will, by the same relation, show how linguistic form is central. The analogy is Henry's attempt to orient Annie's point of view. With both cricket and writing in view, within the intended analogy, Henry intends Annie to see linguistic form's relation to writing—to see it as he does. The analogy aims to make vivid how the bat's form contributes to its function and demonstrate the marks of form and function's relation, viz.. a gentle stout-bottle-popping-knock, a sound like a trout taking a fly.

What was Annie's goal? Henry's help. Her argument was intended to help Henry see that his view of Brodie's play was biased since his judgment of the play's merit is the basis of his concern at her involvement, and so his help. She intended him to see things in a way that *enabled* helping. Henry's goal was similar, in that, he wanted Annie to see that his assessment of the play was objective and sound *and* that there was a consequence to doing a bad play. In Stoppard's play, Henry prevailed with his argument. Annie concedes that the play is bad. That did not close the discussion though as Annie resumed her solicitation for help by direct appeal rather than argument.

7.3 Argument Structure and Function

Did Annie have to surrender? Was Henry's logic superior? What if she had not agreed? In philosophy, one feels that a good argument is compelling on rational grounds. Typically, the conclusion enjoined by a good argument is rejected "on pain of irrationality" or "its rejection would be illogical." The argument above does not seem like that. It is not obvious that those criticisms—irrational, illogical—apply. Failure to be moved by the argument above would be failure to take things as intended, say, to see an analogy between cricket and writing. Indeed, that can happen for any argument. Moreover, other motives for rejecting the argument—e.g. unsettled doubt, incoherence, etc.—function as obstacles to taking the argument as intended.

The question I want to pursue is which idea is more basic: the idea that non-acceptance shows a failure of rationality or that non-acceptance is a failure to converge on a common

perspective? I shall be arguing for the primacy of the latter, in part because I shall argue that arguments are only in service to conversation and depend on conversation for context. When functioning as joint determination, conversation aims at convergence not rational compulsion. ‘Convergence’ need not mean here, arriving at a median position between disputants. As in the argument above, one person may move to the other’s position. Similarly, a prophet may draw the convergence of masses to his singular prophecy.

To understand how criticism and convergent understanding relate, we shall need to look more closely at the elements of an argument which each takes as object. Generally, how is an argument urging a particular response or conclusion supposed to proceed? One can start by *introducing a fact* or making an *assertion* offered as evidence that something is true, “wood cunningly put together ... so that the whole thing is sprung.” It might work by introducing *reasons* for and against some proposition or proposal, “What is so good about putting words together?” But how is this different from what we might call *persuading, proving, or demonstrating*? To persuade someone is to try to induce a belief or judgment in a particular way (e.g. without coercion). It need not be founded on argument or proof. To prove something is for something to be shown or found to be. “He proved to be right.” “Hitting the ball with the cudgel turned out to hurt.” In ordinary speech, a *proof* is something (e.g. evidence) that purportedly establishes the truth of a claim, “the cricket ball will travel two hundred yards in four seconds.” But then a demonstration is not much more than establishing the validity of something, as by an example for assessment, “go out to bat with this and see how you get on ... Ooh, ouch!”

In philosophy a proof (or an argument) is modeled on ideas from *formal* logic and mathematics. This idea of a proof’s form has been held up as a paradigm for anything that aims to enjoin its conclusion. The form is typically a series of statements or thoughts showing that if one thing is *acceptable* something else necessarily *follows* from it which must be similarly acceptable. Typically, acceptability turns on some idea of truth.⁸ There are further conditions on validity, soundness, and much more. This approach aspires to, and presents as a virtue, being *objective* and *rational*.

‘Objective’ here means something jointly or singly *independent* rather than distorted by emotion, personal feelings, bias, or interpretation; or something based on the observable,

⁸The idea of truth can be an unusual one. In intuitionist mathematics for example, truth is proof, identical with demonstrative construction.

that belongs to immediate experience of actual things or events (as opposed to the wholly hypothetical).

‘Rational’ here means having its *source* in or being *guided* by the intellect as opposed to experience or emotion. However, this is not the only sense in which we can speak of the intellect. Intellect is also kindred with understanding. Someone is guided in their thinking by their understanding of the subject of their thoughts (similar in sense to my use of ‘cognitive’ in §5.6 and chapter 5 *passim*). I will use the two—intellect and understanding—interchangeably in this chapter.

The idea of a formal philosophical proof then is of something that has its source in the intellect broadly conceived; giving rise to a process of inferential movement following from thought to thought (or thought to action); lead by an understanding undistorted by subjective bias or fantasy. (Where the proof is valid, the inferential movements will similarly be valid.) So one rejects proofs or arguments by showing them not rational, not objective, or by denying that an undistorted understanding would guide or be guided from one thought to the other. I shall call the last criticism finding that the argument *does not follow*. I intend the somewhat anthropomorphic sense of the intellect ‘guiding’ us partially as a reference to my discussion of the will moving one (§5.6). It should be clear that this last criticism is the most damning and important since rationality and objectivity are only necessary conditions for being a compelling argument. They are not sufficient conditions. A putative proof which did not go anywhere—i.e. from which nothing followed—would not be a proof because it would not prove anything. So it is a necessary condition on an argument that it lead somewhere.

When the substance of the criticism is that we are not moved, that need not, I suggest, be the criticism of irrationality. One form of the criticism of irrationality is a universal one, which claims that *any* intellect would be lead by the argument. It is not the only form. One’s claim that one is not moved can be a claim about where one’s *individual* understanding leads. Or put indirectly, one’s saying that an argument does not follow may be a claim that *some* intellect would not be so moved. In such a case, the question will shift to the deference which the dissenting person whose intellect it is may rightly command. For example, a mathematical intuitionist may not dissent in thinking that some people are moved by a classical proof. His contention is that he, among others, is not. Indeed the intuitionist may understand Cantor’s arguments about infinities, but for him,

they remain “blackboard conclusions.”⁹

While the above description details what one is *doing* when one argues, criticizes or rejects an argument, it says little about the *objects* of these doings. On the one hand, these objects may be the facts, assertions, or demonstrations introduced in the argument. One may criticize these for lacking objectivity or a ground in reason, as Annie did. On the other hand, when one’s criticism is that the argument does not follow, one need not dispute any one assertion or fact. One is simply unmoved by the argument’s intended movement, as when an analogy fails. Indeed an ineffective argument may incline us to the contrary when, e.g., it seems to prove something different or its failure (or success in the case of a *reductio ad absurdum*) urges rejection of an assumption.

So an argument turns on an understanding of the *character* of the facts introduced, demonstrations made, etc. *and* the mooted inferential movement. It is not just that the movement mooted is presented as possible. For any collection of putative facts, demonstrations, etc., many movements are possible. Rather, an argument that has its life in a discussion presents the movement as something more than putative. It is presented as the way to go, the response to make, as what follows, even as what happens in a conversation of this kind, viz. with this origin, with this purpose. This quality is captured in philosophers’ technical rubric ‘normative’.

One counters a normative presentation by questioning whether it is germane, appropriate or helpful *now* with this discussion. Annie could have said, “What does cricket have to do with you helping fix the play?” So, the question of the normativity or unavoidability of an argument’s mooted movement does not hinge solely on the argument’s structure and content. It also depends on the conversational context in which the argument arises. This rephrases the question regarding the primacy of rationality or convergence as: how does one’s understanding control one’s acceptance (or rejection) of an argument’s movement as in accord with the conversation in which it arises?

Suppose we call what is accepted or rejected the *interpretation* of an argument. It is a commonplace that interpretation varies with context. Calling it an interpretation accomplishes little. Doing so does not pinpoint where we disagree. Disagreements about interpretation are, I think, better explained as disagreements about the meaning or sense of the argument *in* a specific conversational context. We could agree and disagree in dif-

⁹See page 200n59.

fering contexts about the exact same argument (assuming an argument is identified solely by, e.g., its linguistic form). Since we need not disagree about the content of the argument or the difference in context, I suggest we locate our disagreement in the *sense* or *meaning* of the argument in one context, but not the other.

Disagreements in meaning are about what is sometimes called the “loaded” meaning—the associations words have in specific contexts. In a discussion of race relations, we may say that reference to those lacking a “European sensibility” is loaded or is code for foreigners, i.e. has a covert or secondary meaning. Of course it only has that meaning or sense in certain contexts, in certain kinds of discussion, with reference to certain concerns such as immigration limits or educational capacities of non-caucasians. The feature calls attention to the understanding with which one “loads” an interpretation. The object of that understanding is not something further *inside* the argument but rather the argument’s *relation* to its context. (I shall speak in what follows in terms of sense, but I mean to include loaded meaning too.)

Therefore our *understanding* of a conversation and its argument is equivalent to the *sense* of the argument in that conversation. However, if we are to answer the question of rationality or convergence as primary, we shall have to characterize further sense and disagreements about sense.

7.4 Sense and Primary Sense

I want to develop the idea of sense as a sort of object of understanding. In philosophy ‘sense’ is used as a philosophical term of art derived from Frege to translate *Sinn*.¹⁰ Even when, as is usual, *Sinn* is translated as ‘sense’ there is disagreement about whether to give the term its connotations in English or isolate it as technical jargon. Technically speaking ‘sense’ is usually taken to be what I have to know in order to know the object of my thought (when my thought has one).¹¹ The ordinary meaning of ‘sense’ is more varied, but is similar in adverting to what *more* one has to know in order to understand. This is evident in phrases like, “he has no sense of where he is,” or, “he has never seen the sense

¹⁰Gottlob Frege, ‘On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*’, in: Michael Beaney, editor, *The Frege Reader*, trans. by Max Black (Blackwell, 1997), pp. 151–170.

¹¹Of course, one does not need to know all the senses of a thought, only at least one such that my thought refers. This definition of ‘sense’ is essentially the one developed in Gareth Evans, *The varieties of reference*, edited by John McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

of poetry,” or, “she has a real sense of style.” Consideration of these expressions reveals what *more* there is in one’s thoughts when one attends to the *sense* of something and thus how disagreements in sense may arise precisely by what more is taken as attendant on genuine understanding.

What are we saying then when we say of someone that they have a sense of style? I take it we are saying they understand which colors work well together, how to use accessories, to dress for effect. Why say they have a “sense of style” instead of saying that they *know* about colors, accessories, materials and fashion. First, they may not. They may simply recognize what works and what does not while being largely ignorant of colors and materials. Second, even if they do know about these things, we are saying something about their ability to *integrate* this knowledge resulting in more than the sum of the parts. Third, we may feel that though we could teach someone about colors and materials we could not *teach* them a sense of style. If anything we could show them examples of what works and hope they “cotton on.” Our use of ‘sense’ here seems indicative of something beyond the mere knowledge of which colors match, which materials do not clash, etc. It seems to be like a *feeling for* how these things work—sometimes like another sense akin to taste.¹²

Someone seems to understand the “sense of poetry” if they understand its *point*, the kind of expression it enables.¹³ Understanding the point involves perhaps understanding *why* someone reads or writes poetry. Understanding poetry as a motivation is not yet enough since someone could simply take it as an amusing pastime.¹⁴ A sense of poetry includes an appreciation for the kind of *expression* that is possible and distinctive of poetry with the thought that there are things best, perhaps only, understood through poetry. If that is right then being “deaf” to poetry may be indicative of an incapacity in understanding thoughts distinctively expressed or described by poetry. The point is similar for literature. What does someone say about themselves when they sum up *Crime and Punishment* as just a good yarn?

Consider instead someone who attends a funeral idly chatting. We might say critically, “he has no sense of where he is.” We mean that he is ignorant of the occasion, even though

¹²I have in mind here the synonym for *Sinn*, *Empfindung*.

¹³Here I have in mind the German synonym *Zweck* and expressions like *Das hat keinen Zweck/Sinn*.

¹⁴Though even understanding poetry as pastime demands some kind of understanding of, e.g., a pastime. McDowell suggests Martians might lack this understanding. John McDowell, ‘Anti-Realism and the Epistemology of Understanding’, in: Herman Parrett and Jacques Bouveresse, editors, *Meaning and Understanding* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1981), pp. 225–248. The discussion below suggests that McDowell’s point is somewhat timid when considering how alien we can be to those who do not share our lives.

he knows he is attending a funeral. He may even understand that funerals are solemn occasions. One might say sharply, “This is a funeral!” If he were to question the remark’s point, we might reinforce it by asking, “Don’t you understand what that means?” Here his lack of sense reveals itself as a superficial grasp of solemnity in a funeral or ignorance of the *meaning* of his actions, i.e. that they are disrespectful. We can say more generally that someone lacks sense. I suggest we are saying that, to a degree, he is mindless. Not literally—it is not that he has no mind—but that what guides us does not guide him. Sense is absent from his thoughts—as if he were mentally shadow-boxing. His response lacks the character needed for it to be an expression of his comprehension or understanding of what is in question. Similarly, we say someone lacks commonsense, i.e. *our* understanding of things (cp. §7.8).

In each example, there were distinctions in the senses attached to the matters in question. First, there is what I shall call the *primary* or basic sense, the sense with which we think of ourselves as thinking about or referring to the *same* things, e.g. funerals, poetry. Second, there is what Cora Diamond calls the *secondary* sense of things. A feature of secondary sense is that agreement in primary sense is no guarantee of agreement in secondary sense.¹⁵ The funeral example brings this out: all know it is a funeral, one is ignorant of its secondary sense.

One reason for registering this distinction in senses is connected with my discussion of realization as a mode of discovery (§6.2). One may realize the sense of what one has done, when realizing the terribleness of what was done. In such cases, one does not learn a new word, a new fact or a new referent for a word. What one realizes may admit of the same superficial linguistic expression. But the (secondary) sense of it has changed. It is now understood “like this.” Wittgenstein’s observations about how to describe the shift in your sense of tic-tac-toe as a game when you realize that the player who moves first need never lose are roughly analogous.¹⁶ Wittgenstein expanded on facets of understanding “like this” (and not like *that*):

Hearing a work in a particular sense. How queer that there should be such a thing!

¹⁵Cora Diamond, ‘Secondary Sense’, in: *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 233–236, and *passim*.

¹⁶He focuses on the importance of our understanding that it stopped *being* a game, not that we realized it *never* was a game. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, edited by R. Rhees, G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), p.203, III-77.

Phrased *like this*, emphasized like this, heard in this way, this sentence is the first of a series in which a transition is made to these sentences, pictures, actions.¹⁷

This does not yet explain what secondary sense is except a way of understanding something, such as this expression taken in that sense, e.g. metaphorically versus literally. As I note below, secondary sense is subject to standards of correctness, even if they are not known by *all* competent speakers of the language.

Another reason for registering the distinction in sense relates to the question, recurrent above, of how people can seem to agree about *all* the facts, yet respond differently. An explanation is that their sense of what the situation demands is different. Diamond develops the idea of secondary sense saying it expresses the *role* that something has in life and language. ‘Role’ also includes its links to other things: which things go together, are associated, can combine to form wholes from parts.¹⁸ That expansion of the idea relates to the discussion of the integrating use of ‘sense’ in poetry, style, meaning and appropriateness. (Indeed the last shows the connection between this idea and the development given to ‘*summetron*’ in chapter 4.) The character of what I have called secondary sense is familiar in the common difficulties attendant on translating single words between languages while retaining faithful liaisons and connotations.

Tentatively, this distinction in sense bears on the description of discussions and arguments as follows. First, a discussion needs agreement in primary senses, i.e agreement about the *subject* of a discussion is a condition on the possibility of contact between people in the matters under discussion. The goal of discussion—when it is joint determination—is a common understanding of what is (to be) determined. A common understanding need not mean one involving the same response. For though people may converge on a common sense of a discussion and an argument within the discussion, they may yet think that what is agreed commands a different response from them (for individual considerations).

So, one can agree that an argument against abortion is sound, yet feel it insufficient for one’s own action. I contend this need require no differences in primary nor secondary sense; therefore no divergence in our understanding of the argument itself. In part, differ-

¹⁷Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edition (1953; reprint, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), §534.

¹⁸Cora Diamond, ‘The Face of Necessity’, in: *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 250–252.

ences in one's lives or other facets of our individuality may constitute something beyond what has been agreed regarding the discussion and its argument. Notwithstanding this though, a way of understanding the goal of argument—viz. a common understanding—is as convergence in secondary sense.

7.5 Secondary Sense and Points of View

To what though does convergence in secondary sense come—given Diamond's gloss above—as it bears on something's role in our life? Convergence could mean, in modest vernacular terms, seeing things the same way. That vernacular expression by itself is ambiguous between seeing the same *way*, and seeing the same *thing*.¹⁹

Consider a dispute over a Kandinsky abstract drawing. Suppose you cannot see it as an ink drawing and I can. To you it appears only as colored ink scattered on paper. Suppose I try to get you to see it my way. I point out the distinctive features whose presence seem to me the product of intentional artistic design. I trace them before the drawing. This does not help you see it as an ink drawing either (let alone something abstract or expressionist). You simply don't see it as the product of intention. I ask you to imagine drawing something just like it. You can't because for you it is a random scattering of lines. Exasperated, I wonder whether we are even seeing the same thing. I suggest we copy the drawing, perhaps to show how it could have been made. We produce excellent copies, so our copies are essentially the same. Pointing to our copies, I ask you to see it as a drawing. You can't. For you it is now a drawn copy of spattered ink. What more can I say to help you see it? It certainly seems that we see the same thing—are having a common experience in the visual field. The copying exercise confirms that and yet I see it


¹⁹Cp. discussion of 'striking' on page 147.

differently than you do, viz. *as* an artwork by an artist, a purposeful product.²⁰

How are we to conceive the difference, which I suggest is similar to the sketched distinctions in primary and secondary senses? The difference does not seem to be in *basic* perceptual capacities since each can describe using simple terms what is common to our visual fields. This capacity is not in dispute. If you were unable to describe in simple terms what you see, then I should doubt that you can see at all. Whatever the difference is, it looks to be more intellectual than sensory. We can now refine the vernacular approximation of convergence, “seeing things the same way” by labeling our Kandinsky difference one of perspective or *point of view* (POV). Either connotes a difference in what is seen and how it is seen.

A POV is a mental position from which something is considered. Any visual association should be deprecated as a POV is simply a kind of relation to the object of perception or judgment, that ordinarily includes a flow of information.²¹ “Henry should consider things from Annie’s viewpoint even though being a writer gives him a special point of view toward writing.” With the foregoing account in view, I propose that an argument presents a POV on the subject of the argument. The POV of an argument, as I shall develop the idea, comprises a collection of senses, each bearing on elements in the argument. In that way the interpretation of the argument is built into the POV. Using the idea of a POV also provides a way of elaborating what is understood when one understands the sense of a conversation. I shall say more about this last momentarily.

A POV is not readily perceptible as a concrete object is, it is in that sense abstract. It is an object insofar as it may be distinct from any person holding it. Someone could assume or abandon the POV of a political party, thereby assuming their position on issues. More

²⁰Consider the same situation, except that our dispute is over whether the drawing looks like a cornucopia. (I have in mind studies for Kandinsky’s *Roter Fleck II*, 1921.) There is a contrast in these two situations though. Richard Wollheim describes it as the difference between *seeing-in* and *seeing-as* in Richard Wollheim, ‘Seeing-as, Seeing-in, and Pictorial Representation’, in: *Art and Its Objects*, 2nd edition (Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp.205–226. The distinction turns principally on whether there is a two-fold character to the perceptual experience. In an instance of seeing-in one has a two-fold experience of both the Kandinsky picture *and* what is represented *in* it, viz. the cornucopia. Whereas in seeing-as there is no two-fold perceptual experience. Instead one sees the Kandinsky either as an abstract expressionist ink drawing *or* a spattered piece of paper. One cannot simultaneously be *seeing-it-as* both. One sees first one way then the other, even if one can induce oneself to see it one way or the other as with perspective inversions of a Necker cube, . However, inducing oneself to see something as one thing or another is not inducing oneself to *judge* it as having one property or another; it is rather shifting from seeing it as one sort of thing or another. In this sense there is no change in representational content as there is in a case of seeing-in. Any analogy with primary and secondary senses is only with seeing-as. For my purposes, seeing-in is just a specialized perceptual experience not a shift in sense or understanding.

²¹I endorse with reservations Cavell’s gloss of Austin’s epistemic use of ‘position’, where it is meant as something that can be assessed. Roughly, assessing your epistemic claim is a matter of assessing the adequacy of your position (for your credentials, facts, learning, perception). Stanley Cavell, *The claim of reason : Wittgenstein, skepticism, morality and tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p.268.

precisely, a POV is a collection of senses, a composite object. Being abstract, assuming a proffered POV may require imagination. Asking you to see a paper *as* a drawing, I may be asking you to imagine it as such. This is distinct from imagining *an* artwork (not now present). In that case there would be *nothing* you were seeing *per se*, the imagined artwork exists only in your mind. When I ask you to see the paper as a drawing, there is *something* you are seeing—viz. the paper—but I am asking you to induce yourself to see it as a drawing. In asking you to imagine the spattered paper as a drawing, I am urging you to attempt to assume the requisite POV.

This may be impossible for the unimaginative. Of course imagination (active or otherwise) is not always a necessary condition on assuming a POV. Aspects often dawn unbidden, as when I come suddenly to see the nape of someone's neck as lovely. I may have been considering what she was saying when her loveliness dawned on me. But as the thought settles, it may eventually become difficult even to recall how it—i.e. a new sense or aspect—could have been a sudden realization at all; something which could have startled me.

Imagined inner voices, as in an internal debate, can each be a coherent alternative POV on an argument, just like another person's POV. But none of these is the same as one's actual POV. This marks a difference in the idea of a POV. The differences that attend understanding someone else's POV also attend understanding a POV one imagines, but *not* one's actual POV. We may "enter" another POV imaginatively, but not without remaining aware that it is distinct from our actual POV. One's actual POV is, we may say, inconspicuous or invisible, in the same way the thought 'I am here' is.²² There is no distance between thinking and the thought, such that its content might be an object of investigation. It is not so much impossible as incoherent.²³ It takes extraordinary circumstances for it to be natural to say, "I am imagining what I now see." The requisite distance is absent.

There are further asymmetries between a POV fitted for other-ascription and one supposedly fitted for self-ascription. Margaret Gilbert points out one such asymmetry of particular importance to a POV on moral matters:

... whereas correct other-ascription of vice in general provides a sound basis for the correlative predictions (he will act viciously in the future), such predic-

²²This modest claim is similar to claims about "Immunity to Error through Misidentification" first discussed in Sidney Shoemaker, 'Self-Reference and Self-Awareness', in *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968), pp. 555–567.

²³None of these remarks ought to suggest that our knowledge is closed under logical implication. That is a separate issue on which nothing here depends.

tions will have a less firm foundation once the subject himself believes that (...) he is vicious. For he now has good reasons for changing his ways and may well falsify our predictions ...²⁴

Another asymmetry is evident when considering deficits in self-awareness such as self-deception. One can be deceived about the content of one's actual POV, but not one's assumed POV. The content of what is assumed—i.e. the POV—is explicit in the assumption. Any putative element of the assumed POV claimed as tacit, may rightly be denied as no part of one's assumption. In any case, the claim to being *self*-deceived (as opposed to deceived) about an assumed POV would be problematic, yet not so about one's actual POV.

Though one's POV can sometimes *become* that of an imagined POV, that shift should be characterized as a shift in perspective not assuming or donning special glasses. Of course, statements can be taken out of one's mouth and investigated, thus creating distance. But, it will be then a statement out of context, i.e. being in someone's mouth. 'I am here'-statements are changed essentially by being removed from (an indexical) context. One's actual POV could be scrutinized in this way too, insofar as it admitted of expression. However, it would be changed essentially also. There is then a difference between one's actual POV, given an expression in an argument, and, given expression in thought and action. The latter, which we could call one's metaphysical POV, is the basis on which one acts, on which one is judged such that it is right to say, his actions are an expression of his POV. Clearly, this sense of POV is central to the arguments made in preceding chapters, especially regarding the internal and external character of one's understanding, and the responsibility consequent on the exercise of one's authority (itself a requirement for intelligibility).

However, in this chapter, POV will principally be used as that collection of senses of the elements of an argument that contribute to a convincing interpretation, i.e. one that follows. Reference to one's actual POV will therefore be limited to what can be expressed in an argument. Much more could and has been said about imagination, and its bearing on arguments about hypothetical situations. Some distinctions between hypothetical and actual situations were made (see chapters 4 & 5). The idea of determining not-determined reality I developed in chapter 6 applied to actual situations. The accounts of arguing

²⁴Margaret Gilbert, 'Vices and Self-Knowledge', in *Journal of Philosophy* 68:15 (1971), p. 452.

and argument developed below are limited to actual situations, not hypothetical ones. Extending the account to include hypothetical situations would require, I think, more distinctions between ethics and morality than I have space to draw (though see §9.2).

Though a POV can be one's own and understanding a POV may require imagination, it does not follow that a POV must lack objectivity. First, a POV usually has a relation to something independent of the viewer, a *part*, we may say, of *reality*. Second, consequent on that independence, the possibility of *error* remains in a POV. Third, two people can *share* a POV (perhaps to differing degrees). I alluded to this when, e.g., describing what is characteristic of the life shared by team members (§3.8). These points warrant calling a POV objective because independent, even though there is another sense in which a POV may be someone's actual POV.

The idea of a POV is always of a POV toward something, of a relation between someone and something. There is an ordinary use of 'point of view' to capture something principally *general*, such as a left-wing POV. It is too general to use in explaining specific arguments. In saying an argument presents a POV, I mean the encapsulated POV on the subject of the argument. In arguments about the actual as opposed to the hypothetical, the terms of the argument are themselves drawn from actual or real matters, e.g. plays, acting, drawings. An argument introduces elements from an actual situation with intended senses. Indeed such introductions are themselves controlled by the context of the discussion (as described below).

There are many ways to realize an error in a POV, using the sense of 'realize' from chapter 6. Someone realizes an error when they have misconceived an element in the argument or given it a sense which is either untrue to the actual matter in question or untrue to the sense *intended* in the argument. Indeed, there are as many ways to realize an error as there are bases for the criticism of considerations and decisions I described in chapter 2.

Realizing one's mistake within a POV is recognizing a distortion in one's understanding (of something). Understanding the origin of that distortion is important for learning or developing sound judgment. One may realize that one was badly placed, or that one was tired, or that one is constitutionally not perspicacious in such matters and so forth. When one so realizes one may guard against such distortions appropriately. When a POV is shared, the senses within the POV are shared. Thus, for instance, one might charac-

terize the “group think” in an organization as a shared POV, perhaps subject to shared distortions.

The account now makes perspicuous that the *object* of the criticism that an argument is irrational or lacks objectivity is in the first instance the POV internal to the argument. Of course, in the second instance the person pressing the argument is also the target of the criticism, for there may be a gap between someone’s actual POV and the one in their argument. All one has as to go on in the conversation is the argument, and someone may put forward an argument for various reasons other than to convince, e.g. to be provocative.

It is not yet clear though what the object of the criticism that an argument does not follow is.

7.6 Narrative Logic

When a discussion is about an actual situation—as in joint determination—it focuses on a part of the world. Therefore an argument within a discussion attempts to bring that particular *part* of the world into focus *from* a particular POV. An argument proffers more than a POV on a part of the world though. It also proffers a particular understanding of that part. Internal to the POV of an argument is, I suggest, a *logic* proposing a specific movement in thought. We can call this the narrative of the argument, as when we sometimes speak of a dialectical narrative. We can also call it the logic, if that is taken as whatever makes *acceptable* the movements in thought mooted in the argument. This sense of ‘logic’—and the way in which an argument’s POV is a collection of senses of the elements of the argument—illuminates Wittgenstein’s use of ‘grammar’; typically glossed as “logico-grammatical.”

A narrative can work as intended or not. Calling logic cognate with narrative recalls how the logic of a situation can ring false, can lack verisimilitude. In literature this occurs in the implausibility of characters and their actions. Argument in literature or dialog is what Cora Diamond calls the “dramatizing of reason.”²⁵ *Crime and Punishment* travels its narrative’s length to effect a change in Raskolnikov from someone who practically believes it is his moral destiny to kill the old moneylender to someone who believes that

²⁵Cora Diamond, ‘Anything But Argument?’, in: *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 291–308.

redemption lies only in freely submitting to just punishment. This is no small transition and the shift in perspective Dostoyevski intends is so radical that he proceeded with the greatest finesse to make the transition credible. But when it works, as I think it does with Dostoyevski, the shift is also *natural*.

Making movements in thought ‘natural’ means making shifts feel neither artificial nor forced. The idea of natural is somewhat opaque. The elaboration required draws on ideas discussed above. Natural relates to accord with the order of things, with actuality, as discussed in chapter 4. It also relates to the regularities on which generalization depends, as discussed in chapter 5. The natural is often how things usually go. More, the idea of what is natural depends on the ideas of modality developed in chapter 5 regarding what someone finds possible or impossible.²⁶ In this way, what is natural may seem necessary without however seeming forced. Sometimes what comes naturally is still *unexpected*. Here, Orwell describes a condemned Burmese prisoner on his way to the gallows:

And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path. . . . It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. . . . He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone—one mind less, one world less.²⁷

Orwell published this in part as a polemical observation about killing, especially by authority. I suggest it as an argument, though not an argument for or against the legality of capital punishment. It focuses attention—through the man’s avoidance of the puddle on the way to his death—on the shared *and* individual nature of distinctively human awareness. In so doing Orwell means to underline the magnitude of what is done in killing a man, even legally.

Several points emerge from the argument’s form. First, much hangs on merely rendering the episode vividly. In this sense it is like a demonstration (or a propaedeutic). Second, as author, Orwell chooses the observation’s focus. Third, notice the stresses in the conclusion: Orwell realized what it *means* to *destroy* a *man*. The stress is on the mean-

²⁶This modal aspect is discussed further in §8.5.

²⁷George Orwell, ‘A Hanging’, in: Ian Angus and Sonia Orwell, editors, *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters Volume I: An Age Like This* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), pp. 68–69.

ing of ‘destroy’ and ‘man’. The argument—if it is one—attempts to create a POV within which the heightened gravity of speaking this way is natural as opposed to portentous or self-important. So the intended conclusion is not a (true) claim, such as that capital punishment is wrong, but rather an altered sense of what it means to kill a man, a sense that commands greater heed perhaps, a heed that would move one to action or outrage. This feature of the conclusion is crucial to an argument’s function in joint determination of what is to be done, since it enjoins a particular consideration of the full weight of the meaning of, say, judicially executing a man.

It is not exceptional for an argument to urge a shift in meaning. Great consequences may turn on the full meaning of a term. Arguably the most famous civil rights case in American history, *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954, turned on whether the meaning of “equality” meant legal neutrality only or “integrated”. The latter premise was written into constitutional law by Justice Warren’s Supreme Court majority opinion from which many significant changes in American life flowed.²⁸ The argument was not resolved by reference to a dictionary, nor to legal precedent as such. And the meaning arrived at was not a confirmation of one disputed meaning over another, but as much as anything a legal stipulation of conceptual change. The plaintiffs sought the stipulation on the ground that it was a natural, though unacknowledged, development of what “equality” expresses. The social changes too, though not directly caused by the shift in meaning, were a natural (though not inevitable) development from it.

Someone may object that the idea of logic in ‘narrative logic’ is simply unfitting here. It imports a kind of rigor which is absent. On the picture so far, an argument about the actual—as opposed to the hypothetical—works as follows. Certain elements from the world are introduced, giving the argument a focus. The focus itself depends on the discussion of which the argument is a part. (I shall say more about the discussion below.) The elements are introduced with particular senses, i.e. an intended meaning, and presented as leading to a conclusion. Their movement to this conclusion is presented as natural under the senses intended. The senses are collectively constitutive of a POV.

Understanding an argument is grasping that within its POV its movement is natural. So understanding is constituted by grasping how the POV required for the argument flows

²⁸This claim is made in James Patterson’s *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) as reviewed in Louis Menand, ‘Civil Actions’, in *The New Yorker* (February 12 2001), pp. 91–96.

naturally.²⁹ This is distinct from being convinced by the argument. Being *convinced* by—as opposed to understanding—the argument is adopting the POV within it and in so doing being moved to the conclusion enjoined in the argument. Understanding the argument is, I claim, also to accept as correct the (narrative) logic internal to the argument.

A common conception is that logic—used in its ordinary instead of logico-grammatical sense—is composed of the laws according to which the *processes* of pure thinking should proceed: processes that lead to *correct reasoning*. A more rarefied conception is that logic is concerned with what is true and how we can know that it is. It may involve the formalization of logical arguments and proofs in terms of symbols representing propositions, logical connectives and constants. The meanings of the logical connectives and constants are expressed by a set of rules offered as self-evident. This second conception is sometimes summarized by saying logic is the science of generalization—rhetorical as it sounds.

While I have said nothing about formalizing arguments with logical symbols or connectives, what has been said is consistent with the characterizations of logic above. A *caveat* is in order regarding hypothetical arguments. Insofar as there is some relation between the hypothetical and generality, the conception of logic invoked has not centered on generality. However, speaking of the ‘processes’ of thinking is consistent, I think, with talking about movements in thought. Speaking of the *meanings* of logical connectives and constants as *self-evident* is consistent with talking about *senses* of things and the effectiveness of an argument depending in part on the *natural* character of movements mooted.

The issue turns on what ‘correct reasoning’ amounts to in this context. Certainly it comes to this: the meanings of terms like ‘destroy’ and ‘man’ as well as ‘travel’ and ‘writing’ must themselves be subject to relevant standards of correctness of meaning in both their primary and, where applicable, secondary senses.³⁰ Correctness comes to this too: what could not be a POV could not be convincing. Correctness is closely related to objectivity, which is—as argued above—applicable to arguments as thus far described because of the independence of the subjects of discussions in which they feature.

It is true that we sometimes generalize the principles we employ in convincing arguments. Often those principles come down to extremely general maneuvers such as being truth-preserving, harmony-preserving or faithful to how things are. However, one could

²⁹There is an inter-dependence between understanding and sense, that is not I think viciously circular.

³⁰Defining ‘standards of correctness of meaning’ draws on issues in semantics that are beyond my scope. See chapter 1.

present a *convincing* argument in ignorance of many generalized principles. What I am urging is that whatever those generalizations are, their presumptive role as arbiters of correctness must wait on—are generalizations from—those arguments that are actually convincing, that shift our POV or move us to action. For any generalized principles must be generalizations of those arguments which reliably do convince or they would be neither convincing nor generalizations.³¹

So my ongoing emphasis on actual joint determinations and discussions as activities to which arguing and argument are specifically in service is a reason to prefer an account that deprecates the formal, hypothetical, or merely symbolic as the basis of logic in arguments. For that reason, I have argued that the logico-grammatical sense of ‘logic’ is primary, instead of the formal sense.

7.7 Genuine Conversation and Openness

A condition on an argument’s being convincing is the possibility of assuming its POV. A conversation or dialog in which an argument occurs—which is the context in which I shall use ‘conversation’ here—demands a certain bearing towards another’s POV. Specifically, one must be *open* to that POV. That may demand many things, such as recognition that one’s POV is one of many, or fallible. Failure to understand or accept an argument may be revealing. It may reveal a lack of energy, discipline, imagination, creativity, patience, delicacy or much else that stands in the way of grasping a POV.³² These are limitations we may say in the *ability* of someone to accept an argument that are consequent on his inability to grasp its POV. An impossible POV vitiates an argument’s convictive potential. Examples of impossible POVs are being 150 years old, in two places at once, both man and woman or traveling at the speed of light. Others are not-possible without unusual antecedents, such as the POV of a Mormon, or someone who has been in the presence of a genuine saint.

However, not accepting an argument may reflect not on ability, but on someone’s bearing toward the person with whom they are arguing. One hallmark of openness in conversation is the possibility of surprise, not of surprising things exactly, but of the potential

³¹Generalizations are in any case not based on *a priori* assured principles of generalizations, but must wait on acceptance as “true” generalizations.

³²Diamond, ‘Anything But Argument?’, *op. cit.*, p. 295, and *passim*.

for surprise in the gap between the two POVs actually occupied by interlocutors. One reason I cannot genuinely converse with myself is that I cannot surprise myself as others can surprise me. This recalls the asymmetry in self- and other-ascription above (page 220). Martin Buber accentuated this condition on what it takes to ask or answer real questions, “The human person is not in his own mind unpredictable to himself as he is to any one of his partners: therefore he cannot be a genuine partner to himself, he can be no real questioner and no real answerer.”³³ While I may be surprised at what I discover myself saying, the discovery itself works to lessen any mystery in a way not comparable to the mystery that may persist in another’s POV.

Someone’s bearing may be insufficiently open or lack a possibility for difference. There must be something which is understood to be open for argument. An argument is an effort at joint determination, specifically of something (otherwise) taken as open. The possibility for difference exists exactly in what all parties take as not-determined. (There is the special case of arguing about what only one takes as not-determined.) If there were nothing considered not-determined—within which is included the determination of what to do—it is not clear that the argument would have an object or indeed that any discussion of this sort would be a joint determination rather than a conversation with different end. Conversations can fail precisely because of asymmetries in what is taken as not-determined.

There are other ways in which conversations fail. In such cases, we may go through the same motions but the aim of the argument will not be convergence. The aim of the discussion may be domination or humiliation. We object to the counterfeit nature of a conversation in many ways.

- You’re lecturing me not talking to me.
- You’re hectoring me, not listening.
- You’re not being serious, or you’re just miming.
- You’re being disingenuous.

If valid, each complaint is an instance in which the POV of the argument is not one *properly* held by the person advancing it. A lot turns on how we understand ‘properly’. For instance, someone could advance a POV which they could not or will not hold. Or they

³³Martin Buber, ‘The Word That is Spoken’, in: Maurice Friedman, editor, *The Knowledge of Man*, trans. by Maurice Friedman (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965), p. 113.

may foreclose any possibility of changing their POV, perhaps because they will not countenance any possibility of error. Dogma is held thus, like an artificial mantle. How could anyone be so sure?³⁴

Remembering that a POV is a standpoint on something independent, one always allows the *general* possibility that one's position is not as one believes even if another position is unimaginable. One may be mistaken about *what* one sees or mistaken about one's relative position, thus mistaken in *how* one is seeing. Central to holding a POV properly is respecting the idea that it is a point of view *toward* something. A proper POV-on-something must allow at least two things. First that one can either directly or imaginatively adopt the point from which one views. Second, that conditions for "viewing" are as one takes them to be, thus only appropriate corrections are employed. This last suggests that the concerns arising from the gap between appearance and actuality discussed in §6.7ff are no less operative here in the assessment of one's own or another's POV. How can I be sure of being right, when another POV seems properly held too? One could put the point in epistemic terms this way: cognizance of another's warrant for counter-assertion is a standing challenge to one's own warrant. Putting the point epistemically also makes it evident how realization of error in a POV is similarly applicable.³⁵

Coercion can masquerade as conversation. Coercion aims to induce an improperly held POV. (I explain the sense of 'improperly' below.) Iago persuades Othello of Desdemona's infidelity by preying on his psychological weakness: his insecurity, his ego, his ignorance of European ways.³⁶ The discussion Iago orchestrates presents a distorted picture of reality—a fantasy—in order to foment suspicion in Othello, aiding Iago's plan to destroy Othello. Not everything Iago presents is fantasy. Desdemona *does* spend time with Casio. But Iago does not believe Desdemona unfaithful, he knows the contrary. Rather, Iago induces Othello to see Desdemona's contact with Casio as suspicious. I say 'induces' because however Iago effects the shift in Othello's POV, it is not through convergence or *joint* determination, for Iago has no intention of acting on what he presents as conclusions about Desdemona.

In this respect it is somewhat different from teaching, where a teacher does seek conver-

³⁴I do not rule out what cannot be questioned because it is sacred or a matter of faith. I contend only that it will not stand elaboration as a POV on matters, but perhaps as a need. A theological corpus is not in this sense usually a matter of faith.

³⁵I return to this issue in §9.6.

³⁶See especially *Othello*, Act III, Scene 3.

gence but entirely through, say, moving the students to a POV the teacher already occupies (or deems an intended intermediate didactic stage). Iago does not seek convergence. He seeks divergence. The *way* Othello assumes the POV is artificial, is forced, based on misperception. He believes Iago's testimony rather than recognizing it as disinformation. That is based on another misperception at least: that Iago is his faithful counselor. Thus Othello thinks that he and Iago are jointly determining whether Desdemona is unfaithful, when of course they are not since Iago does not take it as an open question. The result is Othello mistakenly believes his POV is a vantage on Desdemona's fidelity. When he realizes it is no such thing—because it is oriented on Iago's disinformation—he can properly disclaim it, saying his intention was to determine Desdemona's fidelity on which his POV has no bearing. Of course Othello's disclaimer is subject to rejection on the grounds of his gullibility. But rejecting his disclaimer does not urge restoration of the POV, only responsibility for what was done while it was held.

The distinction is between open (or genuine) conversation and coercion. I call it 'coercion' because the aim is not convergence or movement in the same direction, but rather movement by only one in *another* (possibly known to be false) direction. In this sense, it is like pushing or forcing someone.³⁷ When I place a gun to your head, I do not seek your understanding or your conviction, I seek your compliance. The words you mouth at my request at gunpoint are not in your own voice and the actions that follow from taking things as I do are not an expression of your authority. This is precisely why you may not be culpable for what you do when coerced. It is one point of difference with Othello, insofar as one is aware of being coerced at gunpoint, whereas Othello was not, thereby leaving open the charge of gullibility.

Being pushed into a POV, into improper relations is not the *natural* shift in perspective required for speaking with new conviction on a matter. For this reason I call the POV 'improperly' held when I compel or induce you to assume it (if possible). There is a parallel to the condition on genuine belief requiring more than holding something true. Belief must include an understanding of why it is true. It is related to how someone may be senseless: believing, without any *sense* of what they believe.

The distinction may be put this way. Conversation is a kind of *solicitation* to review the

³⁷The sense of 'force' I intend is nicely characterized in Nozick's remarks on "coercive philosophy" in Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 4.

situation, to see old facts with a new sense, to relate oneself to the question differently.³⁸ That was Orwell's aim. It was Henry's aim with his cricket analogy. Sometimes an argument does no more than highlight the familiar from a different position. The success of the solicitation is in engaging the other's authority in joint determination. Coercion includes no such solicitation because the one who coerces is indifferent to enlisting the authority of the other and the one who coerces likely does not hold the POV he intends to induce.

This does not imply that every argument which fails to convince is somehow illegitimate or even faulty. As was said, someone may be unable to assume or understand a POV within an argument. Alternatively, I may understand the POV but determine that I both do not or cannot share it. I cannot accept it and what follows from it. This is often revealing, perhaps of caution, seriousness, vanity, etc. It reveals, as I hinted before, the kinds of differences between people characteristic of individuality.

This much regarding disagreement however does follow, and is the point of this detailed elaboration of the mechanics of joint determination in the guise of conversation and argument. Where there is agreement that some matter is not-determined, and convergence is not possible, and people respond determinately and differently to the matter, then to that extent they do not share the world. That is, for them, the world is different, *at least insofar* as it commands a different *response* from them. The persistent failure of discussions about something *limits* our ability—with respect to that matter—to share the world, share a life in that world, share our “life with language” (in Diamond's phrase), or relate to them normally as Cockburn said. In this attenuated sense, Vere and Winch were in different worlds, where that can be expressed faithfully as: they experience the *same* world (*our* world) differently. For each, the world has a different texture of being that is not, as I emphasized, expressible in terms of different facts actual or imagined. And of course it reveals something about them that *the world is* that way for them, that it actually has *that* texture—a texture expressible in each response to it. This is a crucial aspect of being an individual, most often expressed (coarsely) in the idea of one's *experience* of the world as being somehow unique or ineffable.

³⁸Cp. realization in §6.2.

7.8 Shared Conclusion, Shared World

When an argument *is* convincing though, when people determine things similarly, they share something, viz. the world. More precisely and prosaically, the world is the same, where that means ‘provokes the same responses’. But if what I have said thus far is right, the sense of ‘same’ will have to be explicated as sharing sufficiently same senses—primary and secondary—of things. Specifically, the world—or that part of it on which conversation has led them to converge in joint determination—has the same meaning for them. The ideas of meaning and determination thus far developed have a *normative* import in that one can expect similar responses to similar circumstance, bounded of course by differences in individuals.

By developing the idea of secondary sense further we can elaborate the idea that the world can have a ‘texture of being’ for individuals and groups.³⁹ The blind, deaf and fully-abled inhabit the same world, but it has a different texture for each. For the blind, many senses of ‘same’ do not include color. That mode of thought is absent. Similarly, secondary sense expresses something’s role in life and language. Its role includes its resemblance to other things, as when we take something as similar or substitutable. Following the Brown 1954 decision, the role of ‘equality’ in our social institutions changed, in the process changing our expectations. Emphasizing the expected or normative dimension of sense and meaning is related to the idea that sharing a POV is expressed in similar responses to similar circumstances. Consider Pericles’ exhortation during his funereal oration for the dead of Athens:

... And when the moment for fighting came, they held it nobler to suffer death than to yield and save their lives; it was the report of dishonor from which they fled, but on the battlefield their feet stood fast; and while for a moment they were in the hands of fortune, at the height, less of terror than of glory, they departed.

³⁹Expressions like ‘texture of being’ are likely to raise the hackles of an analytic—as opposed to phenomenological—philosopher. The approach I intend recognizes distinctive modes of thought, each of which attends to different logical properties. The idea of distinctive modes of thought is familiar to analytic philosophy in the work of Evans and Peacocke in their discussions of thoughts that are immune to error through misidentification and egocentric versus absolute spatial thoughts (mentioned in chapter 1). The idea of intentionality depending on the logical properties of thoughts and their objects is familiar from work such as the *Tractatus* (as mentioned on page 187n29) and the Lewisian modal realism defended in David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973); David Lewis, *On The Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). (If I have understood Lewis’ ideas, he posits *inter alia* a logical space whose properties serve as one basis for individuating our thoughts about the actual and the possible.) As I shall refer to them in chapter 9, the logical properties of the moral modes of thought are those that arise in understanding the human relations that compose the human world.

Such was the conduct of these men; they were worthy of Athens. The rest of us must pray for a safer issue to our courage and yet disdain to show any less daring towards our enemies. We must not consider only what words can be uttered on the utility of such a spirit. Anyone might discourse to you at length on all the advantages of resisting the enemy bravely, but you know them just as well yourselves. It is better that you should actually gaze day by day on the power of the city until you are filled with the love of her; and when you are convinced of her greatness, reflect that it was acquired by men of daring who knew their duty and feared dishonor in the hour of action, men who if they ever failed in an enterprise, even then disdained to deprive the city of their prowess but offered themselves up as the finest contribution to the common cause.⁴⁰

This is, I suggest, an argument about the *correct* response to danger for Athens. Notice it does not commend courage directly, nor indeed attempt to inculcate a particular *conception* of courage. Indeed, it specifically disdains it. Rather it advises a particular preparation for bearing oneself in battle. It proposes a POV from which courage will be the natural issue. Survey the city, come to love it, be convinced of its worth, and the rest will follow from that loving regard. When you are related to the city with love—when it has a texture of being concordant with love—then you will be positioned to defend it naturally. I suggest this as an instance of dramatizing reason.

What does dramatized reason reveal that “ordinary” reason does not? Dramatizing or dramatized reason is a natural way to speak of the intended character of an exhortation or argument of this kind. A drama’s narrative describes what happens first, second, etc. When an actor studies his part, he learns the sequence of things, when to go on or off. Dramatizing reason is describing the roles of the elements of the argument in our life, the connections such that one thing leads to another, such that we take *this* as *that*. When we take Athens as a proper object of love, that love will find expression in our steadfast response to danger.⁴¹ “Dramatizing” is only a description, and reason is after all broad enough to encompass all that guides the intellect. I mean little more than that some arguments, in certain conversational contexts, urge a sequence of responses rather than just

⁴⁰Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian Wars*, edited by P.A. Brunt, trans. by Benjamin Jowett, Abridged edition (London: The New English Library, 1966), p. 70, §§42–43, “Pericles’ Funereal Oration”.

⁴¹The expression ‘dramatizing reason’ is inspired by Cora Diamond, ‘Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is’, in: *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 367–381.

acceptance of further truths.⁴²

It is clearer now what we are enjoining when we criticize someone as illogical⁴³ or unreasonable—themselves the roots of many other criticisms, including those in chapter 2. We are saying something like, “It doesn’t go like that,” or, “Around here it is done this way,” or, “If you want that (to get along) you do this.”⁴⁴ This adverts to the secondary sense by advertent to a role within our life—approximately, “For us, it is natural to go this way.” At the extreme, we are saying that if you want to be one of us, intelligible to us, sharing our world, then do it this way. To adapt some metaphors from chapter 4, the dance is done *this* way or your role in our play is *this*. But of course, this is not a dictate. That the dance has that form is not *secured* by some further principle of rationality or logic, but by our finding it now natural to dance this way. Dancing your own way may preclude dancing with us. This might even include accepting some contradictions that may limit one. It is a rare society that does not have its entrenched contradictions, regarding, e.g., the age of maturity for sexual intercourse and military service.

Of course what we find natural is not immutable. Aspects or realizations may dawn unexpectedly and our nature no doubt shifts with changes in our circumstances. Things would be different—albeit in unpredictable ways—if we were photosynthetic, asexual, or mind readers. Changes may at first startle before dissolving into the familiarity of the unexceptional. Gaita remarks on a further aspect of the way in which our logic is grounded in community and *culture*:

Cultures are partly defined and distinguished by what is unthinkable in them—unthinkable not in the sense that no one ever thinks them, but in the sense that they are beyond argument; they are ‘indefensible’ because any serious attempt to defend them would show one to lack the judgment necessary for the proper exercise of reason on the matters in question.⁴⁵

A corollary of this is that language can go dead—i.e. ceases to effect movement toward convergence or accord. One manifestation of that is *irretrievable* disagreement about some-

⁴²This distinction is meant to make further mischief with a philosophical preconception—in e.g. internalist and externalist debates about reasons—that inference does not ever move one to action save with a later act of will. See chapter 5.

⁴³One might wish to retain a formal sense of ‘illogical’ where it is indexed to a logical framework, e.g. S5 or para-consistent. Here the aim of the argumentative enterprise is likely little to do with convergence, and everything with norms of proof validity.

⁴⁴For an elaboration of this idea, see Stanley Cavell, ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’, in: *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 1–43.

⁴⁵Raimond Gaita, *A common humanity : thinking about love and truth and justice*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 181.

thing that is not recognized as a matter of taste. I shall say more about how what we find natural in human relations is secured or jointly determined in chapters 8 and 9. More, I shall suggest in chapter 9 how moral criticism can work to harmonize our relations with others, retrieving them from the isolation or alienation possibly consequent on irretrievable disagreement.

7.9 Impetus of Conversation

I have argued that the results of successful, genuine conversation—and argument—is accord within a convergent (i.e. shared) POV. Genuine conversation demands openness to change—at least in POV—from all involved in a joint determination. So a condition on joint determination is the acknowledged indeterminacy of what is to be determined.

Though conversation may of course make various demands, what demands conversation? Discussion is mostly driven by need and desire, as when Annie needed Henry's help. At other times conflict may be the impetus as when two people aim at (or desire) conflicting ends, as in legal or moral disputes about integration. The overall answer is I think that the contexts that stimulate discussion are those which—owing to our needs or wants—require coordination with others. These conversational contexts result from the nature of the patterns of human engagement that shape our lives—themselves sources of need and conflict.

Why might I desire to persuade someone? I might want someone to *do* something, such as rewrite a play. I might want to correct *belief* or undermine an intention, such as that good writing depends on form. I may want to *draw attention* to something I think is relevant to them, worthy of attention, valuable, or something dimly grasped such as what it means to destroy a man. I may want to *clarify* something indeterminate, such as whether a work of art must be representational. I may want to *entertain* them or make them laugh. Any of these things might be achieved by urging a POV on someone *along* with demonstrations or directions toward the conversation's aim, e.g. clarification, correction, exhortation, etc. The context then dictates with whom to converse.

Consider instead conflicts amongst people. Counter-assertion is a form of conflict when contrary things are presented as true, such as that one should return good for evil and evil for good. Counter-action is a form of conflict when actions interfere with each other, such

as supplying food for the poor that is then stolen by the rich. Resolving such conflict may demand discussion. The conflicts themselves determine who is required for accord through discussion.

Other things may bring people together. I may solicit your opinion and vice versa. I may do so for the reasons discussed in §6.11, viz. unfamiliarity, fear of my fallibility, the gravity of the situation, or cognizance that my POV on the matter is badly placed. You may solicit me in conversation for any of the ends just enumerated.

These are all descriptions of circumstances in which discussion becomes the way forward for those involved. None are mutually exclusive or unrelated. In other circumstances no one is involved but someone is needed. One is when a doubt has arisen, e.g. whether capital punishment is defensible.⁴⁶ Another is when I am unable to realize my ends without help because, e.g., I need another pair of hands. Yet another is when my comprehension is insufficient to the circumstance. This may be because something is sublime, infinite, occluded, not-determined, unintelligible or somehow beyond one's ken.

The phrase 'way forward' deliberately highlights the idea that the circumstances are a kind of impasse to going on alone, thus what is required is moving on together. That impasse *conditions* the understanding of any argument that arises in the discussion. The conditions are not logical conditions. Nor are they rules for what movements are natural or unnatural. Rather they are conditions on what is germane to the argument, what demonstrations may be relevant, what outcomes may be sought. Something's satisfaction of the condition depends on its power against the impasse.

In this sense, conditions may seem like external constraints on discussion. By that I mean that the context in which an argument is presented determines what is taken as a *natural* consequence of an argument's POV. Taken in abstraction, the elements of an argument could urge many conclusions. But conversational context constrains how the elements may be assembled and presented as leading to a conclusion. So, the analogy between a cricket bat and a play derives most of its intended force by its context in Henry and Annie's discussion.

That is not reducible to the POV in the argument since the POV from which the analogy works could be put into service of many conversational aims. However, in this case

⁴⁶Indeed, Peirce thought that doubt was the *sole* impetus and basis for epistemic inquiry. C. S. Peirce, 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear', in: Philip P. Wiener, editor, *Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings (Values in a Universe of Chance)* (New York: Dover, 1958), pp. 114–136.

Henry is using it to support his withholding his help from Annie and his recommendation that she not take a role. And that depends on the context of Stoppard's play, where Henry and Annie are married, aim to live their lives together, aim to live together in a substantial sense of that idea as essayed in chapter 3. That context conditions the *natural* understanding of the argument Henry presents so that it is understood as a way forward, specifically the same way forward for Henry and Annie both. The 'same way' is not of course to be understood as *identical* actions, but rather concordant actions in the sense discussed in Chapter 4 in analogy with dance or a band. In that sense, going forward the same way depends on understanding the world the same way, *integrated* with one's understanding of one's place in the world. This is central to the idea of a *common* understanding with an *individual* response—itself the crux of the individuality I have stressed. Moreover, the integration of commonality and individuality is the shift in my account promised at the start of this chapter, between internal and external accounts; and individualistic and compositional bases for understanding one's responsibility for one's moral response.

An obvious troubling thought concerns arguments in the absence of this kind of context. Without context, the argument may founder for lack of context. Suppose I encounter a teen-aged boy torturing a cat. The boy is, say, a stranger. The thought is that I can appeal by rational argument for why he should stop, irrespective of how little we supposedly share as strangers.⁴⁷ On my account this is false, we must share more than rationality. We must share a POV if the argument is to succeed.

This is a substantial topic, but the line of argument consonant with my account proceeds below. No doubt, nuanced distinctions in conceptions of rationality would necessitate changes, but not I think to the argument's central dynamic. Rationality and convergence in argument may be thought logically independent. The former is the background for an argument, the latter the aim. But the example below shows either that rational argument is irrelevant for argument; or that its explanatory role is inconclusive. Whereas convergence in a POV features essentially on either explanation of the example.

Suppose I fail to convince the boy by argument. Does that show that there is no reason why he should stop or is there a reason he does not grasp? Putting it that way suggests that on the latter explanation there is a separate existent—a reason—whose grasp does not essentially depend on argument, because its existence (apparently) does not depend

⁴⁷We share quite a bit, as I argue in §§8.6–8.7.

on my argument. But in that case, it is not clear what role understanding the argument plays in our interaction. All that matters is that within his POV he grasps the reason, as expressed by his stopping.

If grasp of the argument does play a role, then any understanding (of a reason) must proceed in the first instance via the argument. With a minimal notion of rationality, the argument can be communicated and presumably grasped without his stopping. What is it in his understanding that is missing then? There is something he cannot do, viz. assume the POV within which my argument moves him to stop. The exact cause of his inability may be unclear. But in the event of irretrievable disagreement, we should be able to establish his competence to understand the rationality of the argument by testing his understanding of the terms involved. However, there is not the assurance of conclusive tests in regard to POVs and secondary sense, for they admit of individuality in the sense developed above, and in preceding chapters.⁴⁸ Thus, the answer to the question I posed in §7.3 about which is the more *essential* to argument—rationality or convergence—seems to be convergence (where that means convergence on the same way forward).

7.10 Understanding Another's Call

However even if I have been right in arguing that the circumstances in which a discussion or conversation originates significantly conditions the understanding of the discussion and its arguments, it is not obvious that circumstances alone are sufficient for *forcing* someone into discussion. The circumstances cannot necessitate the discussion. I may appeal for your help and you may refuse me. We may find ourselves at loggerheads over something and yet one or both of us may refuse to discuss it. I may ignore you or I may not care. I may not bother to persuade you or I may act contrary to you, effectively denying you (explicit or implicit) consideration.

This reveals an imperfect foundation for the account of moral understanding so far given. Responses regarding discussion are necessarily prior to any possible discussion. I must have decided to join you in discussion *before* uncertainties about the interpretation of a conversation and its arguments can arise. Therefore any *understanding* on which my

⁴⁸Secondary sense does admit of standards of correctness, though it may not always be possible to test for adherence. Moreover, secondary sense *in conjunction* with a POV may be individual.

decision to engage with you in discussion depends need have no link to the content of any discussion we might have. So *that* understanding (and its linguistic manifestations) will not, as it stands, answer to standards of correctness in the way I have described for secondary sense. I must already have recognized a motivation for or demand on me to enter the discussion *prior* to seeking to understand the sense of our discussion.

The pointed question is from where does our understanding of the demand to discourse come? Rai Gaita puts part of this point succinctly, “Who speaks to whom and with what authority?”⁴⁹ I would augment it with a complement, “Who may ask what of whom?”

In summary, a circumstance may give rise to a discussion, a comment, an argument—or it may *not*. One has an understanding of when it is appropriate, impertinent, insensitive or not, etc. One’s response (e.g. resentment) is often consequent on one’s expectation of acknowledgment by the one with whom discussion seems appropriate (or is sought).

I shall argue in the next chapter that the nature of the relationships between potential interlocutors and their understanding of those relationships control whether and what kind of discussion arises. Understanding relationships is in this sense fundamental to living with others. Moreover, I shall argue that *moral* criticism is distinguishable precisely by its being grounded in the context of the relationship between people—more precisely still, at the criticized person’s understanding of the demands of his relationship. Moral criticism is directed at someone’s response to the demands of their relations with others *when* that response is expressive of their determination of the demands of that relationship.

⁴⁹In conversation.

8 The Nature of Moral Criticism

A man can be destroyed but not defeated.

The Old Man and The Sea
ERNEST HEMINGWAY

8.1 Inter-relation, Intelligibility and Argument

I have been describing how we understand ourselves in the world. The focus has been on how understanding and the responses—paradigmatically *observable* in decision—expressive of it allow for criticism of the person whose understanding and responses they are. It emerged from a question in chapter 2 of why someone would or should accept the criticism of his decisions as personal, typically moral, criticism of *him* instead of merely his decision. Two early attempts were made to answer that question. One emphasized the *individual* facts of someone's life (chapter 3). The other emphasized the collective facts of all lives (chapter 4). Both were found wanting because the facts could not, as it were, speak for or give meaning to themselves. Facts required a determination of meaning or import. Determination, I have emphasized in the last three chapters, implicates both the person and his understanding, by himself or in concert with others, of those facts.

In the discussion in chapter 7, I suggested that since the majority of one's life is lived with others, the majority of one's understanding is developed with others. This explained much of how we understand each other's purposes in conversation and argument. The problem was that an account of the mechanics of argument leaves open the question about those very mechanics, and these "meta-arguments" cannot be secured within or by the arguments on which they bear. The answer I propose in this chapter is that the resolution of disputes about argument itself is dependent on the understanding of the inter-personal relationship within which the argument is thought to arise.

This answer is also an answer to a different emphasis in the formulation of the problem at the end of chapter 7 expressible as, what further informs one's understanding of when joint determinations are necessary, optional, or irrelevant? When may I ignore your

requests for help? When may I disregard you in deciding what to do? More directly with respect to my overarching question in above chapters, when and how may I criticize you for your failure to consider me, unwillingness to help or unresponsiveness to our shared circumstances?

In the first instance, I shall argue that one's understanding of the answers to these questions about conversation are controlled by one's understanding of one's relations with others. I shall further argue in this chapter that someone can and is sometimes judged or criticized on the basis of the *relations* that exist between him and others. These relations are defined at a minimum, I shall argue, by the *critical authority* that makes possible *meaningful* judgments—i.e. those which admit of correction and correctness. Critical authority is then central to our intelligibility overall, not merely, as in the case of authority, the intelligibility of our determinations and decisions.

Accepting others' critical authority over us in differing domains is controlled by our relation to them, e.g. friendship or fellowship. This is how we are held responsible. The Irresponsible, if he is not a solipsist, is held responsible through his relations to others. Moral conversation, including criticism and argument, is often then the determination of the nature of inter-personal relations by specifying the critical authority that is characteristic of those relations.

Moral criticism is, at root, criticism of someone's understanding of the demands of inter-personal relations—e.g. love or friendship—in the light of one or more decisions bearing on the person in that relationship. Moral criticism is a criticism of *someone*—i.e. has personal force—and not his decisions because it is criticism of *his* understanding of his *life*—i.e. of how he lives—which is centrally constituted by his inter-personal relations (as argued in chapter 3).

The person who is indifferent to his life, in this non-biological sense, is not intelligible to us, in part because we should be unable to discern someone as living a life if he did not attend to the substance of his life: his (network of) inter-personal relations. So much was an intended conclusion of chapter 4. So, I argue that to be intelligible we must accept some critical authorities, though I explicitly provide for the possibility of the intelligible

repudiation of morality in chapter 9.¹

One could worry that my argument—viz. someone may be criticized on the basis of his inter-personal relations—and claim—viz. inter-personal relations are partially defined by critical authority and its role in meaningful judgments—was circular. It is not however, since inter-personal relationships are a basis for criticism not in terms of its justification, but in terms of the object to which criticism is directed. But of course, it is only the object in the first instance, since the real object is that relationship *as understood* by the person within it. Naturally, this will mean that a third party (in the sense of someone not part of the relationship) will be capable of different criticisms, than someone within the relationship. That asymmetry is familiar from chapter 5.

Within this chapter, I am also seeking to highlight and illuminate the character of our relations with others. Development of one's understanding of these relations, generally and particularly, is an ongoing part of one's life, including one's moral life. The relations are not however arbitrary conventions, agreements, or bargains because, first, they are partially grounded in the myriad brute ways in which people affect us and, second, limited to how one actually could live with people. Understanding one's relations is thus partially a *discovery* of the character of one's effects on people and their effects on oneself. It is also partially an expression of the character of our tendency toward and need for others such that any person has some minimal critical authority. This aspect reflects the truth in the "external" accounts considered above.

This chapter concludes the first half of the argument in response to the worry at the end of chapter 7. The argument is completed in the next chapter, and the account explicit in the argument is itself the sketch of the nature of moral understanding I am offering in this thesis. By the end of this chapter, my arguments will show that our moral understanding is part-constituted by our ability to jointly-determine the nature of our relations, to negotiate them. The objects of our moral understanding are then other people in the light of their relation to us and the possibilities for one's life with them.

¹Putative counter-examples to the claim regarding intelligibility and attention to others are a hermit or a saint, both of whom have an appearance of indifference to normal lives. Their very abnormality lessens the dialectical requirement to accommodate them here. However, I can canvass some possible responses. Hermits may define themselves in opposition to the generalities grounding intelligibility, thereby making themselves "inversely intelligible," so to speak, in the same way that a photographic negative is faithfully representational. Conversely, saints could be understood as hyper-attentive to their inter-personal relationships, so fully intelligible in that light. Alternatively, a satisfactory treatment might posit a kind of inter-personal relationship that was being-a-saint/hermit-to-others.

8.2 Criticism within Relations

Consider how the context of a situation is central in determining our response to someone's needs, someone's claim on us. David Cockburn asks about Mary, a married woman whose husband is having a blatant affair:

While the fact is staring her in the face, Mary never says 'My husband is having an affair'. Is she prepared to say it? Well, one question that needs to be asked about this is: prepared to say it when and to whom? (To the radical translator, with his tape recorder, visiting her country from a far off land?) That aside, there may be a quite straightforward, and fairly general, sense in which she is not prepared to say it. Indeed, she cannot even bring herself to think it: her thoughts veer away from the evidence and from any topic that has potential links with her husband's affair. And yet we can see in her demeanor towards her husband, and, perhaps, in adjustments at other points in her life, a recognition of his infidelity. And we suspect that under certain kinds of pressure she would verbally acknowledge what is going on.²

I want to consider a question stemming from this example. What is our understanding of the constraints on when it might be right to tell Mary what she already knows, namely that her husband is unfaithful? Not just anybody could or should tell her. It would be impertinent for a stranger to do so and perhaps incumbent on a close friend to do so. That in saying it we would only be stating the truth is no justification or entitlement to say it either. It is central to understanding what you mean that we understand why you are saying it, where that is understood as in response to some occurrence or circumstance. Merely stating truths is rarely a motive for speaking or conversing. Usually a prior question is required.

This is not an exotic claim. These examples do not exemplify more than the common thought that *what* we say is colored by our relation to our interlocutor, and how we understand what we *can* say is similarly determined.³ One reason for speaking to Mary of the affair would arise if we felt she was unaware that everyone else knew and we *feared* for her embarrassment or shame. Another reason we might speak to her would be if the conversation took a turn such that one would be forced to *feign* ignorance of the affair; for instance if she, trying to brazen it out, commended her husband's fidelity. Even these

²David Cockburn, 'Language, belief, and human beings' (2002).

³Certainly, I do not mean to claim anything that would subvert familiar philosophical theories of meaning and force in language.

considerations might not be sufficient for someone to speak of it. An acquaintance might in neither case decide to speak, feeling that he would be rightly criticized if he did. Where though does our sense of propriety come from?

I suggest it comes from an understanding of the relationship one bears to Mary. A friend might speak when a co-worker would not, even in identical circumstances. A further reason we might speak to her was if we thought that speaking to her would *help* her, thinking that our motivation to speak was somehow justifiable since it was not in the least self-interested.

However it is not clear that this is universally exculpating. The central character in Schlink's *The Reader* is placed in an invidious position.⁴ He is the only person who knows of the illiteracy of a German woman being tried for terrible crimes committed during the Nazi period. The woman will permit herself to be wrongly convicted rather than reveal her illiteracy which, in the case, would certainly be exonerating. He knows she would not have him reveal her illiteracy under any circumstance including this one. He agonizes over whether to do what would properly be in her best interests but against her wishes. After consulting his father, a philosophy professor, he decides that the consideration he should accord her freedom and dignity outweigh his desire to seek her best interest. I suggest that his understanding of their *particular* relationship is *expressed* by his giving her dignity the weight he does. On the other hand, I also suggest that his so regarding her is expressive of his conception of what the relationship of friendship, or in this case former lovers, also demands *generally*.

There is a conflict to harmonize between the particular character of their relationship and the general character of relationships *taken* to be of this kind.⁵ Part of the reason he agonizes over what to do is that in deciding what to do he is trying to decide what the relationship demands, and he holds his considerations subject to criticism—possibly his own—if he gets it wrong. The situation would be different if he were a court investigator or a neighbor—different both in terms of what the relationship properly demands and the criticism we could make. As a former lover, we might say he had been paternal, high-handed, or insensitive if he decided to speak. Were he a court investigator we might only say that he was insensitive. Indeed we might not be critical of him at all if he had to take

⁴Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader* (London: Phoenix House, 1997), p. 141.

⁵The harmonizing of general and particular was discussed in §4.6.

into account his obligations in his role as investigator.

I should not be understood as suggesting that the decision is made by finding a “root” relationship—e.g. a human as such—whose dignity is sacrosanct. Rather, that relationship, viz. a human as such, could be a consideration in concert with that of being a friend, a lover, a court investigator, etc. All of these rightly command our attention with an importance determined by the circumstance. So, the protagonist’s decision in *The Reader* is not a consequence of a *general* respect for dignity and freedom, but rather respect for the *particular* place of dignity and freedom in his relationship with her—even if his understanding of dignity and freedom is part-informed by dignity and freedom’s typical place in relationships.⁶

Of course our understanding and development of our relationships is more complex than that engendered by simple dilemmas. Consider this rather more developed exchange from the film *Manhattan*. It is a paradigm of moral conversation because of the features it illustrates: the focus is on personal relations and what they demand; the form is principally critical; the argument fails without quelling its impetus; and the authority of the interlocutors is itself a subject of debate. In the scene, Isaac confronts Yale when he learns that Yale, who is married to Emily, has resumed an affair with Mary, Isaac’s present girlfriend. Isaac confronts Yale during a class he is teaching.

Yale: What are you doing here?

Issac: What do you mean what am I doing here? I spoke to Mary. Weren’t you going to say anything?

Y: I am going to say something to you but I’m trying to teach a class.

...

I: What are you telling me? That you’re going to leave Emily. Is this true? And run away with the winner of the Zelda Fitzgerald Emotional Maturity Award?

Y: Look, I love her. I’ve always loved her.

I: What kind of crazy friend are you?

Y: I’m a good friend. I introduced the two of you, remember?

I: Why? What was the point? I don’t understand that.

Y: Because I thought you liked her.

I: Yeah, I do like her! Now we both like her!

Y: Yeah, well, I liked her first.

I: “I liked her first.” What are you, six years old? Jesus!

Y: Look, I thought it was over. I mean, would I have encouraged you to take

⁶By this formulation, I specifically mean to deny Korsgaard’s over-arching conception of a root practical identity that anchors all others, in Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, edited by Onora O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

her out if I still liked her?

I: So, what . . . you liked her, now you don't like her, you did like her, you know it's still early. You can change your mind one more time before dinner.

Y: Don't get sarcastic about this. You think I like this?

I: How long were you going to see her without saying anything to me?

Y: Don't turn this into one of your big moral issues.

I: You could've said, but you . . . All you had to do was, you know, call me and talk to me. You know I'm very understanding. I'd have said no, but you'd have felt honest.

Y: I wanted to tell you about it. I knew it was going to upset you. I . . . We had a few innocent meetings.

I: A few? She said one. You guys should get your story straight. Don't you rehearse?

Y: We met twice for coffee.

I: Hey, come off it, she doesn't drink coffee. What'd you do, meet for Sanka? That's not too romantic. You know, it's a little on the geriatric side.

Y: Well, I'm not a saint, OK?

I: But you're too easy on yourself. Don't you see? You're . . . That's your whole problem. You rationalize everything. You're not honest with yourself. You talk about you wanna write a book but in the end you'd rather buy the Porsche. You cheat a little bit on Emily and you play around the truth with me. And the next thing you know you're in front of a Senate committee and you're naming names; you're informing on your friends.

Y: You are so self-righteous! You know, I mean, we're just people. We're just human beings. You know, you think you're God!

I: I . . . I've gotta model myself after someone.

Y: You just can't live the way you do. You know, it's all so perfect.

I: Jesus, what are future generations going to say about us? My God! You know, someday we're going to be like him. [points to a skeleton hanging in the classroom] I mean, and he was probably one of the beautiful people, dancing and playing tennis, and everything. And now look. This is what happens to us. You know it's very important to have some kind of personal integrity. You know, I'll be hanging in a classroom one day and I want to make sure when I thin out that I'm . . . well thought of. [He leaves]

Y: Ike, Isaac, where are you going?⁷

One important feature of this case is that Yale is being criticized for *not* saying something rather than having said something. Principally the example illustrates the complex interaction of criticism. Closer examination reveals *how* criticism occurs.

⁷Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman, 'Manhattan' (1979).

Yale is multiply criticized for his failures *as* a friend (“what kind of crazy friend are you”), for his inaction (“What do you mean what am I doing here?”), his deception (“Weren’t you going to say anything?”), introducing Isaac into hazard (“Now we both like her!”), and lying about the details (“You . . . should get your story straight”). He is also further criticized for treating the decision to leave his wife with frivolity (“running away with the winner of the Zelda Fitzgerald Emotional Maturity Award”, “you liked her, now you don’t like her, you did like her”), for being disingenuous in his defense to Isaac (“I liked her first”), for conniving self-deception (“you’re too easy on yourself”), and indeed for the potential consequences of a lack of integrity (“cheat a little bit on Emily . . . play around the truth with me . . . informing on your friends”). The critical traffic is not all one way though. Yale does offer some *explanations* for his actions (“I love her”, “I liked her first”, “I thought it was over”, “I knew it was going to upset you”, “I’m not a saint”). He also criticizes Isaac for expecting too much (“we’re just people”), for demanding too much (“I’m not a saint”), for overreaching in his criticism (“You are so self-righteous!”), and for insensitivity (“Don’t get sarcastic . . . You think I like this?”). At the end, Isaac breaks off the conversation in deadlock and leaves.

Notwithstanding Yale’s claim, I offer this as a paradigm of moral conversation. It illustrates several features I claim are central to the moral understanding we need for such discussions. First, the conversation is about personal relations: Isaac and Yale’s, Yale and Emily’s, Isaac and Mary’s, as well as Yale’s and his friends and acquaintances. The relations and the consequences for others are what makes it moral. Second, the conversation focuses on what those relationships demand, e.g. telling the truth, considering others, etc. In part I mean that the conversation focuses on the *proper* understanding of *friendship*. Third, the exchanges in the conversation are principally critical, each challenges the other for failing to do what friendship demands or permits. Sometimes one responds to the criticism with explanation, entitlement, or counter-challenge. Fourth, the criticism’s argument may fail without vitiating the demand to try. Relations are in this way sometimes tragic. Fifth, sometimes the authority of the other to criticize is called into question. What though is the role of such criticism? What are we doing with such criticism? I elaborate answers to these questions below.

8.3 Rejecting Criticism

In criticizing we make a judgment. If pressed to characterize this judgment further, it could be called one of incorrectness or infidelity about or to something. In the case of moral criticism the object of judgment is ultimately a person. In the first instance we judge someone's decisions or actions, but such criticism really focuses on the understanding of which those decisions or actions are expressive (in the way described in chapter 5, itself a development from chapter 2). The understanding expressed may be of an immediate (i.e. this situation) or more extended kind (i.e. my life, person, etc.). The criticism's form makes the personal focus more or less apparent; as when it targets decision in the first instance (e.g. "that was cruel") instead of the person (e.g. "he is cruel").

Moral Understanding's Root is Inter-Personal My claim is that the root component of someone's moral understanding—the component that makes criticism of him *moral* criticism—is his grasp of his inter-personal relations and the demands these relations make on him.

Putting it into the terms of chapter 2, the root component of his understanding generates considerations in decision-making that stem from his inter-personal relations. In the terms of chapter 7, the root component of his understanding controls his response to others' solicitations in prospective joint determinations. I shall support the claim that this is distinctively moral in chapter 9, where I will also say something about the origin or substance of this root component of understanding. Below, I shall elaborate the details.

In chapter 2, I made a distinction in the kinds of judgments we make of other people's decisions. I said that when we call attention to errors we may be focusing on a lack of ability or even a malfunction.⁸ This can seem like the case where someone is poor at mathematics, i.e. makes simple arithmetical errors, transcribes erratically, mis-keys, etc.⁹ These criticisms are like descriptions, they highlight a deviation from what is normal. Other times we intend something more, something with a prescriptive import. By 'prescriptive import' I mean a further element implying what you ought to do or what follows if the criticism is accepted as valid and correct. My judgment that you are cavalier is meant *critically* and is meant to focus on you, to highlight the *responsibility* as yours. Insofar as

⁸Cp. §2.5ff.

⁹Cp. discussion of Weil §6.8.

you accept the authority I appeal to in my criticism then I make a demand on you. The demand in calling someone cavalier is that they attend their decisions with greater solemnity or seriousness. The form of the criticism is linguistic. The terms used in the criticism indicate the prescriptive import of the criticism, though they of course wait on all the usual vagaries of conversation and context. ‘Cavalier’ is used to make this criticism: your decision was not *seriously* attentive to him, and you *should* be more attentive.

There are three ways in which the criticism may be rejected. You may give *explanations* that diminish your responsibility in an effort to vitiate both my criticism and the demand flowing from it. This works to undermine the judgment. At the limit, it may “falsify” the judgment such that I withdraw it, accepting that you are not responsible. Essentially this acknowledges deviations in the decision-making process while saying you were not culpable because you were, e.g., tired or lacking energy. These do not undermine the criticism as such, the decision may still be rightly criticized as a deviation or infidelity. The explanations only lessen the personal dimension of the criticism, what makes it a criticism of you. What remains is more like a description.

Second, the *terms* of the criticism are themselves subject to *standards of correctness*. That is, not any term may be used to criticize any action in any circumstance. You may reject my criticism by saying that I have misunderstood the *use* or meaning of ‘cavalier’. When I say you have misused that term I may mean two things however.

I may mean that you have said something with no clear meaning, something that is nonsensical perhaps or something whose meaning is ambiguous in its prescriptive import. For example, suppose you say that I snubbed that stranger. I reject your criticism because it can’t be right. To snub someone requires a sufficient relation from which they can expect the kind of recognition the withholding of which constitutes a snub.¹⁰ Such relations are non-existent with a stranger (though there is something similar, which we call ‘ignoring’).

I may mean instead that you have misunderstood the situation and therefore the appropriateness of this term. For instance, you may think we are friends when we are not. You may think, *contra* me, that part of what it *means* to be a friend includes taking me seriously. This is not like the first mode of rejection I gave. There, the description is accurate, the terms are used correctly, but the prescriptive import is vitiated by explanation. Here, the terms are not used correctly. When I accept that I have made a mistake in the use of the

¹⁰Cp. §3.10.

term I may withdraw that criticism, perhaps rephrasing it. “OK, you *ignored* him,” or, “Oh, I didn’t realize you had worked together.” If I do not agree however that the terms are misused we will be at an impasse as to how standards of correctness apply.

The problem in general form is no different from other disputes about word meaning. If the standards of correctness are internal to the practice of criticizing in this way, then who is to arbitrate in matters like this? These disputes must appeal to something else: a determination (in this case a joint determination). The success of these determinations will depend in part on which *authorities* may be invoked in such a determination of meaning. Before discussing this further there is a distinction here between the sort of authority I have been describing as operative in determinations—what we can call an authority to determine among other things meaning—and what I shall call *critical authority*.

The third way I may reject your criticism is to *reject* your authority to *make* the criticism. In this case I do not dispute the content of the criticism or even what you mean to determine the criticism to be, rather I reject your attempt to make the criticism. In so doing I am saying, “I do not answer to you here,” or similarly, “I do not recognize your claim or the prescription in your criticism.” I reject your critical authority. Such rejections are made, I claim, on the basis of our relationship. So when I reject your critical authority I am saying that our relationship does not include (your having) critical authority on this matter. A characteristic way of putting this is to say the criticism is impertinent, or that you have no right to judge, or it is none of your business.

8.4 Critical Authority

In §6.9 I described authority as the means by which we put ourselves into our determinations, the way we commit ourselves. Those determinations were both determinations of fact and meaning. The thought developed was that in making a determination one takes the consequences attendant on the determination made. One consequence was being judged by others. When one *already* has the authority to make determinations the question that remains in any exercise of that authority is on what *basis* are determinations made. So, a judge must refer to both the law and principles of jurisprudence. A referee must refer to the rules of the game. Measurements are made according to appropriate measuring procedures. In these cases, criticisms of the exercise of authority are with refer-

ence to the basis for determinations made. So a referee may be criticized for misapplying the rules in determining that a match was over. That criticism does not call in to question his authority, it is like the second way of rejection distinguished above.

There is however a prior question of *whether* someone has the authority to make a determination. In chapter 6 I argued that we must always at least have recourse to our personal authority in making the determinations we act on if an action is to be ours. Personal authority was a condition on understanding phenomena like regret, remorse, apology, and alienation. The judicial case is different. The judge has the authority to make determinations only in the legal matters brought before his court and only when he should not recuse himself because of a conflict of interest. The *scope* of the judge's authority (*qua* judge) is constrained by the specific mandate granted to him by the judicial institutional *powers* that appoint him. It is they who may revoke it. The judge's authority extends to all those who *recognize* it, though he may exercise it over those who do not. One can reject the authority of the court to judge, declaring it illegitimate in this matter—though perhaps not others.¹¹

Where does the authority for Isaac to criticize Yale come from? There is no analog to the judicial case, for there is no governing power over their friendship. In that case, it seems that if Yale recognizes Isaac's authority, then that is because Yale *grants* Isaac the authority. Yale uses his power (over himself) to grant Isaac authority. He does this by *recognizing* his authority. In recognizing his authority Yale will need to specify a particular *basis* and *scope* for Isaac's determinations. Similarly, Yale could reject Isaac's criticisms in the matter of their friendship. Why though would Yale grant Isaac that authority? Because Yale *thinks* that is what their friendship demands. That is not to say more than: he thinks that is what friends do. Arguments about friendship are, in the terms of chapter 7, partially for establishing the point of view of friends, in which it is natural to do what friends do. Being a friend includes being answerable to their criticism, where being answerable means responding to the prescriptive import of their criticism, where that must *usually* mean doing what is implied. The extent that one does not is the extent to which the scope and success of their friendship may be limited. I shall say more about this below.

¹¹For example, Slobodan Milosevic has rejected the authority and legitimacy of the International Court of Justice. If the court sentences him, it will in his view not act by authority but rather by the exercise of power, typically force. It is not only those in the dock who may doubt the court's legitimacy, consider the contemporaneous doubts about the WW II war crimes trials in F. H. Maugham, *U.N.O. and war crimes* (London: J. Murray, 1951).

Authority has been spoken of in two contexts, making a determination and criticism. It should be clear now that criticism just is a determination. Criticism is usually a determination that a decision made was based on an understanding of the situation different from the criticizer. (I say 'usually' because there is criticism that is praise, e.g. that one's understanding is especially faithful or a harmonious extension, in which case criticizer and criticized share an understanding.) Such a determination must be made with reference to an ideal, in the sense developed in chapter 2. The deviation in understanding may take any of the forms discussed there. One is a criticism that focuses on a determination used as a consideration, claiming it is mistaken. So, when you took it that the war was just and therefore accepted the call to arms, I may criticize your decision because I determine that the war is unjust. If we disagree then we disagree on some matter of fact or meaning in the way discussed in chapters 6 and 7. Furthermore what we disagree about is importantly independent of us. I set my authority against yours in the matter of determining something external to the two of us, viz. the war's justice. I shall call this *independent authority* as it applies to matters independent of the relationship between the two of us.

This is not the case in what I have been calling moral criticism. Here, when I criticize you I am criticizing your understanding of our friendship. However, 'understanding' may mean one of two things. And 'our friendship' is equivocal between the particular character of our friendship and the general character of any friendship. I will ignore this equivocation in 'friendship' until §8.5. What follows may be harmlessly read as equivocal on this point. When I criticize your 'understanding of our friendship' I may mean that I think you misunderstand what friendship *is* or what friendship *demand*s in *this* case. Misunderstanding what friendship *is* means misunderstanding what the scope of the authority within friendship is or what the basis for criticism within friendship is. Misunderstanding what friendship *demand*s in this case is misunderstanding that friendship demands, e.g., telling me of your affair or misunderstanding that this prescriptive import, e.g. you *should* reconsider, is appropriate here.

So if we disagree about our friendship it may take several forms. We may disagree about the scope of my authority. Just because we're friends doesn't mean you may opine about who I date. We may disagree about the basis on which my authority should be exercised. Why does being your friend mean I should be sympathetic to your political interests? We may also disagree about what friendship demands of me here and now. Just because I am

your friend doesn't mean I can't get angry at you for this. An important difference is that in misunderstanding what friendship *is* I question the fundamental content of friendship which is made up of the authority—specifically, its scope—and the basis of its exercise in criticism. While the criticism that I have misunderstood the *demands* of friendship in this situation is rather more like criticism of a decision, it is a criticism of how friendship applies here. The authority to make these kinds of criticism is what I called *critical authority*. It applies to inter-personal matters and is in that sense dependent on us, though in another sense, as I shall argue, it is also independent.

In my account, independent authority operates in the determination and maintenance of standards of correctness. That is why I have spoken of determinations of facts *and* meaning. The two often go hand in hand. It is correct to describe that as 'a table' or that as a 'well-scored goal'. Also, it is correct to say, "'injustice' has a negative connotation." What we appeal to in these cases is how some other people—those who generally find us intelligible—naturally judge or take things when in similar positions. This kind of joint determination—dependent and visible in sufficient convergence—is appealed to when the "publicity of meaning" or an acknowledgment of common fact is invoked. It is also in this inter-dependent sense that people are the sources of meaning, the constituters of a living language, where meaning is use, and use is intelligible as expression.

A further thought may be foreshadowed by sketching the conditions for being intelligible. Intelligibility requires standards of correctness. Why? Because, I cannot grasp my own relation to correctness (or indeed to the moral good or harmony).¹² Why? One can grasp the conundrum with two analogies: the eye is not part of the visual field; the picture I paint cannot contain me *as* I paint it.¹³ There is no ("Olympian") perspective from which I see myself seeing myself—a formulation resonant in form to the liar paradox¹⁴—for if I were to see my eye seeing, then I would be using yet another (unseen) eye to do so. Nor can I paint myself painting the same picture I am painting, for if I were then I should be painting a picture of me painting a picture of me painting a picture and so on. Similarly, I

¹²Does it follow that a third party cannot see my relation to the good or harmonious? Maybe. One could imagine that with three, the following algorithm might be employed: C checks A & B; A checks B & C; B checks A & C; adjust for the feedback dynamics of the positions; repeat to narrow the relation. This recalls Davidson's "triangulation" approach in Donald Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth', in *Journal of Philosophy* LXXXVII (1990), pp. 279–328. It is also prey operationally to physics' famous 'Three Body Problem'.

¹³See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by C. K. Ogden (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), §§5.6–5.6331 & 2.174. Cp. also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edition (1953; reprint, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), §268.

¹⁴Cp. similar difficulties for Nagel in §10.4.

cannot puzzle over my intelligibility *to me*, for who is it who would be doing so besides the very same putatively unintelligible me.¹⁵ My sense of my own intelligibility *to others*—that is of speaking correctly, of being understood—depends on accepting standards of correctness and the *independent* authority on which they depend. Since linguistic authority is only held by other speakers, and not dictionaries or my own records, correctness requires others. This is a telescopic reprise of a line of thought in Wittgenstein's notorious private language argument.¹⁶ It does not rule out self-criticism *per se*, only criticism which lacks the requisite distance, viz. the distance integral to being another.¹⁷

Critical authority appears to apply to different objects. It is operative in the determination and maintenance of our understanding of the inter-personal relations that control how we respond to others when they solicit us in joint determinations. It is in that sense the *sine qua non* of having and intending relations with others. It is also the answer to the question posed at the end of chapter 7 as to the understanding that controls our responses to other's discursive solicitations to joint determination. (It also begins the elucidation of the idea developed in chapter 5 regarding people's effects on us, about which I shall say more in chapter 9.) This understanding is prior to *joint* determinations of fact and meaning since the activity of joint determination depends on our understanding of the context of our confrontation with another. So in this sense the understanding we have of how others *could* so much as have authority—i.e. the capacity to make determinations of correctness about us or anything else—is a precondition for language, meaning, and the correct description of facts at all.¹⁸ If I have been right to think that depends on critical authority then it is also right that intelligibility depends on critical authority. This understanding is consonant with the awareness of others I called our *Einstellung* in chapter 5. I shall say something more about the basis of the expectations internal to our *Einstellung*.

¹⁵Cp. discussion of surprise on page 227.

¹⁶For more on this formulation see D. K. Levy, 'Language, Concepts, and Privacy: 'An Argument Vaguely Viennese in Provenance'', in *Language and Cognitive Processes* 18:5/6 (2003), pp. 693–723; Crispin Wright, *Rails to Infinity: essays on themes from Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹⁷For more on the philosophical consequences for intelligibility of this formulation see Rush Rhees, 'Wittgenstein's builders—recapitulation', chap. 9 in: D. Z. Phillips, editor, *Wittgenstein and the possibility of discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 178–197; Stanley Cavell, 'Must We Mean What We Say?', in: *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 1–43.

¹⁸This is the beginning of an answer to Wright's concern mentioned on page 28n26. It is of course far short of a philosophical account of the *fundamental* basis of intersubjectivity of the sorts developed differently by Davidson and Habermas.

8.5 Instances and Ideas of Relations

There is a difference then between determinations of meaning and determinations of what morality—in the guise of relations—can demand. However, these collide in the case of moral meaning, for instance the meaning of ‘friendship’. Relations such as friendship must go through some *joint* idea of what friendship is. In part, one cannot be a friend to someone who is not a friend to you. More importantly though, an aspect of friendship is being aware of, or regarding, each other in that friendship. (One can treat another favorably, without being friends of course.) That I look upon him as a friend explains many forms characteristically significant in friendship. It is true that I can *treat* someone as a friend, but we will not *be* friends unless he treats me as one too. It will not be enough to think that friendship is merely an idea like an agreement or a bargain. I return here to the distinction, put off in §8.4 until now, between my understanding of our particular friendship and friendship generally, of which our friendship is an instance. Our particular friendship must answer in part to what friendship (or true friendship) *really* is, where the idea of ‘really’ includes how we may actually live, what is bearable *and* what is recognizably like whatever else we call friendship. Consider the following exchange:

Charlotte: There are no commitments, only bargains. And they have to be made again every day. You think making a commitment is it. Finish. You think it sets like a concrete platform and it’ll take any strain you want to put on it. You’re committed. You don’t have to prove anything. In fact you can afford a little neglect, indulge in a little bit of sarcasm here and there, isolate yourself when you want to. Underneath it’s concrete for life. I’m a cow in some ways, but you’re an idiot. *Were* an idiot.

...

Henry: What was that? Oh ...yes. No commitments. Only bargains. The trouble is I don’t really believe it. I’d rather be an idiot. It’s a kind of idiocy I like. ‘I use you because you love me. I love you so use me. Be indulgent, negligent, preoccupied, premenstrual ... your credit is infinite, I’m yours, I’m committed ...’ It’s no trick loving somebody at their *best*. Love is loving them at their worst. Is that romantic? Well, good. Everything should be romantic. Love, work, music, literature, virginity, loss of virginity ...¹⁹

The sides in this discussion neatly highlight two important aspects of relationships. On the one hand, they are not static but are sustained by the ongoing living of the relationship,

¹⁹Tom Stoppard, *The Real Thing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), pp. 65–67.

by the *characteristic* unfolding of lives *guided* by the shared conception of the basis of that relationship. That is a kind of joint determination of the demands on a day-by-day basis.

On the other hand, it is not in that sense an agreement because relationships cannot have just any character. They are answerable to many expectations of what is characteristic of them, e.g. being romantic. Those expectations shape our development of relations, our intentions in living together in fidelity to them. Also though, we discover what we can live with, i.e. discover the limits that living with others places on us. Some relationships don't work. We find we can't live *that* way with *that* person. In part that is what makes us individuals.

Perhaps there are conceptions of relationships with which none of us could live. Some of these may be ones that require a point of view that is impossible in the sense of §7.7. We could perhaps say that some are incompatible with human nature. Perhaps so, but no explanation is actually needed beyond the impossibility of so living. That we cannot live that way is basis enough for being assured that friendship, love, and any other relationships are not like that. Cavell describes the essence of moral discussion in the context of relationships as “positions” toward each other:

The *problems* of morality then become which values we are to honor and create, and which responsibilities we must accept, and which we have, in our conduct, and by our position, incurred.²⁰

Read quickly, it may seem that Cavell means that we choose our values and thus incur our responsibilities. I doubt it.

More likely, he is alluding to a tension of the same sort described when discussing the will in chapter 5. Forming a relationship with another person is like a decision, *but* is also like a ‘finding out’. I find out what kind of relationship we can have. What form does such a finding out have, or more exactly, what is found out? One thing we find out is who can be our friend. Another thing is that friendship can demand criticism of this kind, e.g. Isaac's. Finding out what it is to be friends is in part discovering what it can be to live together in that way. ‘That way’ means something like with that texture of being or reality, where that means—in line with what was said about secondary sense in chapter 7—what directions or dynamics seem natural.²¹ This kind of finding out is also like the finding out

²⁰Stanley Cavell, *The claim of reason : Wittgenstein, skepticism, morality and tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 325.

²¹Cp. Discussion of ‘dynamics’ in §4.5.

in chapter 5. It is finding out what is possible, what is necessary, and so on. What we find out in the recognition of others is that they limit our will, that they *can* be critical, and that their criticism makes a claim on us to which we are responsive.

A corollary of my account is that there may be limits to our understanding of criticism if we do not understand the relationship on which the criticism depends. For instance, there may be criticisms that only those in the fraternity of soldiers could understand. Or there may be relationships whose understanding depends on assuming a point of view that is not-possible in the sense of §7.7. It is another way in which an individual may be opaque or anomalous to one. So, though Winch was unable to criticize Vere's *decision*, nor express a difference in their reasoning, perhaps he would have been able to criticize the nature of Vere's *relationship* to Billy.

Crucially, there is a sense in which forming a relationship is a decision—a decision refined by joint determinations in circumstances that provoke it. As with determinations generally, such determinations may not be settled by the facts of the matter. In this case, 'the facts' are the form that this kind of relationship *generally* takes. Consider a married couple who desire a child though the husband is sterile. Each thinks that artificial insemination is the solution. However, the husband cannot countenance the father being anyone he knows. The wife however could not take the father being anyone she does *not* know. The question to be answered is, plausibly, what can either reasonably expect of the other as spouse? Also, symmetrically, what can the other reasonably accept the other expecting? In short, what does being married demand of them in resolving this impasse? Or again, what does the relationship of marriage demand?

The difficulty is to do justice to two distinctions. The first is how a marriage is dependent on what each takes it to be. The second is how we strive to exemplify or instantiate what we understand marriage to be as something independent of us (without of course merely appealing to the thin legal conception). Its (independent) character and content must be sufficient to preserve the possibility of realizing how we may have failed. We might think we failed to rise to what marriage demands. We may also understand that marriages are not alike. There is an elasticity to the concept and its instantiation that requires a determination in this *particular* case. The determination required is roughly that this relationship has the essential qualities of a marriage. But 'essential' should not be understood as necessary conditions, or the qualities that all marriages have. Using the ideas

in chapter 3, two networks or patterns may have similar properties (e.g. functional properties) yet have a distinct constitution. Similarly the philosophical concept of identity is univocal, yet constituted differently in the case of lines, numbers, material objects, people, etc.

The consequences of misunderstandings differ depending on the relative independence or the distance from those in dispute about it. So, we might disagree whether another couple's marriage is recognizably a marriage as opposed to just a domestic arrangement. That disagreement is sufficiently independent—including the terms of it—that the consequences of disagreement for a marriage may be slight. Again, we might disagree about the idea of marriage generally, but if the point of disagreement is not one under pressure in our particular marriage, then the consequences of disagreement mirror our marriage's independence from marriages generally conceived. However, when the disagreement is about particular elements in our marriage—either because we differ about the general conception of marriage as it applies in our marriage *or* are unreconciled about something we agree cannot be settled by reference to the general—then the *dependence* of our marriage on *us* shows itself with the greatest possible consequence. (I shall further elaborate the consequences of disagreement in chapter 9 beyond the suggestive remarks made in chapter 7 on page 234ff.)

One constraint on any determination of what marriage demands is that a couple remains married. Marriage cannot demand something with which one of them could not live (without becoming something other than marriage). A good example is the way some "open marriages" founder on an incapacity to see their "ideals" through. I have spoken of our idea of what a relationship is and of how friendship or marriages generally go (in a way similar to the discussion of lives in chapter 3). But it is far from obvious that any such *idea* of marriage could *settle* the question the childless couple faces. That is one reason for thinking of it as a joint determination or, in simpler terms, a decision. Of course neither is it an agreement or a "bargain" since as I emphasized not anything is intelligibly recognizable as a marriage or as a friendship—thus not anything may be agreed. Marriages are recognizable in part by the content taken as characteristic: romance, sex, sacrifice, family, duty, etc. However, these are not necessary conditions, nor is any one sufficient for

marriage.²² As with determinations generally, the possibilities for remorse attend the possibility of realizing how one has misunderstood what, e.g., marriage is. Sven Lindqvist self-critically laments his divorce and regrets his conduct so:

I am being punished for my ignorant moralism. I thought those who could no longer love each other were just lazy. But work alone is not enough. Without grace, there is no love.²³

8.6 Unintended Relations

I have argued that our lives are constituted, understood, and guided by our attention to our relationships. Attention to *particular* relationships reveals what is *generally* possible in our lives with others. There are many types of relationship whose demands are various and familiar. A reminder of the range of our relationships can be drawn from examples. There are those which are common, usually looming large in one's life, such as the relations of family. A father's decision to turn state's evidence may be shaped by how he thinks his children will think of him. He knows they expect him not to dishonor them by his conduct. The example above of a married couple who may have to decide what marriage, and each other, can ask is illustrative. In §5.2, sons have to decide whether to turn in their fathers for embezzlement. The sons must balance the competing claims of different relationships, among which are relationships as sons to fathers and fellows to their countrymen. Many of these relationships are ones we are born into, or at least are ones which constitute significant portions of and forces in our lives.

There are relationships which are more obviously the products of choices. Friendship's facets were revealed in the exchange between Isaac and Yale. One thing the conversation between Yale and Isaac reveals is that the idea of moral rules (as opposed to ideals) as the objects of our moral understanding is essentially derivative. One does not, in such cases, attend exclusively to rules. If anything, one seeks to understand whether and how those rules apply to this case, where 'this case' is inseparable from the one which involves Isaac and Yale and *their* friendship. But that question is rightly seen as attending to the relationship in the first instance and determining which constraints and expectations flow from

²²The recurring reference to what is characteristic of something recalls Wittgenstein's discussions of family resemblance and a general dissatisfaction with conceptions demarcated by necessary and sufficient conditions, Wittgenstein, *PI*, *op. cit.*, §§65–69.

²³Sven Lindqvist, *Desert Divers*, trans. by Joan Tate (Granta Books, 2000), p. 112.

its joint understanding.²⁴ It would seem odd indeed to say that one meant to determine the meaning or the demands of friendship by first determining which rules were part of friendship. This thought is similar to the priority that arguments which actually convince enjoy versus generalizations in the form of convincing arguments, discussed above.²⁵

Becoming friends—like any relationship—is relating oneself to another such that expectations arise, demands are made, and resentment is expected when those demands are not met. This is more plain if we think of promising. Sincerely promising something is explicitly to grant someone a claim on you. Part of promising is licensing resentment if I fail to keep my promise. But the conditions for the *exercise* of that claim or that resentment are dependent on how the promise is actually made, not the other way around, i.e. on the basis of the *concept* of promising.

The rule ‘to always keep one’s promises’ is not more than the expression or description of how one typically positions oneself to another by promising. The rule is not required *prior* to making promises. Rather it is derivative. In part this is because promises are not trumping and promises are of many kinds. Promising one’s father is different from promising one’s neighbor, in part because the character of the expectation created by promising is itself colored by the character of the other expectations one has in virtue of the (other) relationship(s) within which a promise occurs. These kinds of combinations can be difficult. Vere was torn by his relationship to the Navy as an officer and his relationship to Billy as fellows before God. My relationships to my co-workers differ according to whether I am their manager or they are mine, whether we are friends outside of work, whether we are all members of a professional society and so on. People sometimes wish to keep them separate, but it is not always possible. Indeed, sometimes the desire to keep them separate is a cover for a desire to avoid the complex nature of the demands of combined relationships.²⁶

²⁴This amounts to saying that the uncodifiability of moral rules is, though another reason for thinking rules inappropriate or secondary, beside the point in moral understanding. Cf. John McDowell, ‘Virtue and Reason’, in *The Monist* 62 (1979), pp. 331–350.

²⁵Cp. page 226.

²⁶Williams makes a similar more general point about the authority of ideas introduced via moral theory, such as person, rather than experience:

How can we come to see the weakness of a theoretical concept except by reference to the everyday distinctions it is supposed to replace or justify ...? So far from having some special authority because of their belonging to a theory, these conceptions, in relation to what they are required to do, are likely to be more arbitrary than those ... they replace.

Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the limits of philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 114–115.

A relationship is sometimes thought to require a choice to create or construct the relationship. It is easy to show that this is not obvious. Spatial relations such as being behind something, causal relations such as knocking something over, logical relations such as being contradictory and harmonic relations such as being in tune with something, for example, are not the products of choice but merely of position broadly construed. The same is true for many of our inter-personal relationships. Citizenship, being neighbors and ethnic identity also constitute relationships that bring particular expectations in their wake, without choice. Indeed if they did not create expectations, there might be a question about whether there was anything that one *was* in being so identified—it might come to nothing. There are many minimal forms of human relationship we recognize, whose demands we acknowledge though they are not consequences of our choices, even if there is no single relationship that all of us *must* respond to or accord priority. In this way, people make a claim on us, against our will as it were, simply by our *awareness* of them.

Consider someone whose acquaintance I make while serving on a committee or at a party. That he is an acquaintance of mine ordinarily demands that, for instance, I acknowledge him on the street. If I do not, he may rightly think ill of me, and I, on discovering that I didn't see him, might worry that I will have given him cause for offense. That such responses are possible is, I claim, a proof that something as slight as being acquaintances is a relation of whose demands and authority we are cognizant. Such relationships may claim us through nothing more than our mere awareness of them. Suppose, though I have done nothing to invite it, one of my students develops a crush on me. Once I become aware of the crush, I may consider myself bound to consider her with a new sensitivity knowing now of her vulnerability to my criticism. I have not chosen the relationship, but I already understand many of the demands it places on me. Indeed, if I do not, I should turn to others for advice on how to accommodate them (or they may point them out).

On reflection, it is obvious we are continually aware of the way the merest relationships make recognizable demands on us. If I notice that my smoking at a bus shelter causes a stranger to cough while we are waiting, I may *rightly* think it would be thoughtless to continue and the stranger right to resent my smoking.²⁷ It is similar for how I sit on a bus seat that must be shared. It has been my claim that what we understand in that case is how a relationship as merely fellow human beings or at least fellow members of this

²⁷There are cultural exceptions to this, e.g. Japan; cp. chapter 10.

culture presses the acknowledgment of certain demands expressed in bases for criticism and critical authority. I shall say more of the consequences of not acknowledging these demands in chapter 9. Simone Weil presented the force of others to affect us when she said:

The human beings around us exert just by their presence a power which belongs uniquely to themselves to stop, to diminish, or modify, each movement which our bodies design. A person who crosses our path does not turn aside our steps in the same manner as a street sign, no one stands up, or moves about, or sits down again in quite the same fashion when he is alone in a room and when he has a visitor.²⁸

8.7 Relations Are Robust

Our relationships are importantly robust as well. They are among the last vestiges of intelligibility visible in the murk of insanity. Indeed as I shall reinforce below, they are a hallmark by which we take another as intelligible, intelligibly human. The film *Apocalypse Now* is an illustrative journey from sanity to insanity during which human relationships—and community—steadily break down, buckling under the maddening logic of war.²⁹ Captain Willard finds Colonel Kurtz deep in the jungle on the edge of madness. He passes freshly severed heads bleeding on a ruined temple's steps. He says, "Everything I saw told me that Kurtz had gone insane." While he is Kurtz's captive, Kurtz asks him to consider the freedom to escape relations to others, "Have you ever considered, any real freedoms? Freedoms from the opinions of others. Even the opinions of yourself." Kurtz, we are told, was a model officer, from a military family, who had as expected pursued a career with vigor until he discerned the hypocrisy of the military establishment. That realization cast him on the road to madness. Willard says, "He broke from them, and then he broke from himself. I'd never seen a man so broken up and ripped apart." Kurtz tells Willard his aim is to create a force of men who, "...kill without feeling, without passion, without judgment ... Because it's judgment that defeats us." Yet through this insanity, a relationship endures, enough to move Kurtz, changing his tone, to appeal to Willard:

I worry that my son might not understand what I've tried to be. And if I were

²⁸Simone Weil, 'The Iliad, Poem of Might', in: George Panichas, editor, *The Simone Weil Reader*, trans. by Elisabeth Chase Geissbuhler (London: Moyer Bell, 1977), p. 157.

²⁹Francis Ford Coppola and John Milius, *Apocalypse Now Redux: Screenplay* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).

to be killed, Willard, I would want someone to go to my home and tell my son everything ... Everything I did. Everything you saw. Because there's nothing that I detest more than the stench of lies. If you understand me, Willard, you will do this for me.³⁰

Kurtz's appeal is motivated by *his* relationship with his son, but it is based on the shared idea that *anyone* wants their son to think of him as decent, truthful, etc.

Even death need not importantly vacate the demands a relationship makes on us. This is immediate when we are moved to pity or respect the dead, though they are obviously not among us. If I betray your secret while you live with no consequences for you, is it any different if I do it when you're dead? I think not, though I shall defend the thought only briefly. If I have a relation to you at all—if it is right to count what I do as betrayal—it is not importantly vitiated by your death any more than my fondness for the Twin Towers in New York City is incoherent because they no longer exist. The point turns on my understanding myself as bound by the relationship I take as a fact. My understanding is not secured *or* undermined by the facts of someone's present existence. Sometimes we give substance to the relationship by saying that, e.g., I want to honor the part they had in my life.

In another film, *Blade Runner*, the protagonist Deckard is assigned to kill several escaped "replicants," artificial humans. In the course of carrying out his assignment he is exposed to the relationships the replicants have come to bear to each other though the replicants have existed only four years. He is exposed to the force of their desire to live, to override the obsolescence mechanism that will kill them shortly. They are possessive of their inauthentic remembered experiences even though they are known to be implanted. Moreover, though artificial people, they *value* their experiences, and think them valuable. Roy Batty, their leader, says just before he dies, "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe ... All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain." Deckard, reflectively, says, "Maybe he loved life more than he ever had before. All he wanted were the same answers any of us want ... All I could do was sit there and watch him die." In the first phrase, Deckard recognizes that Roy *can* love. In the second, he *identifies* with him as one of us, we who suffer. His lament in the third expresses his helplessness to respond to Roy's demand of him. The story teaches Deckard—and the movie teaches us—that the *possibility* of a rela-

³⁰Coppola and Milius, *Apocalypse Now*, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

tionship is not importantly dependent on biology, on having had a childhood, but on who we can *recognize* as a fellow, to whom we are open.³¹ In this sense, Roy emerges in our *Einstellung*, meeting our expectations for a life intelligibly and distinctively human. The possibility of recognizing someone this way is not without constraint.³² It is notable that Deckard may never have expected to recognize Roy in this way, but he was *open* to it. His conversation with Roy eventually became a genuine one in the sense of chapter 7.

8.8 Common Humanity

A simple idea of humanity goes deep with us. It does not take academic philosophy to reveal it, nor does it take philosophy to explain many of its demands. The idea of humanity, of common humanity, of the demands of humanity is something common to discussion and philosophical debate. Public leaders like President Kennedy can make uncontentious reference to “a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.”³³ The idea of common humanity is in the public mind. For example, in 1996, there was a short lived imbroglio in Britain over pregnant convicts who were being chained during delivery. The response from the public was swift and had no more basis than a conviction that prisoners should be treated with *humanity*. Prisoners, as humans still, expected more, and we rightly owed them that. At no time was a specification of humanity needed or even in dispute. In the resolution of the debate, *The Times* reported:

Michael Howard said that prisoners taken to hospital to give birth would not be chained or handcuffed after arriving. ... Mr. Howard said that the new arrangements would strike “a reasonable balance on behalf of the public” between security and treating prisoners with *humanity*.³⁴

Indeed, it does not take much to appeal to the understanding we *expect* others to have of what merely being human demands. It was sufficient to issue US Customs officers with a card saying, “Think Courtesy. The person you are searching is a human being and must be treated as such.”³⁵ There were no further directions about what courtesy

³¹Understanding the movie this way was inspired by Stephen Mulhall’s “Picturing the Human.”

³²Films can make things seem intelligible when they are not. In part this is because they are finite and definite in a way which our life with others may not be. So a recognition of someone as one with whom one could live, share the world, and so on may be defeated by how events subsequently unfold.

³³John F. Kennedy, ‘Inaugural Address’ (January 1961), (URL: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/j012061.htm>) – visited on 1 November 2003.

³⁴Richard Ford, ‘Howard backs down over handcuffing pregnant prisoners’, in *The Times* (19 January 1996), p. 2, my emphasis.

³⁵U. S. Customs Service, ‘US Customs Officer Reminder Card’ (1987).

demanded or a specification of how human beings *must* be treated. Of course we can disagree about this. That has been my point, to describe the objects of moral disagreement, discussion, debate in terms of our understanding of what relationships demand. My point in assembling these examples is to show how pervasive and important to the conduct of our lives these relations are. More, I have wanted to show how minimal they can be, how people can intrude into our lives, exerting a kind of force, for no other reason than that we recognize them as humans, as one of us. It is sometimes said that this is prompted by our recognizing others as fellows, as fellow sufferers, as beings trapped in the human condition. That may be right. However, it seems (explanation) enough to think that what we recognize are similar expectations and vulnerabilities. I know of no more comprehensive or succinct statement of this condition and those vulnerabilities than the following:

Yet what is perpetually present, what it is therefore permissible to love, is the very possibility of misfortune. The three facets of our being are always exposed to it. Our flesh is fragile; any piece of matter astir can pierce it, tear it, smash it, or distort forever one of our internal mechanisms. Our soul is vulnerable, subject to depressions without cause, pitifully dependent on all sorts of things and beings, themselves fragile and capricious. Our social self on which the feeling of our existence practically depends is constantly and entirely exposed to every possible risk. Even the center of our being is bound to these three things with fibers so tender that it feels all their wounds (however slight) to the point of bleeding itself. Above all what diminishes or destroys our social prestige, our right to consideration, seems to alter or abolish our very essence, so much so that we have for our very substance illusion.³⁶

8.9 Interim Summary

We have arrived at an intermediate point in my account of our understanding of relations, itself part-constitutive of our moral understanding. Let me summarize the account of the understanding of our relations at which we have arrived. Our lives are ordinarily shared with others in a web of inter-relations. Such relations range from the mere awareness of another human being to our relations as friends, lovers, and families. Our understanding of specific relations is well described by the scope and character of the critical authority

³⁶Simone Weil, 'L'amour de Dieu et le malheur', in: *Simone Weil: Oeuvres* (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 1999), p.705, my translation.

each relation sustains in its possibilities for criticism of our decisions. This is revealed in the ways we identify fidelity to *both* the conception of a relationship and a particular relationship. Criticism is usually a determination, roughly, of misidentification (or in the case of praise of exemplary fidelity in identification or extension). Critical authority is the authority to criticize—especially to note deviations—decision-making and decisions about what to do, think and be. These last can be thought of as the determining of one's actions, attitudes, and intentions.

Thus far I have explained why criticizing one's understanding of an inter-personal relation is different from joint determinations that depend solely on our independent authority. Speaking abstractly, the object of one's understanding is chiefly one's place in the world at some moment, where 'one's place' includes both that moment and the relations in our life. One's understanding and will—expressed in one's motivational bearing—constitute the major part of who one is. Criticisms of one's decisions, and so of one's understanding and will, are therefore criticisms of oneself individually.

I have called the criticism of one's relations, moral criticism. Moral criticism differs from other criticism by taking as its specific object someone's understanding of their relations to others. What justifies the name "moral criticism"? The demarcation is needed, for there are differences between moral disagreement and non-moral disagreement, and moral criticism and non-moral criticism. I shall argue in the next chapter that it is in the consequences for living together that these criticisms earn their moral appellation.

9 The Ground of Moral Criticism

If you didn't care what happened to me,
And I didn't care for you,
We would zig-zag our way ...
through the boredom and pain
Occasionally glancing up through the rain.
Wondering which of the buggers to blame
And watching for pigs on the wing.

Pigs on the Wing (Part One)

ROGER WATERS

9.1 Moral Understanding, Moral Reality and the Human

World

We speak to those to whom we stand in relation and do so within the bounds of that relation. Sometimes the bounds break down and then we jointly determine the content of those relations through discussion, argument and criticism. That was the upshot of the previous chapter.

The question that remained was why this picture, itself derived from a more basic picture of discussion and argument, had a claim to be called moral, or to demarcate the moral? An obvious answer would be to recall the commonplace that moral philosophy is about how to live. Insofar, as our lives are lived with others, and insofar as that life depends on the negotiation of relations, then any account of how our understanding organizes our lives with others might be called moral. Perhaps that is enough.

However, the answer I mooted focused on differences between moral and non-moral disagreement *and* the consequences of persistent disagreement. The broad answer I will offer in the latter part of this chapter is that when disagreements are insuperable, we cannot be together, not, in any case, as before the argument. In that sense, the consequences of a lack of convergence are the diminution of the human world, the world sustained by our lives together. Wronging someone is then comprehensible as *inter alia* denying someone's critical authority, and thereby denying his *relation* to oneself, denying him a place with us, in our life.

The consequences for disagreement are important because the stalking horse as interlocutor in the conversation that putatively ends in insuperable disagreement has been the Irresponsible. The Irresponsible was, in brief, someone who disclaims personal responsibility for the understanding from which his decisions spring. In response to him, I developed an explanation of how personal responsibility arises and our understanding of it. In chapters 5 and 6 I argued that we become responsible at a basic (or metaphysical) level by the action of our will and at a higher thinking level by employment of our authority. This internal account was circumscribed by facets of “hard” reality discussed in chapters 3 and 4 and “soft” constraints of conversation, sense and intelligibility described in chapter 7. These internal and external elements are bound together *in* what I have called moral reality and the human world. They are bound together *by* oneself and others through our inter-personal reactions, relations and criticism. The possibilities of order immanent in this external aspect combine with the possibilities of meaning (i.e. possibly motivational content) in this internal aspect to produce the possibility of moral understanding and its objects. Both are necessary for the possibility of experiences of a moral reality.

One’s moral understanding therefore is the understanding of moral reality as articulated by these elements. Chapter 7 described a principal mechanism—the “how”—of our moral understanding. Chapter 8 described the principal objects—the “what”—of our moral understanding. This chapter describes the “why.” I do this by characterizing our moral understanding and its objects not merely in terms of how we think or what we think about, but why it makes sense to think *that* way about those *things*. However, ‘making sense’ is not offered here as a reason, rationalization or justification. ‘Making sense’ of it is showing how it all fits together and in that sense it is more of an explanation than a theory.¹

Fitting together is an appropriate explanatory perspective because at the root of morality is “relationality.” That is, the bedrock of morality is the inter-personal relation in its multiple actual realizations. How we respond to others is to hold them critically answerable in virtue of their relation to us. Mere awareness of them already entails a relation to them, however slight. One’s awareness *qua Einstellung*—a bedrock component of moral understanding—reflects the human world by how it encompasses our expectation of the gamut of human responses. Moral understanding comprehends the moral world. It also

¹In chapter 10 I consider two theoretical objections to the view set out here.

part-constitutes it insofar as it is the operation of our moral understanding that gives rise to the norms onto which we fasten in making our criticisms of people's deviant decisions. It is circular in the same way a feedback loop is: the output becomes the input. By analogy, one's moral understanding is functionally realized by the living of ongoing relations with others. Without relations, and *a fortiori* other people, moral understanding and what it comprehends would dissolve.

It is almost a conceptual truth that moral understanding principally comprehends moral reality and its actual articulations. Moral reality is, on the view sketched above, composed by others through their inter-relations. Understanding the significance of those relations is part-consequent on the possibilities of regret, remorse, etc. Closing oneself to others—e.g. by being exclusively self-involved—is one way of closing oneself to moral reality, or at least to its articulations. This is a similarity with banality or superficiality. A question this chapter answers is how do we show our openness to reality, except by openness to others? I shall argue we do not. The truly alienated, *ipso facto* not one of us and already separated from reality, does not worry about this. But he is beyond our reach, as we saw when he was enrobed as the Irresponsible.

This overview has been necessarily abstract, as discussions of reality as such invariably are. Beginning from §9.7, I shall aim to make matters as concrete as the subject admits. First though, I will return to the difference between moral and non-moral disagreement, and argue for the scope I have attached to the moral. I will offer four considerations intended to illuminate the difference. In §9.2, I consider the differences in the force of criticisms. In §9.3, the difference in the status of facts is considered. In §§9.4–9.6, the possibility for repudiating morality and the allure of self-consideration are discussed, prior to an elaboration of 'wrong' in §§9.7 & 9.8.

9.2 Force of Moral and Non-Moral Criticism

I have called the criticism of our relations, especially one's response to the call to jointly-determine, *moral criticism*. I did not intend this as a stipulation, and I shall vindicate the designation below by contrasting it with non-moral criticism. There are differences between moral disagreement and criticism and their non-moral counterparts. Tensions between the moral and non-moral sometimes urge rejection or repudiation of the moral.

So a justifiable demarcation is more than a theoretical requirement. Plato, in Socrates' voice, asks:

What are the subjects of difference that cause hatred and anger? Let us look at it this way. If you and I were to differ about numbers as to which is the greater, would this difference make us enemies and angry with each other, or would we proceed to count and soon resolve our difference about this?²

What subject of difference would make us angry and hostile to each other if we were unable to come to a decision? ... [Examine] the just and unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad. Are these not the subjects of difference about which, when we are unable to come to a satisfactory decision, you and I and other men become hostile to each other whenever we do?³

If it is right that moral disagreement alone breeds hatred and anger, then moral criticism should focus on the root of disagreements with those consequences. But disagreements about the just or honorable are not necessarily moral disagreements. They could be legal disagreements yet have angry consequences. So morality alone does not breed hatred, apparently.

In spite of that, I claim that morality is logically prior to ethical or legal disputes, and therefore more fundamental. Consider a doctor who is approached by a patient seeking assistance with euthanasia. In the case where euthanasia is illegal, the doctor may yet think the code of medical ethics endorsed by his professional body—perhaps derived from Hippocratic principles—permits or compels him to help. In the case where euthanasia is illegal and unethical according to his professional society, he may yet feel morally compelled to help. However, the relation does not reverse. For moral inhibitions are personally decisive whether matters are illegal or not, as with a doctor who will not for moral reasons perform abortions when they are legal and ethically permissible (or even required). Roughly, the normative force of “the law is immoral” is cogent in a way that “your morality is illegal” is not. It is this that I mean by calling morality ‘logically prior’. This relation is different again with prudential matters as well, though the point of priority is parallel, since “your morality is imprudent” would be most inappropriate as counsel in responding to wrongdoing.

²Plato, ‘Euthyphro’, in: John M. Cooper, editor, *Plato: Complete Works*, trans. by G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1997), p. 7b6.

³*Ibid.*, p. 7c10.

I cannot pretend to have distinguished the moral, ethical, legal, prudential, and normative at this point. However, I think I have justified the following methodological assumption. Since morality is logically prior to the ethical and legal (and much else) it may function as a court of last appeal before the onset of hatred and anger resulting from disagreement. So while moral appeals may neutralize an ethical dispute, an intractable moral dispute can only end in the consequences of disagreement. Therefore, I shall proceed as if morality were at the root of ethics and other (practical) norms.⁴

We can then separate the moral from the non-moral by their consequences after all. Moral disagreements limit our ability to be together—pathologically, because of anger—or live together—because we are enemies. And intractable moral disagreement closes us to each other. Moral criticism, as I have described it, focuses on our understanding of our personal relations including when we might properly resent people’s responses to us, demand their attention, seek their forgiveness, or think their criticism unfair. Consequently, failures in this area invite resentment, anger, and all the other ways we mark the disrespect and disregard of others.⁵ I will detail further the consequences of moral disagreement in §9.8.

A central difference between the moral and non-moral is in the *force* of moral criticism. As discussed in chapter 2, non-moral criticism criticizes only the decision and the decision-making process, not the person. Deviant decisions reveal limited ability, insufficient care or indifference. There, when we say, “You should have done it differently,” the injunction may be ignored with little consequence for any assessment of one’s character. You may simply not want to do otherwise. Consider this contrast:

Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said, “Well, you play pretty badly” and suppose I answered “I know, I’m playing badly but I don’t want to play any better,” all the other man could say would be “Ah then that’s all right.” But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous

⁴In fact, I think there are important differences between the moral, the ethical, and the prudential. For instance, the experience of each presents itself under differing aspects: the necessary, the normative, and the desired. This is one reason why no philosophical account of the moral could comprehend the whole of the normative. Another reason is that moral understanding is not exhausted by reference to normative considerations; cp. the morally supererogatory or §4.11. Of course, these comments are only programmatic, considerable argument would be needed to substantiate them. Moreover, the “ordinary language” distinctions between ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ are muddy, so, as mentioned in chapter 1, any account of their difference is partially a stipulation. The distinction is discussed in Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the limits of philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985).

⁵I have focused on some hallmarks of morality in chapter 6 such as remorse, apology, and wrong. Resentment is another, though I have not discussed it. Cf. P. F. Strawson, ‘Freedom and resentment’, in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 68 (1962), pp. 1–25.

lie and he came up to me and said “You’re behaving like a beast” and then I were to say “I know I behave badly, but then I don’t want to behave any better,” could he then say “Ah, then that’s all right”? Certainly not; he would say “Well you ought to want to behave better.”⁶

Moral criticism not only criticizes the decision, but more directly criticizes the *person*. There, failure to respond to the injunction signaled by ‘ought’ carries with it a personal consequence, a greater consequence for one’s character. One way to put this difference is that non-moral criticism may *commend* an alternative decision, but moral criticism *demand*s an alternate one. In the moral case we are saying that the situation demands—requires—an alternate response. These distinctions, while broadly correct, are not sharp. Consideration of some examples reveals how the distinction is not exhaustive. In the following examples, consider—as in the tennis/lie example—whether the demanding force of an ‘ought’ is appropriate.

If someone mows an ordinary rectilinear lawn using concentric circles as opposed to shrinking perimeters, we might say he was dumb but not that he ought to do otherwise. If someone loads a dishwasher in a haphazard way that limits cleaning efficacy, we might say he was inefficient. If after closer consideration he still loads it ineffectively, we might say his efforts were useless. But the force of insisting that he ought to do it differently is not great. Mostly he wastes time and energy. In the tennis example, tennis may still be enjoyed when played badly. There, the ‘ought’ is completely idle.

Consider instead a C.E.O.’s business strategy. He must ensure it is defensible by reasonable business strategy standards of the sort taught in business schools. If the strategy fails, perhaps because of mischance, he will be responsible, but not necessarily in a way that impeaches his competence. The force of saying he ought to have done it differently is almost wistful. Of course, reasonable standards are not comprehensively determinate. They will not determine, e.g., the correct level of risk to take. The individual qualities the board may have looked for in hiring that C.E.O. may have been his attitude to risk. He will be *personally* responsible to the board for his strategy—risk-averse or not—but not in a way that could inflate to impugn his *character* nor one licensing a moral force to ‘ought’ (unless perhaps he had done something illegal). Their relation and this situation is not one that need license moral criticism, in part since the C.E.O. need not have misunderstood

⁶Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘A Lecture on Ethics’, in: James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, editors, *Philosophical Occasions: 1912–1951* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1993), pp. 38–39.

the demands of his relationship to the board in fashioning the failed business strategy.

Some things are clearly personal and moral. For someone who thinks that deceit is an assault, then the man who cheats on or beats his wife is plainly personally responsible in an obvious moral sense that invites an 'ought'.⁷ However, as suggested above (§8.6), multiple competing relations may make contrary demands. Consider a university lecturer who feels torn between the demands of his employer, the demands of his professional colleagues, and the demands of his students. Can his employer rightly expect him to teach *any* syllabus they provide? Must he accept the expectations of his peers with respect to how the profession defines itself? How is he to understand the differences in his relationship to his students when he addresses them *ex cathedra* as opposed to as an individual? The answers to these questions may be many (and they highlight the difficulties in distinguishing the moral and the ethical). The point is that only *some* are apt for criticism in ways which are personal or moral. So while distinguishing the moral and non-moral by their force and personal character is broadly right, its application by itself has limits.

The force of 'ought' is central to the account given of our response to the *demands* of others, the necessity of our response. So a further difference is that while physical necessities limit our options, they do not *literally* demand or ask anything of us, for they have no voice. In joint determinations with others or in our response to others, it *is* often the case that the situation is one where we are being asked. This can be true of any practical situation including the moral. However, it is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition on the moral that *someone*—not something—is demanding our attention or regard. So, acting on a moral 'ought' is always—albeit perhaps indirectly—acting *for* someone.⁸ The same is not true for facts, for instance in seeking a particular state of affairs.⁹

⁷Sissela Bok calls violence and deceit two forms of assault. Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (London: Quartet Books, 1980), p. 18.

⁸Although, I am not here committing myself to an account of our relation to non-persons, if I were to do so my view is broadly that our response to animals is derivative, because it is more or less anthropomorphized. Anti-hunt campaigners, for instance, often appeal to the experience of foxes in terms which are understood in the first instance by reference to oneself, even though foxes are plainly not capable of the full range of human experiences. See Cora Diamond, 'Eating Meat and Eating People', in: *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 319–334; Raimond Gaita, *The Philosopher's Dog* (Melbourne, Australia: Text Publishing, 2002)

⁹I discussed my objections to conceiving moral thinking as the administration of states of affairs on page 36.

9.3 Moral and Non-Moral Facts

A commonly made and appealed to distinction is between non-moral and moral facts. The distinction is however familiarly problematic. One difference between moral facts and non-moral facts, on my account, is that moral facts lack the *independence* of non-moral facts. We constitute the moral world—the world of moral facts—by our particular relations to others. Moral reality is *composed* of us and our relations. Moral facts, by contrast, *depend* on those relations.¹⁰

Many features of the moral (or human) world are consequences of the patterns or systems arising from the collectivity of relations. Familiar examples such as music bands or academic departments have already been noted (chapter 3). Here are further examples. Some systems are not intended by any one individual, but are parts of the moral world. During W.W. II, the British engaged in their National Struggle, even though the actual intentions of most Britons were not as such to struggle. Some tried to survive, others to do their duty, others again helped others when they could, and then not all the time. Similarly, despite the efforts of some historians to implicate each and every German in the Holocaust, we know that individual intentions and responses were various.¹¹ Yet, nonetheless, what arose from the collective actions of the German people was a terrible evil for which the nation, as a whole, remains ashamed. These examples show that systemic efforts and events form part of our world. The examples are temporally and spatially extended. The facts about them make some statements true. Many also vindicate our explanations. They have therefore the hallmarks of fact.

Moral facts, on my account, depend on our particular relations. Moral possibilities of a general kind—such as the possibility of friendship—also depend on the patterns or systems of engagement with which our relations generally accord. That is *not* the case for non-moral facts, even those that are unusually factual such as the facts of mathematics (whatever their status). There, the test of a fact is often paradigmatically its independence

¹⁰The discussion of moral facts in the philosophical literature has typically turned on the truth of moral statements, as if an answer to that question might be morally illuminating. Throughout, I have instead focused on the explanatory role of our moral understanding of, *inter alia*, facts. The distinction has not therefore been important. In any case, I am persuaded that a minimal truth predicate, in Wright's sense, could be defined on some moral discourses. The primary explanatory question left open then is the "width of cosmological role" of such a discourse, i.e. the explanatory role of the discourse. Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 191–199.

¹¹Nowhere is this better documented than in Christopher Browning, *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

from us, or indeed any judge or perceiver. Of course whether this is the crucial distinction between moral and non-moral facts is debatable. The distinction is frequently difficult.

As I have described it, moral criticism focuses on someone's understanding of the demands of a relationship with respect to decision-making. Moral criticism may focus specifically on the *considerations* used to make a decision in response to particular demands stemming from a particular relationship in a particular situation. So, in chapter 2, one example question to decide was, "Should I tell Mike that I know about his affair?" There, it was taken as salient that Mike had a chance to reveal the affair—when perhaps he should have—but did not. Accepting his hospitality was considered. Our friendship was considered. In such cases, we can call these considerations that are factual (i.e. admit of truth or falsity) the moral considerations or *moral facts*:

- Our friendship is a fact.
- That he deceived me is a fact.
- That he did not end the affair is a fact.

The dependence of relations on us may seem in tension with the case I made for the minimal, almost unavoidable, nature of certain relationships or the way mere awareness of an unsought relationship exerts a force (§8.6). It is true that these relationships are not as dependent as others. Friendships can be severed, marriages annulled, jobs left, and so on. It is right that some relationships are based on (brute) awareness and others on intention. However, even these minimal relationships above are dependent, I claim, because any relationship can be *repudiated*. If that is right, then moral facts, *unlike* other facts, may effectively be repudiated (as moral facts). Repudiation of a relationship is denying its claim *completely*, not merely its content, viz. its scope, situational demand or critical basis. The claim consequent on the relationship is thus repudiated.

One form of repudiation is the refusal to enter into discussion or joint determination upon being solicited, i.e. to disregard, ignore, close oneself to, or separate from another. The decision to repudiate the (moral) claim of another may invite criticism of its own but *not* all such criticism need properly be called moral. Instead, criticism might be of ignobility or pusillanimity or inconsistency, e.g. you rebuffed that crippled man while you avow that the strong ought to protect the weak. Each of these criticisms has uses that are meant critically and non-morally.

Repudiation is revealed in decision and action. Consider a woman who is having an affair with a married man who has a young daughter. We might urge her on *moral* grounds to abandon the affair. We may say that in abetting the husband's deception she wrongs his wife, she does him a disservice by nourishing his own deceiving character, and she imperils his daughter's childhood. These are moral considerations at least because they appeal to the woman's relationship to her lover, her lover's wife, and her lover's daughter.¹² Of course with the latter two relations, owing to the illicit nature of the affair any thinking here must appeal to a very general idea of the relationship since there has been no joint determination of the demands of her *particular* relationships. But, that the woman knows of them—as in this case she does—is sufficient for the wife and daughter rightly to resent her actions regardless of the consequences.

However, we might instead urge the adulteress to give up her lover because little can come of the relationship. Even if he were to leave his wife, he will have the burdens of a divorce, a settlement and an abandoned child—hardly fertile ground for a new relationship. Moreover, any relationship so begun must develop under the possible censure for the wrongdoing and deception consequent on its genesis. These latter considerations are, we may say, *prudential*, at least in part because the considerations are presented as bearing on an end. I assume in this case that her ends are, at least, a desirable issue from her love for her lover, and, more generally, a life fulfilled by this romantic pairing. The prudential considerations are presented as poor means to her (possibly impossible) end. In acting on them—viz. expressing her *disdain* of the moral considerations by, e.g., “Who or what is his wife to me?”—she repudiates the (unvoiced) moral claim on her of the wife, daughter and arguably her lover. Of course it need not be so neat—there is often a conflict between prudence and morality—but it could be.

9.4 Relations to Oneself

It is a common thought that the pursuit of the fulfillment of one's own life is also a moral consideration, “I only have one life, and this is my only chance for happiness.” If this were right, then morality would not have its bedrock in our inter-personal relations as I have

¹²I say ‘at least’ because I do not wish to debar general moral considerations about the kind of harm or wrong she does. In the first instance, a consideration of the people she wrongs directly is usually most effective.

argued. I shall argue that this consideration does *not* give rise to a moral response. That does not render it unacceptable as an explanation or justification though. We often pit the demands of morality against the force of our desires and our non-moral ends. Williams rightly says that “it is quite unreasonable for a man to give up, in the name of . . . [morality] . . . something which is a condition of his having any interest in being around in that world at all.”¹³ Why though is this not a moral response? I shall set out reasons against taking this consideration as moral, before refuting some common responses.

First, there is no sense in which acting *for* oneself is recognizing any sort of moral necessity and a limit to what one might will, for the only will in question is one’s own. It is certainly no response to another’s demands of me. Nothing *external* is limiting my will. In acting for myself there is little *beyond* me to which I might appeal in explaining why I acted—almost by definition. I do not mean that one may not debate whether to act for oneself, for instance by considering moral considerations against so doing. That must be the ordinary case. That is why acting for oneself is a repudiation of morality in, at least, *that* situation, because one could not offer explanations or justifications that genuinely bore these hallmarks of the moral. Of course these hallmarks may only be sufficient and not necessary. The extent to which they are necessary depends on the above characterization of our experience of the moral.

Second, there is no sense in which one *can* seek to uncover the character and demands of one’s relationship with oneself. One does not bear an inter-personal relation to oneself. I am one only and a relation takes two. One immediate difficulty is that we wrong *another* and I am solely myself. Naturally one can make discoveries about one’s body, intellectual powers, or dispositions. However, these are not discoveries about one’s *relation* to oneself.¹⁴ (I shall strengthen this point below.)

Third, an imperative to self-actualization is problematic because there is no one who could issue it or judge of compliance. *Prima facie*, I cannot issue imperatives to myself. Since I am the source of the imperative, in ignoring it, I would *de facto* be rescinding it or vitiating its force. To think otherwise is to imbue the *saying* of words to myself in

¹³Bernard Williams, ‘Persons, character and morality’, in: *Moral luck : philosophical papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 14.

¹⁴Wittgenstein noted the root asymmetry when he observed that ‘I’ is not properly referential or nominative, as it would be if I were to say, “NN is in pain”. My remarks in §3.4ff are also apposite to this contrast. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the ‘Philosophical Investigations’* (1960; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 66–69.

the imperative voice with more authority and substance than such a ceremony ordinarily could have. This is a complex topic, I shall defend this point further when considering Korsgaard in §10.6.

Fourth, while one may regret what one has not done, e.g. pursuing one's dream, it is not possible to feel remorse for it. One does not *wrong* oneself in failing to pursue a dream, thus precluding remorse. I may have *been* wrong in my decision, i.e. my decision may have been wrong, but I did no wrong even to myself.¹⁵ This is so, as we shall see in the elaboration of wrong in §9.7, because in acting *for myself* there is no one—including me—who can rightly expect *me* to do other than I do. At the time I decide, any of *my* expectations salient to the decision are made quiescent just by my making a decision.

My position, that considering oneself is not a moral consideration, may seem counter-intuitive. Certainly, people sometimes speak of wronging themselves. It is possible that if my claims are well-grounded, then my position will be somewhat revisionary. On the other hand, it is also a common thought that saints distinguish themselves precisely by their disinterest in themselves. Again though, people also speak of promising themselves. However, it is confusing if, as is ordinarily supposed, that two people are required for a promise, and I am only one.¹⁶ Of course, it is possible to consider one's future self as distinct from oneself.¹⁷ But this must surely be more revisionary than my proposal considering the multitude of paradoxical situations one can entertain on this view, e.g. resenting one's future self. In any case, my point is secure on this peculiar view since one would not be wronging or acting for oneself, but for another—who happens to be temporally related to oneself.

Perhaps the failure to defend oneself from exploitation is an example of wronging oneself. Consider someone who allows his manager to assign unreasonable amounts of work to them, or a migrant worker paid illegally low wages. Does he wrong himself? The

¹⁵Suicide might seem to contradict this claim. It is a complex topic, but I think the appearance is misleading. First, imagining any of my responses to my suicide is difficult since any imaginative setting must include, *contra* my suicide, my existence. Second, can one resent oneself? One could resent the circumstances and their author for making suicide the right or necessary response. Then though, one would reasonably think that one was wronged, not that one wronged oneself. Finally, as a matter of fact, a common obstacle to suicide is the thought of the consequences for those left behind. Often it takes the deadening effects of depression or melancholy to overcome this, in which case one may rightly doubt whether the suicide is the (moral) author of his death.

¹⁶Wittgenstein makes a similar point, asking why my left hand cannot loan my right hand money? Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edition (1953; reprint, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), §268.

¹⁷Nagel's famous argument for altruism was based on precisely this idea, Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

principal wrong here is that of the exploiter, so any self-wronging would be derivative. Moreover, the exploiter will do wrong by an act of commission, rather than the exploited person's act of omission. More importantly, there is no obvious requirement to attribute the wrong of this situation to the person wronged, for the obvious explanation is that the wrong originates in the exploiter. If failure to protect oneself from being wronged were sufficient to implicate oneself morally, then we should have to allow that Jesus wronged himself, albeit derivatively, by allowing his crucifixion instead of acting pre-emptively against Judas. And since it is frequently the case that some precaution might have protected one from the wrongdoing of another, self-wronging by omission must be rejected for making an absurdity of our notion of being wronged.

Kant's idea of duties to oneself is another source of resistance to the claim that one cannot wrong oneself. While I cannot here attempt the exegetical task that would be required to show Kant mistaken, I should like to indicate why the threat is not great. First, Kant argues that self-love can be no basis for the moral law.¹⁸ Second, for Kant failure to honor imperfect duties (to oneself or others) is not a source of blame only of merit, and hence not wrongdoing.¹⁹ Third, to avoid the difficulties I described above with self-imperatives (p. 277), perfect duties to oneself are recognized as duties not to one's phenomenal self, but to "the humanity in [one's] person."²⁰ Here again, we seem to be literally acting for another, viz. humanity, albeit a very abstract other. I shall discuss the difficulties with this sort of abstraction in §§10.5–10.6, but insofar as it is coherent it does not in this literal form seem to threaten my claim.

I have sought to defend the other-regarding nature of my account of moral understanding from the thought that acting for oneself is also a moral consideration by showing that one does not strictly have a relation to oneself. I argue below that self-regard, in contrast to other-regard, closes oneself to moral reality and cannot therefore be central to moral understanding. If that argument is persuasive, then I may not in any case be vulnerable to those who think one bears some kind of relation to oneself. All I need for my account is that we do not bear the kind of relationship to ourselves that admits of characteristically moral criticism, e.g. regarding what is jointly determined.

¹⁸Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*, edited by Mary Gregor, trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 4:422.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 4:430.

²⁰Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 6:418, §3.

9.5 Choosing Oneself

It is true that we find limits to what we can do, what we find possible, even while acknowledging the *claims* of others on us. Not all failure to act for others is repudiation. We might think that Yale asks Isaac (in chapter 8) to consider his limits when he says that he is no saint or only human. Yale is acknowledging Isaac's claim and Emily's claim, but he asks Isaac to withhold his criticism and expectations because he is weak and susceptible to temptation. His appeal is *within* morality because he is not repudiating another's claim on him. If Isaac suspends his criticism out of mercy or compassion perhaps, he need not be amending his understanding of the proper demands of friendship, or determining a new facet specific to his friendship with Yale. He too acts *within* morality because mercy specifically releases a proper claim, in this case a properly moral claim. It is no mercy to release an improper claim. It is rather a *correction*. A central facet of Yale's appeal to Isaac is for the compassionate acknowledgment of the limitations to which we are all (seemingly) prey. He is not rejecting the criticism, or supplying a non-moral ideal to which he means to be faithful.

The oppositional relationship of the archetypally moral—demand and necessity—with the archetypally non-moral—desire and personal goals—is expressed polemically here by the difficulty of translating one to the other:

Does that mean that there is no morally respectable form of self-concern? After all, we come across, and take morally seriously, someone saying, "I couldn't live with myself if I did (not) do this." Yet, try translating this into "I don't want to do this so as not to compromise my excellence, integrity, life plan as an admirable moral agent." Take this further. I ask you, "Why can't you do it?" You say, "It would be cruel, unjust, a betrayal." Again, try giving this a positive rendering: "Because I want to be kind, just, loyal." Someone is going badly, morally badly, wrong here. The translation contained two elements: the rendition of the negative terms (cruel, unjust) into positive (kind, just) and the change of modality from necessity to want. So it seems that while acting or refraining under some description of evil, vice, the bad, is both common and morally authoritative, it can't be rendered into the pursuit of the corresponding good without change of ethical meaning. It suggests secondly, that the serious moral recognitions and responses take the modality of necessity: I must (not), I can't, rather than I (don't) want. When speaking of the good we're tempted to portray it as what is wanted and pursued. In relation to evil,[. . .]

the natural response is 'I mustn't, I can't'.²¹

Bernard Williams has argued that the language of necessity—'ought' and 'must'—can apply to some non-moral contexts.²² Surely this is right, just as the morally supererogatory can lack the force of necessity. An essential difference remains though, since in the non-moral context it is (almost) always possible to question the necessity by suggesting the subject consider altering his desires or "projects." In a serious moral context though, the suggestion that one *just* alter one's morals is always impertinent. (Asking it seriously—as opposed to 'just' asking—is the stuff of moral discussion in any case. Cp. chapter 7.) Williams concedes much of the force of this point when he says:

The recognition of practical necessity must involve an understanding at once of one's own powers and incapacities, and of what the world permits, and the recognition of a limit which is neither simply external to the self, nor yet a product of the will, is what can lend a special authority or dignity to such decisions ...²³

A criticism is rejected if it is asserted that it is based on a misunderstanding of the possibilities of the situation. Such possibilities may not be only local but might comprehend someone's whole life.²⁴ Perhaps this is what Yale means when he says, "You just can't live the way you do. You know, it's all so perfect." This too is within morality insofar as there are the claims of others to answer here, but Isaac has misunderstood them. That is a rejection of criticism, not a repudiation of morality or moral claims.

This is distinct from acknowledging limits to what can be done without acknowledging others' claims. Charlie Parker—arguably the greatest jazz saxophonist and one of the few musicians to change jazz permanently—asked his wife to consent to a divorce because he thought meeting his marital obligations would limit the possibilities for what he might achieve musically. He did not ask her because, for instance, she had compromised their marriage or that his conception of marriage had shifted. Rather, he wanted to repudiate his marriage vow to meet his (hoped for) musical destiny. That he asked limits the extent to which this is a moral repudiation, though the request is so invidious as to invite the obviously moral criticism of being cruel or self-serving. Of course, he might reject these

²¹Marina Barabas, 'Moral Discourse and The Reality of Value' (2000), minor corrections to punctuation mine.

²²Bernard Williams, 'Practical Necessity', in: *Moral luck : philosophical papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 124–131.

²³Ibid., pp. 130–131.

²⁴This was one upshot of chapter 3.

criticisms, thinking he had done nothing wrong, *because* responding to the demands of music is, e.g. noble or God's work.

Williams, principally for other purposes, suggests a similar point for someone he calls "Gauguin" (who could have been the real Gauguin).²⁵ Living as he did, allegedly abandoning his family, it could be right to say that "Gauguin" chose Art in favor of morality. If it were right to put it that way, then it would be right to say he repudiated the moral claims of his wife and children. Had he thought of it this way, an expression of his sincere break with morality might be evinced by his denial that he had done something squalid, but merely sought beauty.

A disgraced C.E.O. may kill himself rather than live with his shame, thinking that honor demands it. The pointed question is how can honor demand it, or indeed anything else? To say that honor has a moral voice is at best metaphorical. (It is of course possible that in some cultures his family would expect his suicide for reasons of honor.) His family's voice is anything but metaphorical. He may put honor before his family, but any expression of that is revealed by how *his* understanding of honor shapes his decisions. Placing honor first can be a moral repudiation of his family (it might not, if honor had a moral ground). This is evident in the tones of necessity with which he may speak, "I want to be with my family but honor *demand*s I atone for my disgrace." He understands his family's claim as operating in the mode of attraction or appeal, not of necessity. Instead, he may admit he should stay with them, but that he will not live with his shame. This is a conflict between the moral and the non-moral. Similarly, a new mother be torn between her satisfaction from returning to full-time work and her understanding that her child needs her full-time. Neither is like Vere's challenge. That was within morality, between Vere's relation to the Navy—and through it, to Billy as a seaman in his command—and to Billy as an innocent before God.

The scope for resolving conflicts between the moral and the non-moral is plainly unclear and indubitably tortuous. Moreover, acting in favor of one or the other need not of itself be a repudiation of morality. Criticisms in both idioms may apply to the same decision. So while comprehensive moral repudiation may be rare, it is possible—even though more particular repudiations may be more common.

²⁵Bernard Williams, 'Moral Luck', in: *Moral Luck: philosophical papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 20–39.

9.6 Alternative and Personal Ideals

Moral repudiation is different from moral scepticism as discussed briefly in chapter 1. There, an imagined dialog revealed how peculiar the sceptic's question is, how it is unmotivated:

Why be moral?—What kind of answer do you expect, what would satisfy you?—*I am not sure.*—Then why do you ask?

Thrasymachus, in Plato's *Republic*, presses this kind of question, unsure what form of answer will satisfy him.

However, someone who repudiates morality may have an answer to these questions. In the *Gorgias*, Calicles, with his grand vision of Athenian political life, has an answer that satisfies. An answer originates in an *alternative ideal* that is *not* a moral ideal, for example a certain asceticism, code of honor or conception of a grand life. An alternative ideal is a species of decision-making ideal.

A decision-making ideal as discussed in chapter 2 was a basis for criticizing decisions. We can now describe the content of an ideal, as I have used the term.

(Decision-making) Ideal encompasses a collection of conceptions of inter-personal or mind-world relationships along with the standards of correctness for those relationships.

Of this genus, I propose three species:²⁶

Alternative Ideal encompasses a mixture of conceptions of inter-personal and mind-world relationships. Prudence is an example.

Moral Ideal encompasses solely inter-personal relations, but is open.

Personal Ideal encompasses solely inter-personal relations, but is closed. Asceticism and the Bushido samurai code are examples.

Criticism of decisions springing from an ideal encompassing inter-personal relations reflect personal character because they are criticisms of that person's inter-personal bearing or standing, expressed in the decisions that spring from their understanding of inter-personal relations. In this sense, it is also a criticism of their grasp of the world composed

²⁶I envision at least one more, an Epistemic Ideal which encompasses only mind-world relationships.

by others. Whether that composition is open or closed, in terms of who does the composing, is a distinction I will make below.

An alternative ideal is non-moral insofar as it contains a conception of reality in terms *not* exclusively collected in inter-personal relationships. Alternative ideals provide a basis for criticizing decisions as, e.g., ugly or base, dishonorable or ignoble, common or inconsequential. The model of decision-making in chapter 2 was precisely neutral about the ideal on which criticism is based. In this regard non-moral ideals provide the justifications and correctives suitable for organizing a life. Indeed, different ideals can be employed at different times. Each provides a basis for different kinds of criticism. The key thought in which this figures is that a conflict between moral and non-moral ideals is sometimes intelligible and not a product of misunderstanding. Cavell explicates this thought as follows:

There are conflicts which can throw morality as a whole into question . . . [when there] is a position whose excellence we cannot deny, taken by persons we are not willing or able to dismiss, but which, *morally*, would have to be called wrong.²⁷

The 'position' Cavell describes is what I have called a decision-making ideal. Characteristic of alternative and personal ideals is an orientation limited in its bearing toward the claims of (some) others. While there may be elaborations of alternative or personal ideals which are responsive to the claims of all others, historically most have not been. The orientation may be toward oneself to the exclusion of all others, e.g., an ideal of personal perfection. Or the orientation may be exclusive, oriented *solely* toward, e.g., one's fellow knights, one's liege, fellow travelers, or a supernatural pantheon.²⁸ Both are not open to all.

Much turns on what 'open' comes to, since there is a plain sense in which other people are considered in the decisions following alternative and personal ideals. The 'open' signals a difference between whether a possible demand is independent or dependent.²⁹ Specifically, when a possible claim is independent of an ideal, then one's bearing is open, i.e. one is open to the possibility of a claim from any quarter. A moral ideal is open-ended

²⁷Stanley Cavell, *The claim of reason : Wittgenstein, skepticism, morality and tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 268–9. I think a sympathetic reading of Callicles' outlook in the *Gorgias* provides a good example of a kind of excellence, the denial of which is, as in the dialog, profoundly difficult and unsatisfying. Other examples are considered in Marcia Baron, 'On Admirable Immorality', in *Ethics* (April 1986), pp. 557–566.

²⁸Religion could be an alternative or personal ideal. This is one reason to think that morality and religions can come apart. A Martin Buber-like way to express how comes from asking about the scope of second personal relations captured by the schematic phrase 'I and Thou'. Is one 'I to a supreme Thou' or 'I to every Thou'?

²⁹It also recalls the conditions on genuine conversation in §7.7.

in this way.³⁰

When closed, the possibility of a demand depends first on being recognized as a possible source of demand within the ideal of the person to whom the demand is made. So, an Arthurian knight is open to demands from fellow knights, but is closed to some extent to a peasant or Moor. The disgraced C.E.O. above was closed to his family's demand (in one scenario), but open to honor. Why would not a *mafioso* and his code of *omerta* qualify as moral? First, the mafia's own name for itself, *la cosa nostra*, reveals that one is only answerable to those in "our thing." Moreover, even within the criminal enterprise, a *mafioso* answers only to another "made man" as opposed to a mere henchman.

Following an ideal has the consequence of separating the world into those within and without the ambit of the ideal. Following a closed ideal overrides, as it were, whatever brute effect other humans have on us. One way people fall away from an ideal is when the tension between their *Einstellung* and their ideal becomes unsustainable. For instance, a racist may have his first doubts about his racism when he cannot suppress his awareness of an instance of decency in a Jewish man.

The distinction is subtle. Yale grants Isaac authority, making their relationship.³¹ The difference is whether Yale is also closed to the possibility of authority in others, as they loom in his awareness, their authority ungranted but acknowledged. Moreover, the distinctions may not be sharp. Perhaps one could conceive a modern ideal of knightly honor that reflected the particular relationship one had to one's fellow knights while remaining open to others. But, for it to be determinate *in advance* that knightliness trumps all other claims, just is closing oneself (to a degree) to others.

Closing oneself limits the possible meanings of another's behavior transforming it toward the status of an obstacle: things to whom our relation in decision-making is distinct from the moral because we lack a reciprocal potentially critical relationship. At the limit, it is not too different from how we regard physical obstructions or the limited possibilities for significant expression in the lives of animals. History abounds with the horrors possible when people have been conditioned to dehumanize human beings. This may be revealed by the way persons so regarded are diminished in our awareness. There are things a slave-owner might do in front of slaves which he would be embarrassed to do in

³⁰Professional ethics can, on this view, seem an alternative or personal ideal.

³¹See §8.4.

front of those he regards as his fellows.

The name, ‘personal ideal’, reflects an orientation toward oneself. Aspects of the distinction drawn in chapter 3 between a person and his life are also reflected. A personal ideal could be lived in principle without others, or without those outside one’s circle. An artist can sequester himself while continuing in service to “Art” or his talent, e.g. J. D. Salinger or Count Balthus. In saying that these are personal ideals, I do not mean that one may not consider others in decision-making. The difference is that a personal ideal is concerned with oneself in relation to the ideal and only indirectly to others, whereas moral ideals are concerned with others directly.³² Another way to put it is that personal ideals relate oneself to others with respect to oneself, while morality relates one to others with respect to them.

This suggests I think that the openness of moral ideals is cognitively more basic insofar as the domain of the real is not “pre-constrained” by the indirection imposed in following a personal ideal. Following a moral ideal is a condition of being open to the corrective impact of error and reality, as described in §6.7. Therefore, in that sense, following a personal ideal can rightly be described as a kind of distemper or madness.

Relative to the distinction drawn above in the Euthyphro (§9.2), it is distinctive of morality then, I claim, that one is open to anyone’s hostility as significant rather than merely an obstacle. Hostility limits the ways we may live together or share a life, as opposed to the ways we get around or overcome each other. Attending, ameliorating or avoiding another’s hatred requires relating oneself to another intentionally, taking responsibility for your position relative to theirs; where ‘taking responsibility’ must include being open to criticism. In short, attending to someone morally means regarding them in the light of the possibility of his claim on you. That is what it is to *intend* to live together, as opposed to happening to live side by side like insects. A personal ideal, because of its exclusivity, reduces some to the status of insects.

Cavell expands the idea of a position in relation to another:

... [T]he point [of moral discussion] is to determine *what* position you are taking, that is to say, *what position you are taking responsibility for*—and whether it is one I can respect. What is at stake in such discussions is not, or not exactly, whether you know our world, but whether, or to what extent, we are to live

³²It is notable that the idea that internal harmony *necessarily* extends of itself to external harmony was an insuperable difficulty in the Platonic picture elaborated in chapter 4.

in the same moral universe. What is at stake in such examples ... is not the validity of morality as a whole, but the nature or quality of our relationship to one another.³³

Cavell's point is that our moral life together—our moral world—is a function of the variety and character of our relations to each other. Alternative and personal ideals not only demarcate people into those that count and those that do not, but also determine the scope of what the world can ask of you. A solipsist only asks of himself. By definition there is no community that could ask anything of him. Ideals create communities and, in a sense, the world in which that community exists.

It is logically possible then that there should be two divergent moral ideals, neither of which was recognizably in error by those within it, neither of which had the seeds for convergence with the other within it. This could reflect differences in brute sympathies perhaps. In any case, in that circumstance, two communities might forever remain to a degree alien to each other such that neither felt able to criticize the other. This could happen, perhaps, at the individual level, leading to the reluctance to criticize discussed in chapter 5. I shall say more about this below.

9.7 Being Wrong and Doing Wrong

There is a further basis for the adumbration of morality I have proposed: it provides further elaboration of what it means to wrong someone. Personal ideals—alternatives to morality—provide a basis for criticizing decisions as wrong or right, for someone being wrong or right. They lack what is unique to morality: a basis for doing wrong that extends with the same sense (i.e. univocally) to those outside their circle. Only morality identifies *being* wrong with *doing* wrong, and so avoids creating a gap.

Internal to the idea of doing wrong is the idea of doing wrong to another or wronging another. One can *be* wrong *alone*. To *do* wrong is always to wrong *another*. But with a personal ideal, there is a division in place. Therefore a distinction is required between wrong and “wrong” or another word whose connotation is distinct from ‘wrong’ as applied to oneself or one’s circle. For instance, in the past, a gentleman who raped a common woman did a wrong far different than if he were to rape a lady. He may have been wrong to rape

³³Cavell, *The claim of reason*, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

the commoner, but he did not wrong her as he did the lady. So, being wrong and doing wrong could come apart under that ideal. The open character of moral ideas, as I have characterized them, does not permit the identity between being and doing wrong to come apart. Indeed, it suggests a litmus test for a moral versus non-moral ideal.

This thought allows an elaboration that reveals more about the hallmarks of the moral, beyond the contrast between being and doing wrong. There is a rough distinction between doing-wrong-to-another and wronging-another, though often they are synonymous. I may do wrong to another and realize it when I realize the kind of regard in which I have held someone. An example in §6.4 considered the realization that I had been condescending in my interactions with my colleague. I realized I had done her wrong. We may suppose that I had never acted on my latent condescension, and had never harmed her, never directly *acted* in a way toward her that was wrong. Iris Murdoch's famous example of this involves a mother-in-law's dutiful but unloving regard for her daughter-in-law.³⁴ Even so, I can realize that I did wrong in how I regarded her. It is a wrong for which one might apologize or atone, even if one would not ordinarily express remorse. I did not wrong her, I did wrong *to* her and only the former may permit remorse.³⁵ So, while the possibility of remorse is a *sufficient* condition or hallmark of morality it is not a necessary one. This distinction—broadly between doing wrong in how one regards another and wronging another, typically in one's actions toward them—plainly clarifies little.

A philosophical utilitarian might object that there can be no wrong without harm, so the distinctions above are irrelevant. It is false however that someone must be harmed in order to be wronged. I may wrong someone by opening his mail even if I discover nothing at all in so doing and he remains unaware that I have done it. While I could then say, "No harm done," doing so would not also permit me to consider it right or not-wrong. Moreover, opening his mail may be sufficient for remorse when I realize how I betrayed our friendship's trust. It may not, but my feeling remorse would satisfy the condition for moral wrong. A utilitarian makes harm and benefit the two ends of a see-saw with our moral understanding as the fulcrum. But if it is right that we can recognize wrong without harm, then this tripartite relation cannot be fundamental.

³⁴Iris Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection', in: *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 17–23.

³⁵One may not have remorse toward oneself, though perhaps this is akin to thinking that one is a stain on the world. Cp. page 151.

Sometimes it is thought that wrong done is a kind of harm though not—as most utilitarians have it—one reducible to natural or psychological harm such as pain and suffering. However, making wrong done a species of harm is problematic and should, I think, be resisted. First, harm, unlike wrong, can be more or less mitigated by restitution or compensation. (So too, the consequences of being wrong.) Wrong is not compensated. We atone or apologize for the wrongs we do. Wrong, unlike harm, cannot be completely mitigated, it remains an indelible part of one's life in a way vital to the isolation characteristic of remorse (cp. §6.5). Second, one can resent wrong without harm, but not harm without wrong. If resentment is a moral hallmark, then wrong is morally prior to and divisible from harm.

Third, wrong is personal in a way that harm is not, since it is possible to compensate harm with no knowledge of the person harmed. Genuine apology for wrong requires an understanding of the meaning of the wrong done to that individual. So, Union Carbide may disburse payments in compensation for its malfeasance in Bhopal, India with no knowledge of the individuals harmed other than that they were, e.g. blinded. Yet, genuine apology requires more. It requires atonement or understanding of the individuals affected by Union Carbide's actions. This is one reason that blanket corporate apologies seem hollow, or *pro forma*.

After this catalog of difficulties, one may ask in exasperation, "What then is wrong with wrong?" "Where is the harm in wrong?" "What is bad about wrong?" A direct answer will come in the section immediately below. Indirectly, perhaps what is needed is a category of moral harm that is distinct from non-moral harm. I am not sure what this would be other than wrong, which, it seems to me, is one reason why the identification of being wrong and doing wrong seems central to morality.

It is certainly true that in doing wrong and in wronging there is someone whose expectations I am responding to or not. The expectations may be of a certain regard, attention, or limits to what we do to them. It is a *necessary* condition that one's moral thoughts be other-directed. However it is *not* sufficient insofar as one may attend to others without thinking of them as making a demand or claim for the regard that limits us reciprocally. It was allowed that a personal ideal may involve other-directed thoughts.

The hallmark of morality—the necessary and sufficient condition—is that one's attention is directed and open toward others in their capacity to exercise a claim through a re-

relationship, however minimal, that makes them a part of the human world. Being directed toward others in our decisions is essential to morality because it is internal to the character of moral responses such as remorse, and moral gestures such as apology, forgiveness, and atonement. Calling criticism of our understanding of relations ‘moral criticism’ is conditional on an orientation essentially directed toward any other person—in contrast to the excluding orientation internal to personal ideals. Other than in linguistic form though, how is doing wrong fundamentally other-directed?

9.8 Expectation and Community

Consider this way of understanding what stays our hand from the bestial:

What is it, exactly, that restrains me from gouging out the eyes of that man, if I have license to do it and it amuses me?

...

What would restrain my hand is the knowledge that if his eyes were gouged out by someone, he would have his soul rent by the thought that one is doing him evil.

There is from earliest infancy until the tomb, at the base of the heart of every human being, something which, against all experience of crimes committed, endured and observed, *expects* invincibly that one does him good and not evil. It is this before everything that is sacred in every human being.³⁶

The idea of doing wrong I am pressing is consonant with Weil’s curious emphasis of the (seemingly contrary) individual and universal elements in this passage. On the one hand it is “that man” and “his soul” that would be “rent.” So I understand what I would be doing to the man *before me*, whose rent soul would loom in my awareness. On the other hand, part of my awareness of that rending is conditional on—made possible by—the certainty of his expectation—of anyone’s expectation—that harm will not be done to him. (Whatever that expectation is, it will be different for those within and without the circle of a personal ideal.)

This emphasis on expectation as it features in our understanding is necessarily, I shall argue, dependent on the way in which we live together and how our life together constitutes—intentionally and unintentionally—an order among us. A basic expectation

³⁶Simone Weil, ‘La Personne et La Sacré’, in: *Ecrits de Londres, et Dernières Lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), pp.12–13, my emphasis, my translation.

that one should feature in a limiting way in the awareness of another is the root from which the forms of consideration distinctive of our more complex relations grow. The core thought is that when we wrong someone we violate their expectations of our consideration. In its more developed communal form, we understand their expectation and the specific nature of what we have done in violating it by reference to our community (broadly conceived) with others. In wronging another, one *separates* oneself from community with them and by extension the others with whom they live. It is not because one wrongs them that one separates. Wronging is separating. By 'separating', I mean disintegrating. Communally, separation is dissolving community, thinning reality.

What community? A community of *expectation*—expectations whose *form* is the product of our inter-personal relations. We cannot plead ignorance of this community—of someone's expectation—and remain intelligible. One aspect of this is revealed in the concept of being forsaken. The uniformly plaintive ring of the lament, "Father why have you forsaken me?" stems in part from the thought that there is nothing one could do to obliterate one's consideration in a parent's love, or, more perfectly, God's love.

In parallel, is it conceivable that one could completely close oneself to another without being in the grip of raging emotion or the dehumanizing racism it is a commonplace to accept as wrong? Someone, for entirely understandable reasons, resolves to close himself utterly to a savage mass murderer. Yet, while understandable in the abstract, is it similarly understandable (or intelligible) that he (should) carry through this resolution? When the man writhes in pain from appendicitis on the floor of his cell or cries with fear as he is led to the gas chamber? Yes, he may have lost the position from which to *ask* for pity, but his *claim* on our pity? When could that be improper? Resolution like that is to be feared.³⁷

Perhaps we may be unaware of the character of their expectations and how what we do violates them. "What have I done?" "How could I not have understood what I was doing."³⁸ This does not bear on the certainty that there is some (basic) expectation from an intelligible other.

What basic expectation? At a minimal level, the expectation one has of anyone is that I am not invisible to you. One aspect of that is that my pain is not invisible to you. That means that the actuality or possibility of my pain should always figure in the considera-

³⁷Recall Kurtz's aim to create a force of men who, "... kill without feeling, without passion, without judgment ..." on page 262.

³⁸Recall Arendt's description of Eichmann's "thoughtlessness" on page 30.

tions of what to do or think. I said our *Einstellung* is how we understand the gamut of possibilities for human expression. Since pain is a universal human response, this minimal expectation must be part of any *Einstellung*. I realize the wrong I do when I am aware of their suffering *and* that I am the cause. Such a realization depends of course on their expectation to the contrary. When I reset someone's dislocated shoulder, it causes pain. However, there is no expectation to the contrary and therefore no possibility for realizing it as wrong. Of course, that one is licensed to cause pain, does not license one to cause any pain. A particularly rough-handed doctor is accused of insensitivity, even cruelty, rightly, even though he has permission to complete a painful procedure.³⁹

There is however suffering whose causes are not physical, that is not mere pain. There are the sufferings of the soul, of a personal kind.⁴⁰ I can cause this suffering too. However, a relationship between us is a condition on being the cause of this suffering. One cannot grieve for no one, nor suffer unrequited love for no one. More relevantly for suffering caused by the decisions of others, I can only be snubbed by someone appropriately placed to do so. I can only be betrayed by one who has my trust. So where the suffering is caused by someone, they can only do so because they are appropriately placed to do so. By 'appropriately placed' I mean having a relation in which the expectations the sufferer has will, when violated, give rise to that kind of suffering, viz. grief *et al.*

So the possibility of realizing what I have done is dependent on my understanding of the relationship between us, of how such relationships generally go, the expectations of which they are definitive. Realizing the meaning of what I have done depends on recognizing my deformation of our relation in both the particular and general senses described in chapter 8.

9.9 Moral Reality

As I wrote (§8.6) complex expectations may weigh on one through the simplest awareness of another's, e.g., trust, crush, adulation. That is just a symptom though. It should be clear

³⁹On this view, one may not consent to be wronged. Why not?—Because there is nothing recognizable as a relationship which does not bring with it expectations of being treated a particular way. Yet, there is no such expectation in a relationship which is precisely founded on the expectation of having one's expectations violated. Consenting to exploitation may instead be the expression of alienation from oneself.

⁴⁰Weil has elucidated this sort of suffering, whose connotation is not easily recreated in translating the French '*malheur*'.

now that our moral understanding depends only on the reality of our attachments to each other, on our living together, on the way patterns of life emerge from our attachments and intentions. To be clear, while we do not begin *ab nihilo*, we have moved from the simple society characteristic of apes to the life of culture. This occurs at various levels from the brute to the emergent (or supervenient) where such patterns are manifest, as I described in §§3.8 & 9.3. It is only such things—brute and intentional—that create the objects of our moral understanding, whose comprehension and miscomprehension are the targets of our critical vocabulary, praise and blame.

It is our life together that not only gives reality its texture but its substance. Weil says gnomically:

Good and evil. Reality. It is good which gives more of reality to beings and things, evil which removes it.

The Romans did evil [*fait le mal*] in denuding the Greek cities of their statues, because the cities, the temples, the Greek life had less reality without the statues, and because the statues could not have any more reality in Rome than in Greece.⁴¹

Why would those statues in Rome have less reality than in Athens? One reason at least is that they would not mean to them what they would mean to the Greeks. The common regard—the shared meaning, the secondary sense—they had for Greeks in their *system* of religious or political life is not something that was part of Roman life (at least initially). A clear understanding of the statue's place for Greeks, and of the role of statues generally in civil life, could have moved the Romans to relinquish their trophy if they had understood this and responded to it. In a sense, failure to understand reality as the Greeks understood it is shown in the distance between Greek and Roman life, itself the explanation of the diminished reality of those statues in Rome. Roman wrongdoing, originating in and exacerbating the separation from the Greeks, dissolved the reality to which both could advert in (moral) discussion. Shared reality was thinned. A similar lesson might be argued by reference to the character of the rootless reality Judaism has had since the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70 and the ensuing diaspora.

When someone denies the realities dependent on compositional, collective existence, such as the texture art brings to life, we call them shallow. By it we mean that they have not located the fibrous complex substance of reality, the web of distinctions on which the

⁴¹Simone Weil, *Cahiers*, volume I (Librairie Plon, 1951), p. 20, my translation.

meaning of art depends. From their point of view (in the loaded sense of chapter 7), they cannot see it; similarly, for the banal who erodes fine-grained detail, taking the surface or hollow for the whole. The character, David, featured in the extract from Bergman's film in §1.3, exemplifies this kind of self-serious banality, when he seizes the surface of the significance of personal responsibility, to ground his self-assurance:

The main thing is to believe in one's own good intentions. Then everything solves itself, as if by magic. Provided you go through the correct motions. Activity stimulates self-confidence and hinders reflection.⁴²

Similarly, we say to the person in the grip of puppy love, that's not real love. Most of us know when someone loves us. Shallowness and banality are not the norm, they are a fault. We know genuine love not just because of what someone says when, but by what someone chooses not to say. We know someone's love in the way someone says what they do. A loving regard feels our pain *before* seeing how our limitations produced it. That is what makes love real. Or at least that is what gives reality the texture of love. Exceptionally, there are some whose understanding of the love of others exceeds the norm, such as the love in saints. Their acuity and comprehension are expressed by critical praise.

It may seem like so many words, but the consequences go deeper. Only what can share our world can share our meanings. No amount of *reasoned* argument will overcome someone who is shallow or drawn to the banal. This cannot be explained as a failure to understand the terms of the argument. The difficulty is a cognitive one insofar as his thoughts fail to make contact with the reality introduced into the argument as its focus, hobbling the effort at the outset. After reason, our efforts aim to elicit a response with a different origin, perhaps in common sympathies. There may be limits to what can be elicited, to the distances between people that can be closed.⁴³

Any person, manifestly, can share some of our world. Being completely open to humanity is, partially at least, thinking that we can share the world with anyone.⁴⁴ But where that fails, by cognitive defect, by failure of understanding, by wrongdoing, the consequence is not so much distance between us but void. In a personal ideal, the breach between humans may be insuperable. Under apartheid, a colored could never become a white.

⁴²Ingmar Bergman, *A Film Trilogy*, trans. by Paul Britten Austin (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), p. 47.

⁴³These limits are discussed in §§4.11 & 10.9.

⁴⁴It is in this sense that one might profitably speak of regulative ideals whose precise content is not grasped, just as a hope for a good life is regulative.

As a picture of the ground for moral reality, there is something terribly contingent—even unsatisfying—about this. What kind of bedrock or foundation is this? We might lose our proclivity and capacity for being bound to others as friends, lovers, husbands, wives, and families. We might forget our intentions to be together in the ways distinctive of life as we now understand it: in teams, bands, dances, jobs, communities, religions, nations, and so on.⁴⁵ No doubt some such things will change, others will emerge, some will fade away. There is no security here beyond what we find inconceivable, and what we imagine we can do by our own efforts and our collective efforts. Much depends on the limits to how we can live with another's decisions, expectations, and explanations. Adapting Cockburn's remarks from chapter 7 (page 204), I should like to say that taking another seriously brings expectations for how my life with another person may go. If too many such expectations are disappointed I may begin to take them lightly and at the limit, when I find them scarcely intelligible, my relation to them will be different from that which is normal. Those are the seeds of tribalism.

Does this give any substance to the idea of moral necessity? Do brute contingencies and mere human intentions void the necessity of our responses to others? When I agree with you that something is necessary it does not become so because we say so. I may simply acknowledge what we both know. But such acknowledgment can as well be a determination. And determinations may rightly be taken as necessary when they are in a context in which recognition or realization engages the will—when it came to it I realized I had no choice and did it. Tragedy emerges in part from the collision of necessities, from two people going where their ways must go, ways that collide. Of course, what that comes to is that sustaining our relationship depends on my acting as I did. It is that thought that I think is more prosaically at root when Cavell says that what is at stake is whether “we are to live in the same moral universe.” That is to say not much more than that the “nature or quality of our relationship to one another” is dependent on what we do, on how we take others into considerations in our determinations and decisions.

This is a pervasive idea of morality because in it all relations between people have a moral content—ones understood through our moral understanding—that afford criticism. The expectations stemming from relations—relations not always of our choosing, but from

⁴⁵Williams argues a similar point, saying that people's dispositions are the ultimate supports of value, and that, “The preservation of ethical value lies in the reproduction of ethical dispositions.” Williams, *Ethics and Limits*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

the course of our life—with others creates the possibility for wrong—the texture or order of reality against which some decisions are deformations, ruptures, wrongs.⁴⁶ If that is right then the consequence of a corrupt moral understanding is an inability, or at least a limit, to the life one can share with others. When one is an intransigent wrongdoer no one, no human being, as Arendt said of Eichmann, “can be expected to want to share the earth with you.”⁴⁷

Perhaps this will seem insufficient or unsatisfying. Surely doing wrong is also being irrational. It may be, but on this view not only might it not be the best description, it may not even be a faithful one. Consider this thumbnail alternative sketch. We make the world together by the joint determinations we make, the responses we have and, often, by the words we use to express those. We become closer to—are in community with—others when we respond to reality the same way, when we are moved to respond the same way.

Harmonizing is what our use of critical discourse is for—even though there are limits to possible harmony (by we who are embodied).⁴⁸ The target of our criticism is the will, the understanding, the person—not the fact, not the reality, not even the mere grasp of it. It is the response (i.e. the conjunction of will and understanding and also attention) by the person to how things are here and now, i.e. the world. In making the criticism, I am claiming superior clarity on actuality, both of the world and of our collective (implicit) understanding of it. (This last, I call the *Moral Consensus* in §10.10.)

We respond to critical vocabulary from critical authority because our relation to the bearer, as part of our world, is part of (moral) reality. Moral understanding is in this sense cognitive: it aims at sustaining the most faithful relation to reality, i.e. error-free. Sometimes that relation wanes by our inattention and we fall into alienation from ourselves.

⁴⁶One reason I favor an understanding of Evil as something that undermines comprehension, like the sublime or the infinite, is precisely because it is not just a big distortion but it is something which ablates the order or at least disables the demonstrative capacities needed for comparison of *that* evil with *this* order. In this sense, one mournful consequence of Evil is how, in coming to terms with it, we reshape the order of things, making what was previously unthinkable thinkable—changing moral categories. Cp. Williams’ remarks on the ‘unthinkable’ on page 31; and §6.8. That may be reason enough to withhold extending our language to encompass evils done. Cf. Imre Kertész, ‘The Language of Exile’, in *The Guardian* (October 19 2002), (URL: www.guardianunlimited.com) – visited on October 21 2002.

⁴⁷Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem : a report on the banality of evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 279. This recalls the fate of Plato’s wrongdoer: alone, living a life after his own likeness. Plato, ‘Theaetetus’, in: John M. Cooper, editor, *Plato: Complete Works*, trans. by M. J. Levett, revised M. Burnyeat (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1997), p. 177a. Cp. §§4.9–4.10. The emphasis in the motive tones of this predicament are interestingly different from the notorious Hobbesian prediction for “the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

⁴⁸In the *Lysis*, Plato considered the possibility that we become friends with those who are like us and as friends become more like each other, perhaps because of our shared love of what we understand as good.

Sometimes it simply wanes and the result is alienation from others. Alienation may be well described as a (merely) psychological condition as opposed to a rational or cognitive one. At the limit, perhaps all the grounding moral motivations are (just) psychological. Here, in any case, are some of those impulsions. First, the isolation that is the consequence of dissolution and separation is at odds with the demonstrable proclivity of human beings to become attached to each other in any circumstance. Second, error—whatever it comes to—is not a standing desire of anyone in any domain including the moral. Third, as we close ourselves to others the world disintegrates, losing substance and texture, asymptotically approaching a void. In the absence of form—the condition of the void—there is no possibility. As embodied creatures, part-constituting reality, depending on possibility for the expression of our (relentless) will, how could anyone desire the void? Perhaps to quell the will? When a person's will is no longer his liberator but only his tormentor, he is alienated and lost. The absence of will, on the other hand, is the absence of freedom, and so for motivation, concern and love. The alienated or the quiescent lack the psychological condition to be with us, to be one of us.

9.10 Moral Understanding

Let me summarize the account of moral understanding at which I have arrived. Morality or moral reality—the object of moral thought—is sustained by and composed of relations between people, by the life we share. One's moral understanding is of this reality. Therefore moral understanding is of the relations—generally and particularly—that constitute it. Relations exist in forms that range from the mere awareness of another human being to friends, families, and nations. Relations are differentiated by the scope and nature of the critical authority for criticism given to those in the relation. One's moral understanding is manifested in the language we use to characterize the form and deformation of these real relations—or reality with that texture. Reality is, in this sense, articulated by meaning. Moral sensitivity is then receptivity to meaning.

One's understanding is expressed in the decisions or responses one can will or actualize in response to reality. The specific object of one's understanding is chiefly one's place in the world at a moment. One's place includes both that moment and the relations composing one's life. One's understanding and will constitute the major part of who one

is—who one can be intelligibly identified as. Criticisms of one's decisions, and thus one's understanding and will, are therefore (personal) criticisms of one as an individual.⁴⁹

Moral criticism differs from most criticism by its exclusive focus on inter-personal relations. Moral criticism differs from all other criticism by taking as its object someone's understanding of their relations to *anyone* else. Morality alone identifies being wrong and doing wrong such that 'wrong' can be applied with the same sense to any other human being (or person). Understanding our relations includes specifically what *that* relationship demands. For example, insufficient attention to a friend properly invites resentment as criticism of the content of that friendship. For another, insensitivity is the proper criticism of someone's indifference to the way their smoking visibly irritates another, even a stranger. Moral discussion uniquely involves the direct negotiation of relations—e.g. friendship—*not* in the sense of making an agreement but of making a joint determination of what that relationship *is* generally and particularly. Other discussions, including morality, include the exchange of explanations or reasons. Other discussions, such as business, include the negotiation of relations as particular agreements (however atypical).

Wronging someone is then comprehensible as *inter alia* denying someone's critical authority. That is one form of denying someone's relation to oneself. That denial deprives him of a place in the moral world, in one's shared life. In short, wronging someone diminishes him, actually makes him less (morally) real. Apology, conditional on remorseful comprehension, can restore someone's reality. Therefore, to wrong is to separate oneself from those wronged, voiding the substance of shared reality (potential or actual).

The human world is made by the collective understanding of the content of inter-personal relations. If moral understanding were too diverse, then communities would collapse. Communities are sustained—beyond force or circumstance—by our inherent awareness of, capacity for, and need for relations with others. The large scale rejection of morality is difficult to conceive, but limited rejection of critical authority—perhaps in service to a non-moral ideal—is possible as a repudiation of morality. Calling that repudiation wrong, morally or otherwise, may not make sense. For, meaning, its correction and agreement, are the way we live lives with language, sharing the reality thus articulated.

⁴⁹I believe one could pursue a "unified theory" of critical authorities, criticism and understanding for several domains, with perhaps a root domain. I think that epistemic and moral critical authority *might* be unified in that root domain. I am not sure. For reasons I have pointed to throughout, I do not think that there could be domain above the moral, and in this sense personal ideals are parasitic on the moral. Perhaps there could be peers or unrelated, incommensurable domains. These issues are beyond my discussion's already strained scope.

The moral life is lived in response to others through one's relations to them, not the avoidance of criticism. Accepting the prescriptive import of moral criticism harmonizes responses among individuals, making lives and the reality they compose more substantial. Solipsism is, as most suspect, a delusion of substance. Therefore the moral life is best characterized *immediately* as attending to others in their relation to me, and *reflectively* as attending to negotiating the content of those relations. I mean negotiation as deliberately equivocal between agreeing and finding one's way through. Decision is a paradigm of moral thoughts in these activities or concerns, though it is not the only one. Reason is a paradigm of moral discussion, though it too is not the only one.

9.11 Realist and Relativist Reservations

The core of my explanation or account of moral understanding is complete above. It might be thought inadequate, for too much seems to depend on us. I have argued that this sense of 'depends on us' is only problematic when it means 'what I think is so' not, as I have used it, 'essentially self-involving'. The internal/external role of the will, as both in the world and making the world, invites worry. I have addressed this at several points above, but some may remain adamantly unconvinced.

As Thomas Nagel has said, "We do not *make* these things true ..."⁵⁰ My account of moral understanding and its objects is not a theory of how things are independently of us and that is the only constant, according to this objection. This objection springs from the theoretical commitments of philosophical realism. Relatedly, the dependence on us threatens to make morality relative and therefore again insubstantial. Relativism is the fear realists seek to protect us from. In this sense, the relativist and the realist have the same concern, but one propounds while the other denies it. I will rebut both theoretical objections in the next chapter.

⁵⁰Thomas Nagel, 'Universality and the reflective self', in: Onora O'Neill, editor, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 207.

10 Realism, Relativism, Consensus and Dissidence

It is to the true and original realism, that I would direct the attention. This believes and requires neither more nor less, than that the object which it beholds or presents itself, is the real and very object. In this sense, however much we strive against it, we are all collectively born idealists, and therefore and only therefore are we at the same time realists. But of this the philosophers of the schools know nothing, or despise the faith as the prejudice of the ignorant vulgar, because they live and move in a crowd of phrases and notions from which human nature has long ago vanished.

Biographia Literaria Volume I
SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

10.1 Realism and Theory

I concluded the positive development of an explanation of moral understanding and its objects in chapter 9. On the view elaborated, our moral understanding is constituted principally by our ability to employ and understand the language of moral criticism. The appropriate objects of moral criticism are someone's understanding of the demands of his inter-personal relationships. Therefore, morality as comprehended by our moral understanding was based on no more than the possibility of inter-personal relationships, our proclivity to attachment within them and the actual relationships currently extant in disposition or actuality. I suggested this last could be understood as moral reality.

I allowed that the conclusions reached might have been disappointing to someone with certain (not unreasonable) preconceptions. The sources of disappointment were not only the seeming contingency of my account but also the integral role of individual people in the persistence and character of moral reality. An expression of this disappointment is the insistence that morality has its form and authority independently of what anyone thinks. In short, our moral investigations should not focus on individuals, but on how the world is independent of any one person. My account, contrary to this, seems to make morality a matter of consensus, even if only tacit.

The objection has been expressed in terms of realism by Thomas Nagel's insistence that if an anti-realist answer is the "only available solution to the problem of normativity, then morality is an illusion, . . . , and the sceptics are right."¹ "We do not *make* these things true . . ."² Realism is a theory about the nature of reality which claims, broadly, that truth is conferred on thoughts or statements by states of affairs which are determinate, independent of us and potentially unknowable. Moral realism comes in many flavors. I shall consider two below, each of which adverts to a conception of the independence of a state of affairs which underpins morality.³

Realist objections are, I argue below, given a theoretical form motivated by metaphysical preconceptions about how reality must be characterized in order to underwrite morality. Each is in this sense a theoretical objection to the explanation I have offered. I shall argue that this common form is inadequate. First, it is incoherent and internally unstable. Second, its impersonal bias does not explain the personal nature of morality, because it undermines the practice of moral criticism and ignores inter-personal data in favor of abstract data. I am not arguing that these explanatory *lacunae* are anomalies for which realist theory is inapt. Neither is an anomaly, each is fundamental to morality—a point agreed by realists. For this reason, they are genuine threats to realist moral theory.⁴ I sketch my plan of attack for these arguments in §10.2.

However, the intuition motivating realism in moral philosophy is a sound one. Moral realism seeks to protect us from relativism, the view that morality is relative to groups (or individuals). The relativist is unable to explain how a dissident can make true moral claims, for a claim at odds with the group is *ex hypothesi* false. The claim that dissidents have been right is a powerful and plausible one. Socrates is one example. Another is dissident individuals in the collective madness of the Chinese Cultural Revolution who were right, not merely non-conformist. Any account of morality, if dissident phenomena are to be acknowledged, must accommodate the possibility of meaningful dissidence, where dissident claims can be understood as true. If, the thought motivating realism continues,

¹Thomas Nagel, 'Universality and the reflective self', in: Onora O'Neill, editor, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 207.

²*Ibid.*, p. 208.

³Another type of moral realism focuses on when moral explanations are suitable for vindicating aspects of morality. See, e.g., Gilbert Harman, *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2000) and David Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁴The interaction between theory and anomaly is explained along these lines in Tom Sorell, *Moral Theory and Anomaly* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000), chapter 2.

morality is suitably independent, then dissidents against consensus can be right; for then independent moral truths owe nothing to groups or consensus. So, I suggest, the best way to defuse the worries of moral realists, *without* picking up their metaphysical baggage, is to deny relativism and account for dissidence. (This is a long way of saying that morality can be objective without being realist. Though the objectivity must be of the right sort, not of the sort employed in, e.g. dog shows.)

It might be thought, incorrectly, that my explanation of moral understanding was relativistic. Beginning in §10.7, I shall argue that the threat of relativism is misunderstood. Relativism, when implicitly grounded in nihilism, is the worry for which realism sensibly offers a substantive salve. Non-nihilistic relativism is no threat, indeed it reflects an important moral datum: that investigations of moral reality are inter-personal in contrast to many in science.

I shall argue that my explanation accommodates dissidence and supplants nihilism by elaborating the idea of *Moral Consensus*. A Moral Consensus is a collective embodiment of an understanding of moral reality as I have described it, i.e. inter-personally composed. My conclusion is that others can be alien, but that any alterity that expresses is no motive for supposing that one's understanding of others must be relative to a general or alternative conception of humanity. The focus of any moral exploration is always, in the first instance, the human being with which you are confronted.

Finally, this chapter completes a circle begun in chapter 2 that led to the initial considerations of an "external" account of moral understanding in chapter 4. In section §2.1, the Practical Reason Model suffered from a logical drift toward an impersonal abstraction, viz. the ideal decision maker. This too, like the realism described above, was motivated by the desire to ensure that morality had a suitably robust ground. The same desire culminated in the Platonic effort to hypostasize morality in the cosmos. Both express a response to the vertiginous fear of nihilism. In moving toward an "internal" account, however, I did not reject this intuitive response. I reformed the desire for substantive reality into a more fine-grained tripartite division of form, formlessness and conformity.⁵ The arguments concluding this chapter complete my elaboration of these three aspects of reality while illustrating their interdependence.

⁵Described in table 4.1, p. 120.

10.2 Plan of Attack

I have already recounted Nagel's insistence that matters of moral truth are not made by us. Rather, they are independent. Therefore, a dissident may have a better grasp of them than the majority. Indeed, on Nagel's view, any one person's point of view (POV)⁶ can be better than another's. Further, such POV's can be improved upon, progressing at the limit to an ideal perspective, free from the distortions of being a particular person in a particular time at a particular place in a particular community with a particular background. He calls this ideal POV the *View from Nowhere* (VFN).

I will describe Nagel's View from Nowhere (§10.3). Second (§10.4), I will argue that it is incoherent, or if not incoherent then unsatisfactory in providing the transcendent POV needed. Third (§10.5), I diagnose the source of the incoherence and reconstruct Nagel's position in a way consonant with Korsgaard. Fourth (§10.6), I argue that these conceptions cannot accommodate our practice of morally judging people—a practice to which we three are committed—because of the impersonality of their accounts. Therefore, their accounts are unsatisfactory for explaining morality. My aim is to suggest that any impersonal account is structurally incapable of explaining our moral practices. Seeing this requires recognizing that the VFN is also a "View by No One," (*contra* the conception in chapter 3) and that Korsgaard's Practical Identity is also not a person's identity, but of a type (*contra* the conception in chapter 6).

10.3 The View from Nowhere

Nagel gives an initial account of *what* may be conceived impersonally as follows:

I can conceive impersonally my house burning down, and the individual T.N. standing before it, feeling hot and miserable, and looking hot and miserable to bystanders, and seeing their sympathetic looks, etc. etc. If I add to all this the premise that I am T.N., I will imagine feeling hot and miserable, seeing the sympathetic bystanders, etc.; but this is not to imagine anything happening differently. Anything which I can imagine feeling, I can imagine being felt by the person impersonally described, who I in fact am. Anything I can judge or believe about my own situation, experiences, actions, I can judge or believe about him, without any alteration in what is being believed to occur.⁷

⁶See chapter 7.

⁷Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 103–104.

Later he describes the method by which we achieve this considered, detached POV:

The first step is to see that our perceptions are caused by the action of things on us, through their effects on our bodies, which are themselves parts of the physical world. The next step is to realize that since the same physical properties that cause perceptions in us through our bodies also produce different effects on other physical things and can exist without causing any perceptions at all, their true nature must be detachable from their perceptual appearance and need not resemble it. The third step is to try to form a conception of that true nature independent of its appearance either to us or to other types of perceivers. This means not only not thinking of the physical world from our own particular point of view, but *not* thinking of it from a more general *human* perceptual point of view either: not thinking of how it looks, feels, smells, tastes, or sounds.⁸

Nagel is describing a method for conceiving things as having “their true nature” *independent* of us, this nature being “detachable” from our perceptual capabilities. Their nature is *determinate* insofar as it is there in advance to be seen truly as opposed to made. With the method, we should factor out our particular POV, replacing it with one that is more *general*. Notice also that this is a method for constructing a POV within which we can discover the “true” (or less distorted) nature of things, not how they should be. He continues:

But we can go further than this, for the same basic method allows us to think of experiences that we can’t imagine. To represent an experience from outside by imagining it subjectively is the analogue of representing an *objective* spatial configuration by imagining it visually. One uses ordinary appearance as a medium. What is represented need not resemble the representation in all respects. It must be represented in terms of certain general features of subjective experience—subjective universals—some instances of which one is familiar with from one’s own experience.⁹

This method can be extended imaginatively to describe new unimaginable experiences using *universal* features of experience, so-called “subjective universals.”

The idea is that the concept of mind, though tied to subjectivity, is not restricted to what can be understood in terms of our own subjectivity—what we can translate into the terms of our own experience. We include the subjectively unimaginable mental lives of other species, for example.¹⁰

⁸Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 14, my emphasis.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 21, my emphasis.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 21.

The conception offered is one where particular states of affairs including the “true nature” of their contents are conceived as from no particular POV, but rather one composed of subjective universals—universal to any mind. The conception aims to eschew any POV that depends constitutively on the particular character of the perceiver such as being located somewhere, at some time, with some perspectival capacities or a particular history. In this sense it should be available to anything with a mind.

10.4 Incoherence of View from Nowhere

10.4.1 Time, Space, Unity

Take the above claim that “anything which I can imagine feeling, I can imagine being felt by the person impersonally described ...” This is extremely difficult to understand, especially coming from an author who famously insisted that there is an inscrutable “what it is like” to be something with a particular and peculiar subjective life.¹¹ What is it that I am imagining *feeling* in such a circumstance? Am I feeling pain myself, and imagining what it would be like for someone else to be *me* feeling pain? This would seem to reverse the method, i.e. from the impersonal to the personal, viz. me. Or am I feeling pain that I then imagine is his, that he has? Leaving aside the impersonal, I cannot imagine what it would be like for anyone to have *my* pain. Surely it is well-worn ground that the reification of what is felt is a linguistic illusion that gives rise to confusions, e.g. if my pain is literally *in* my finger, and if I put my finger in my mouth, is the pain now in my mouth?¹² This cannot be Nagel’s intention.

Suppose instead that, occupying the VFN, I am watching DL “impersonally described” feeling chagrin at making a knowing post-modern self-reference while writing a philosophy thesis. Now suppose that unbeknownst to me someone else also occupies the VFN and helpfully supplies the premise, “That guy, DL, is you.” Who has he spoken to if the premise is true? Do I *and* the impersonally described DL both turn and say, “Thanks?” Is the spell broken? Do I lose my grasp of the VFN and “collapse” into DL’s POV?

The most natural response is surely, “How can I be in two places at once?” or, “If he is

¹¹Thomas Nagel, ‘What is it like to be a bat?’, in: *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 193–214.

¹²Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edition (1953; reprint, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), §§293–304.

me, then who are you talking to?" We can scarcely follow this kind of absurd dialog. It reads increasingly like surrealist fantasy. It seems difficult to conceive slipping the reins of embodiment so easily. The language of perception and conception seems internally dependent for its meaning on ideas of particularity in time, space, unity, identity, and much else. Eschewing these connections leads toward nonsense or absurdity.

10.4.2 Intentional Limits

Nagel makes clear his conception of the methodology of the VFN when he says, "the enterprise assumes that what is represented [in the impersonal view] is detachable from the *mode of representation*, so that the *same* laws of physics could be represented by creatures sharing none of our sensory modalities."¹³ This is extended to morality too when Nagel says almost twenty years later, "The issue [in Ethics] is, what does the truth or falsity of statements about what we have reasons to do or believe, or what we should do or believe, depend on?"¹⁴ He continues that we must assume, on pain of abandoning the enterprise, that they do not depend on us, "We do not *make* these things true . . ."¹⁵ In both physics and morals, we have a statement or thought whose truth or representational relation must be, Nagel claims, independent of us.

However when we consider the conditions on placing a statement in the mouth of someone for whom it could be meaningful—or a thought in the mind of a representer for whom it could be significant—we shall see that they are unmet when taking the VFN literally. For any thought or statement to be about *something*—to have a somewhat determinate content—it must stand in some kind of relation to *that* something or else claims of its content will be non-individuating and unusable. The relation could be formal, causal, evolutionary, informational—assume your favorite theory. Suppose the idea of something as it is in itself—i.e. having a true nature detachable from any perceiver's perceptual capacities—is intelligible. Imagine also a non-abstract existent object with a "true nature." Any thought or statement made or understood, about that object still requires some relation between the object and the thinker of the thought. How are we to conceive the relation obtaining between the object and a thinker occupying the VFN? Our perceiver

¹³Thomas Nagel, 'Subjective and Objective', in: *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 209, my emphases.

¹⁴Nagel, 'Universality', *op. cit.*, p. 205.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 208.

is not located anywhere, nor is he possessed of any particular sensory capacities. A relation between somewhere and nowhere is unintelligible, since one end of the relation is absent. Even an asymptotic line has a relation to the line of which it is an asymptote, though it does not touch it. The relation is just that, asymptotic.

The VFN is a method whose successful operation requires severing the relations on which significance depends. Indeed the universality alleged to be integral to the VFN suggests that any relation between the VFN (or its occupier) and the true nature of the object had better not foreclose the possibility of some other relation with a different object. For if it did, the VFN would be limited in what could be represented conjointly—irrespective of the “subjective universals” employed.¹⁶ Such a limitation hobbles the idea that any POV can be “improved upon” by diminution of the particular.

This is not to beg the question against Nagel or a philosophical realist. I am not stipulating that every fact of a state of affairs is in principle knowable to humans, only that it should be in principle knowable by something minded, perhaps with a different essence or spatio-temporal location than we have, including logically possible beings.¹⁷ But it seems plain that our conception of a statement or representation with content about an existent object depends on its being thought by someone somewhere.¹⁸ The dependence on a relation to an object is vital—no matter how obscure the relation’s character—if we are to make sense of the idea that two radically different (forms of) representations represent the same, and only the same, “true nature,” laws of physics or reason for belief.

This point can here only be preliminary and depends on using extremely common objects of experience, existent non-abstract objects. The point would be more difficult to make with abstract or non-existent objects such as reasons or principles (both candidates for the “stuff” of morality, if their problematic metaphysical statuses could be resolved). That said, acknowledging limits to the domain conceivable from the VFN is sufficient to necessitate alterations to the conception as described by Nagel.

¹⁶This problem is akin to Wittgenstein’s revelation that formulating the (general) form of all propositions produces no further understanding or philosophical progress, since nothing can be expressed with maximum generality. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by C. K. Ogden (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), §6ff.

¹⁷This is an expanded expression of Dummett’s Principle K: “If a statement is true, it must be in principle possible to know that it is true.” Admittedly, this is not considered neutral by some. Michael Dummett, ‘What is a Theory of Meaning? (II)’, in: *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 61–62.

¹⁸The possibility of “absolute conceptions” akin to a fully realized VFN POV is discussed by Moore. He concludes using his own terminology that a VFN POV may be possible but demurs on whether anyone could even in principle occupy it. A. W. Moore, *Points of View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

10.4.3 Imaginative Limits

Taken as the method above that *literally* allows one to detach from oneself, the conceptual and practical difficulties quickly accumulate into incoherence. Perhaps the process is not best understood as one of literal detachment. Rather the method may be better understood as aiming to create a conception of the true nature of the world, including minds. In favor of this Nagel says, “such a conception ... still has to provide a way of *thinking* about what the world contains in detachment from any particular point of view within that world.”¹⁹

Nagel insists that the assumption of the VFN is not a feat of “imaginative scope” but rather one of detachment.²⁰ So, imagination is not required. It is hard though to see how adopting the VFN could not be a product of imagination where the minds of others are concerned. Indeed, Nagel says, “It is this general faculty of sympathetic subjective imagination that takes us on the first step outside of ourselves in the acquisition of an objective concept of mind ...”²¹ So, contradicting himself, imagination is required.

However, it is difficult to understand how imagination will facilitate knowing what it actually would be like to be someone else—let alone no one else—while retaining the sense that one was merely imagining it. Williams makes this point vividly when imagining himself as Napoleon. He says that it is not enough in imagining yourself as someone that you see the same images they see, “for instance, [seeing] the desolation at Austerlitz as viewed by me vaguely aware of my short stature and my cockaded hat, my hand in my tunic.”²²

This is no knowledgeable understanding of what it was like to be Napoleon since what is imagined depends crucially on one’s prior knowledge, true or false, of Napoleon, Austerlitz and Napoleonic mannerisms. It is in this sense rather more like the portrayal of Napoleon in the film *Waterloo* which Rod Steiger gave based on his research for the film. That one can imagine what one thinks it would be like for oneself to have been Napoleon is not evidence that in so doing one is like the historical Napoleon. Williams

¹⁹Thomas Nagel, ‘The Limits of Objectivity’, in: Sterling M. McMurrin, editor, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, volume I (Utah and Cambridge: University of Utah Press and Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 82, my emphasis.

²⁰Nagel, ‘Subjective and Objective’, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

²¹Nagel, ‘Limits of Objectivity’, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

²²Bernard Williams, ‘Imagination and the self’, in: *Problems of the self: philosophical papers, 1956-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 43.

insists, “I still do not understand, and could not possibly understand, what it would be for me to have been Napoleon.”²³ Moreover when I entertain the thoughts and images I imagine Napoleon to have had, this “does not introduce a further ‘me’ . . . there are only two persons involved in this, . . . , the real me and Napoleon.”²⁴ Since there is no basis for supposing that by imaginative feats one can come to know the “true nature” of another mind, both the capacities and method Nagel describe require another medium.

10.4.4 Berkeley and Imagination

These arguments should not be confused with a related discussion regarding Berkeley and the existence of unperceived objects.²⁵ The imaginative constraints I have tacitly appealed to are outlined by Peacocke, “to imagine something is always at least to imagine, from the inside, being in some conscious state.”²⁶ Under this constraint it is always reasonable to ask what it is like to imagine the experience of imagining some conscious state. This rules out imagining the action in a movie as if one were not somewhere watching it, even if only imagining it on screen. The answer may be vague—such as “in the theater”—but “from nowhere” is not acceptable. Naturally there are existent movies I have not seen, but I cannot imagine seeing them (as they actually are) unless I know their content. I can imagine seeing a movie called *The Mighty Ducks* without having seen it, but there is no ground for thinking that what I imagine will bear any relation to its actual content. I might imagine it was about powerful waterfowl, rather than a hockey team.

It is the same for a VFN. It could be that there is something that it is like to be a maximally general, subjective, location-less mind. What ground is there for supposing though that our imagination of this condition has any verisimilitude?²⁷ There is little ground for supposing that our imagination tells us more about the possible nature of the world be-

²³Williams, ‘Imagination and the self’, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁵George Bishop Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, First Dialogue.

²⁶Christopher Peacocke, ‘Imagination, Experience, and Possibility: A Berkeleyian View Defended’, in: J. Foster and H. Robinson, editors, *Essays on Berkeley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 21–22.

²⁷This conception is a peculiar POV from which to learn what to do in any case. Suppose that a purely thinking thing, the *res cogitans* of Descartes, is a coherent idea. Suppose further that we can imagine the experience of being one. In so imagining we must leave behind part of ourselves, the *res sentiens*: our embodied sensitive part. A *res cogitans* is, one presumes, disembodied since it is nowhere with no (physical, spatio-temporal) substance. Perhaps this is a Nagelian conception. Why suppose though that what we learn from the *res cogitans*’ perspective is of any relevance to people in our embodied, sentimental predicament? Any direction so gained invites the rebuke, “That’s easy for you to say!” This illuminates from the other direction one difficulty with this conception of imaginative powers. Suppose the *res cogitans* imagines what it is to be us. Is it plausible that it could imagine our embodied pain without ever having experienced a bodily sensation? Most plausibly, what is imagined is nonsense.

yond the possibilities inherent in the prior experiences from which it began. An imagined “objective spatial configuration” is still imagined from the materials in the experience of the mind of the imaginer, including the conscious experience of that spatial configuration on paper, on a computer or in another familiar medium. Nagel seems to have ignored the limits between what I imagine to be and what is. It is a further instance of the failure to heed the requirements of correctness for distinctions between what is right and what seems right.²⁸

10.5 Constructive Realism

Perhaps I have failed to do justice to Nagel’s conception. There are however statements that suggest that internal to his conception is an “infinetism” about (the limits of) this method and the degree of generality possible. He says:

A being of total imaginative flexibility could project himself directly into every possible subjective point of view, and would not need such an objective method to think about the full range of possible inner lives.²⁹

Though the subjective features of our own minds are at the center of our world, we must try to conceive of them as just one manifestation of the mental in a world that is not given especially to the human point of view.³⁰

There is probably no end-point to this process, but its aim is to regard the world as centerless, with the viewer as just one of its contents.³¹

These statements suggest Nagel believes in radical generality, to include the “subjectively unimaginable lives of other species.” The difficulty internal to the literal account of the VFN is a lack of conceptual resources for limiting its infinitist generalizing. Without a limit, the VFN leads into nonsense. That much is shown by the considerations in §§10.4.1–10.4.4. It seems to me a consequence of a realist antipathy to placing anthropocentric conditions on the intelligibility of human thoughts. It is however not a consequence of realism only. A similar antipathy is found in (post-modern) authors impressed by the possibility of radical alterity.³²

²⁸See Wittgenstein, *PI*, *op. cit.*, §§258–260.

²⁹Nagel, *View*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 18.

³¹Nagel, ‘Subjective and Objective’, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

³²For representative examples, see Dwight Furrow, *Against Theory: Continental and Analytic Challenges in Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1995).

It may be objected that the VFN's method was never intended to have utility or meaning at *the* limit. Instead, we should wish to think right up to the limit, using it as a regulative norm. If that is so, it seems right to ask after the utility or coherence of a view that is conceptually pregnant with this unthinkable nonsense. Used regulatively, how are we to know when we have gone too far and passed into nonsense? How can it be a sound way to proceed, in morality at least, if the ideal to which our efforts aim is a (holy) nonsense? These questions are acute. Limits internal to the VFN are required. Nagel acknowledges this, despite his infinitist remarks above:

There is a problem of excess objectivity also in ethics....The good, like the true, includes irreducibly subjective elements.³³

Here [in Ethics], as elsewhere, I don't think we can hope for a decisive proof that we are asking objective questions and pursuing objective answers.³⁴

Perhaps the best or truest view is not obtained by transcending oneself as far as possible. Perhaps reality should *not* be identified with objective reality.³⁵

An alternative formulation which addresses these concerns is possible. Consider the alternative formulation of the VFN below, where one *constructs* new knowledge. Suppose I am a detective searching for a *mafioso* I suspect is hiding in a secret room. I walk around the house pacing the dimensions of the interior spaces. Then I construct a map, in my head, before considering spaces within the house not accounted for by my measurements. In this way I detach from my present location and experience to discover somewhere new. Anyone could do this. It is important though that my "discovery" is not something I could have arrived at without first "priming" my imaginary peregrinations with my pacings. Perhaps this is the idea of "objective spatial configuration[s]" Nagel meant to propose.

My alternative formulation might be harmoniously extended to morality as follows. Suppose I am deciding whether to tell a book critic who disparaged my book how dimwitted he is when I meet him.³⁶ I consider my motivations for doing so by imagining a person acting on the same motivations. Then, by considering different motivations, I wonder whether mine are sound. Perhaps I even imagine the imagined person's reflections on his motivations. Suppose that the person I imagine concludes that these motives are un-

³³Nagel, *View*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁴Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 115.

³⁵Nagel, 'Subjective and Objective', *op. cit.*, p. 211, my emphasis.

³⁶The example is inspired by Thomas Nagel, 'Concealment and Exposure', in *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27:1 (1998), pp. 3-30.

sound. I add the personal premise: that the imagined person is me—insofar as he has my motivations. Therefore, I conclude that I should not act on my motives because they are unsound. This process can be extended to imagine people with different motives in different circumstances, with different histories, etc. This will produce increasingly general conclusions.

Notice that the same *limit* (in the sense of a gamut) applies as with the detective's pacings: these reflections are primed only by what I bring to them. The limit is similar to that found in imagining Napoleon or *The Mighty Ducks*. Whatever I imagine is fashioned solely from the contingent contents of my imagination. The upshot, roughly, is that you cannot get more out than what you put in. Those mental contents, and the states of information from which they are derived, are insufficient warrants for claims about the true nature of the world.

Nagel could object that such a warrant might emerge from wondering "what the world probably has to be like, in order to explain why it appears as it does."³⁷ The limit proposed is not undermined by this objection. The limit is on the scope of any conclusion in relation to the *possible* ingredients of an imaginative speculation. The objection expressly asks what the world has to be like for us to have the experiences we have *already* had, not those we might yet have on account of the (purported) nature of things. This position betrays a pessimism about the convictive force of transcendental arguments. However, the dialectical onus is, I think, on the transcendentalist in any case.

Korsgaard

This alternative conception has affinities with a recent account of Korsgaard's that is explicitly constructivist and general.³⁸ Roughly, her account is as follows. Korsgaard describes one's practical identity as the source of one's reasons for action. Practical identities are one's self-conceptions as a student, teacher, brother, Muslim, etc. She says, "It is necessary to have some conception of your practical identity, for without it you cannot have reasons to act."³⁹ This necessity is a consequence of the essentially reflective structure of our consciousness. Such a consciousness makes one "a reflective animal who needs reasons to act

³⁷Nagel, 'Universality', *op. cit.*, pp. 205–206.

³⁸Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, edited by Onora O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 245.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 120.

and live."⁴⁰ These reasons come from one's self-conceptions. She continues, "Yet most of the self-conceptions which govern us are contingent. . . . Rational reflection may bring you to discard a way of thinking of your practical identity as silly or jejune."⁴¹ According to Korsgaard, it is evidently wrong, for instance, to identify oneself with one's sex.⁴²

However one's "moral identity is necessary." Though one's reasons often spring from local or contingent⁴³ identities, they only have normative force because as human beings with a reflective consciousness one *must* have some identity.⁴⁴ Moral identity is distinctive because it is the one we cannot give up. It anchors the others so "for that reason, moral identity exerts a kind of governing role over the other kinds." Glossing and extending Kant she says our moral identities comes from conceiving ourselves as Citizens of the Kingdom of Ends, members of the party of humanity. That is, one's moral identity comes simply from being a human being or a human animal, like everyone else.⁴⁵ It is therefore a general one based solely on our (conception of) humanity.

In Korsgaard's account there is a thinking (reflective) self that commands the acting self according to what is reflectively endorsed as good. The two are unified by the thinking self's only issuing orders which are law-like and therefore universal and binding. In a byzantine argument, she argues for this constraint on the thinking self because of our need to see ourselves as causal powers.⁴⁶ Korsgaard thinks that a certain amount of reflection is unavoidable. It is in the structure of human consciousness. She allows that reflection might not always go far enough to uncover things one would endorse with perfect insight. But it *could*. It is always possible to discover what would be endorsed by a Citizen of the Kingdom of Ends, a human animal.⁴⁷ To this extent, what we correctly will as humans is law for all other humans. Korsgaard is making a limited claim since she thinks that it is just a contingent fact of history that we have our present Enlightenment conception of humanity.⁴⁸

⁴⁰Korsgaard, *Sources*, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴³'Contingent identity' is not used metaphysically, but to reflect possible identities, e.g. being a mother.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 129–130.

⁴⁶Though the constraint ought not to be read too strongly. She allows that someone could choose not to anchor his reflective endorsement in his identity as a human being, but rather as an Aryan. Such a person would be "evil," *ibid.*, p. 250.

⁴⁷See the discussion of Cohen's *mafioso*, *ibid.*, pp. 256–258.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 117. That said, she thinks the perspective we have is as "knowers as such" and "rational agents as such," p. 246.

Korsgaard's account yields the following method. One is given a candidate motivation for reflective endorsement. In reflection one detaches from the local or contingent identities which are its source. One wonders whether 'just as' human beings one could endorse it. If so, one acts on it. Notice that one's reflections are primed only by our contingent grasp of our self-conception as human beings. In virtue of the parallels with the alternative conception of Nagel developed above, I shall call these collectively the 'Impersonal Method' (IM). I call it 'impersonal' because it has universal and general emphases contrary to the sense of 'personal' I sought to elaborate in chapters 3, 5, 8 and 9. I shall argue that the IM exacerbates difficulties in understanding moral judgments and criticism as directed at individual persons.

10.6 Difficulties in Judging Persons

The intuition behind the VFN is extended to persons in terms stridently similar to Nagel's remarks regarding anti-realism, sceptics, and morality as illusory. In response to Parfit's argument that a person is a "subject of mental predicates but not a separately existing thing," Nagel says, "I don't really have an answer to this [but] ... If there were no such thing [as a person], then the idea of personal identity would be an illusion, but we are not in that situation."⁴⁹ This robust idea of personal identity is central to Nagel's understanding of our practice of morally judging people. The link is made in his discussion of the problem of "moral luck" (the tensions between conceiving the will as voluntary and how circumstances may be exculpating).⁵⁰ He says circumstantial considerations of various types of "luck" urge us to suspend judgment of others' behavior and character. Constitutive luck in how one is constituted determines whether one is, e.g., a naturally good or bad reasoner. Circumstantial luck determines the situations that one has to face, e.g. a "no-win" situation. There is also luck in how one's plans and actions turn out. They "all present a common problem" in that "they are all opposed by the idea that one cannot be more culpable or estimable for anything than one is for that fraction of it which is under one's control."⁵¹ The problem is that at the limit it appears that almost everything we do

⁴⁹Nagel, *View, op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁵⁰Thomas Nagel, 'Moral Luck', in: *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 24–38.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 28.

can be subsumed under one or more categories of luck. Nagel says:

The effect of concentrating on the influence of what is not under his control is to make this responsible self seem to disappear, swallowed up by the order of mere events.⁵²

Under pressure of luck, it can seem that the self vanishes, at least as an object for moral judgment. Yet we do make critical judgments of culpability as Nagel has said.⁵³ Nagel thinks that we should not abandon our practice of moral judgment, because we are not in a situation where there is no separately existing object (viz. oneself) for moral criticism.

Korsgaard also endorses our practice of morally judging others by holding them responsible even though accidents of circumstance can be exculpating.⁵⁴ In the absence of such judgments, she thinks morality would not be possible:

Unless you hold others responsible for the ends that they choose and the actions that they do, you cannot regard them as moral and rational agents, and so you will not treat them as ends in themselves.⁵⁵

We hold one another responsible because this is essential to our interactions with each other as persons; because in this way we populate a moral world.⁵⁶

In chapters 3 through 6, I endorsed and elaborated the practice of moral criticism focused on the responsibility consequent on the moral understanding from which one's responses spring. My argument with the IM is that if it tells us anything at all, it tells us only what *anyone* should do. But when judging others our criticism is meant personally, i.e. applying to one person only, not anyone. If that is right, and Nagel and Korsgaard's IM cannot accommodate the judging practices they endorse, then they should abandon (or modify) the IM.

It is an oft-made claim that someone makes a moral claim on us just because they are someone, just because they are a person or human being. The most famous philosophical formulation of this is Kant's thought that someone deserves moral deference (*Achtung*) just because they are a being possessed of a rational will.⁵⁷ It is a claim I endorsed in different terms, viz. awareness and openness, variously in §§5.10, 8.6 & 9.6.

⁵²Nagel, 'Moral Luck', *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁵³See chapter 2, page 69.

⁵⁴Christine Korsgaard, 'Creating the Kingdom of Ends: Reciprocity and Responsibility in Personal Relations', in *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992), p. 323.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 320.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 324.

⁵⁷Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*, edited by Mary Gregor, trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

All agree that it is central to judging someone morally that we apply general conceptions to individuals. The possibility of anomaly, which in this case takes the form of individuality, is paramount. We are principally concerned to judge him, not people *like* him. To do that, I have argued in preceding chapters, we need to take into account what is salient and particular to him: the moral understanding expressed in his actions, and the life within which that understanding has developed. Of course, it would be odd if we did not think that considerations that make one situation or individual similar to another were not *prima facie* salient in future decisions. The position I have argued for is that while that is *generally* true, it is not universally true. Any individual worthy of the name is a candidate for anomaly. This is especially the case for individual people.

The problem for the IM lies in the distinction between an endorsement that anyone using the IM *could* give and the endorsements one *does* give. To repeat, while the IM may provide endorsements by “anyone,” any judgment of me depends on my further personal endorsement of the outcome of the IM (i.e. those I mark with my authority). An analogy with an *adviser* could obviate the concern. But this lacks sufficient authority, for it is surely not a moral defense of my own action that he advised me to do it. This was touched on above (chapter 2, page 49). More significantly for an action to be mine it must come with the imprimatur of my authority (as discussed in §6.9).

A better analogy explicitly endorsed by Korsgaard is the idea of myself as *legislator*. Reflectively I (the reflective self) make a law or issue a command that I (the acting self) in turn obey because it is a properly issued law or command. Returning to the discussion of self-imposed imperatives in chapter 9 (esp. page 277), how is it that the self-made law commands me? Peter Winch puts the difficulty thus:

Roughly: to act in obedience to a command is, at least in very many cases, to act intentionally. But to act intentionally is, as it were, to decree one’s own action for oneself. Yet when one accepts the authority of someone else in obeying his command, one’s action seems to be decreed by that other person, not by oneself. How then can one’s act of obedience genuinely manifest one’s own intention?⁵⁸

⁵⁸Peter Winch, ‘Authority and Rationality’, in *The Human World* XII (August 1972), p. 11.

The idea of a legislator is a metaphor, for there is no actual legislative body “in my head.”⁵⁹ It is not an apt metaphor as it includes the idea of two selves: the commanding and commanded, or reflective and acting, or impersonal and personal. Yet, these two selves are not analogous in regard to power and will. Consider the difference between power and will.⁶⁰ It is a sad truth that external power (e.g. the state’s) can coerce an individual’s will. The state’s power acts on one’s will. But in the individual case, what power can one bring to bear on oneself? Surely, if there is a power like that internal to oneself, it is one’s will and nothing else. So, in the external case power and will come apart, but in the internal case they do not. Therefore the two selves metaphor founders on an unsustainable implicit division between the individual’s power and will.

One might object that this ignores the obvious link between laws and lawfulness. But consider the difference between ‘lawfulness’ and ‘legitimacy.’ Again it is an unfortunate truth that we often comply with laws we think illegitimate (because a state or its law is illegitimate). Our lawful behavior—i.e. compliance with the law—need be no expression of our endorsement of that law’s legitimacy. One may have reasons for compliance, e.g. fear, distinct from or contrary to reasons for legitimacy, e.g. justice.

Again this distinction is unavailable within a single individual, for reasons in favor of one’s reflective endorsement of the law are necessarily reasons for its legitimacy—where that means they motivate compliance—in one’s eyes. In the intra-personal case, law, legitimacy and lawfulness cannot come apart logically or practically. Whereas they can and do in the inter-personal case. Persons simply do not decompose into the “sub-persons” or selves required by the self-legislation metaphor.

Korsgaard might object that I do not do justice to the idea that one has a moral identity that often stands in tension with the desires of one’s contingent identities. What is the force of ‘identity’ here? It cannot be the metaphysical sense cognate with ‘identical’ since Korsgaard allows that some identities are contingent. Indeed she allows we can abrogate

⁵⁹It is, mysteriously, a perennially tempting metaphor. Surely, it distorts our moral psychology to suppose that in response to a particular situation I am concerned about which laws to promulgate for myself or others. Surely, I mean to do what is *right* in this situation—the law, mine or others, be damned. It is more quixotic when the thought includes the ideas of legislator and legislated upon in one person. Again, it is reminiscent of the mistake Wittgenstein highlighted in saying that the left hand cannot give the right hand money. Wittgenstein, *PI*, *op. cit.*, §268. For more on Wittgenstein’s claim see D. K. Levy, ‘Language, Concepts, and Privacy: ‘An Argument Vaguely Viennese in Provenance’, in *Language and Cognitive Processes* 18:5/6 (2003), pp. 702–703.

⁶⁰The distinctions between ‘power’ and ‘will’; ‘lawfulness’ and ‘legitimacy’ which follow draw from Winch, ‘Authority and Rationality’, *op. cit.*, p. 11. The treatment of them here is my own, and is consonant with related discussions in chapters 5, 7 & 8.

our moral identity.⁶¹ The metaphysical sense is too strong to permit tension between identities since each would be identical, in that sense, with me.

If identities are not understood metaphysically, then the difficulties are plain. Korsgaard, and Nagel, seek an outcome delivered by the IM that, because of its impersonal provenance, would move anyone. The issue is in virtue of what would it move them? Suppose it is a contingent fact that everyone is moved by some IM-produced outcome. That fact does not support the further claim that the explanation of being so moved is grounded in a shared identity. Much else could explain it: instinct, fear, logical compulsion. Moreover, it is a separate claim that one *ought* to be so moved such that it is right to judge an individual for non-conformity.⁶² Whatever else is true, our judgments of the individual must focus on his moral understanding in the first instance, even if, as a matter of contingent fact, some part of his understanding is common to all. Merely calling attention to what is common in his moral understanding with others may be an exhortation of a sort, but it is not obvious why it—garbed as the IM or not—should be universally motivating. The responsibility must remain particular to the individual if he is correctly to be judged for it.

Though I have explicitly attempted to make a place for identity in the ideas of lives and relationships (in chapters 3 & 8), one might object that my characterization of the IM is too narrow. We could “flesh out” the method by identifying with the person impersonally described or employed by the IM. In the suggested sense, the “detached” human is one of us. The ‘us’ in this case will refer to what we have in common not contingently but *essentially* as human beings or animals. It is this commonality that obliges compliance with the motives delivered by the IM. Korsgaard essays an unconvincing argument along these lines.⁶³ Rather than refute it in detail, I shall describe what I take to be its insuperable structural fault.

There is much to be said for what we do have in common, e.g. the capacity for love, and for the common causes with which we identify.⁶⁴ All of these inform the general conceptions with which we orient our relations with others. General conceptions of relations, I have argued, are crucial to our understanding of situations and appropriate responses.⁶⁵

⁶¹Korsgaard, *Sources, op. cit.*, p. 250.

⁶²Recall the lawn-mowing example from §9.2.

⁶³*Ibid.*, chapter 4.

⁶⁴See §8.7.

⁶⁵See §8.5.

However, no amount of fleshing out will allow that role for generalizations to engage the infinitism at the heart of the IM without compromising our critical moral practices. Those practices depend on decisions by individuals regarding individual responses to particular situations (composed in part by particular relations). Those decisions are made and understood in terms that depend essentially on the notion of individuality—in life, context, and relations—I have elaborated in preceding chapters. The point of moral praise and blame is precisely the recognition of individuality, of how someone has distinguished himself by who they are. But the central force in the IM is one of generality or non-individuality. So use of the IM is an unsatisfactory route to doing what is right.

The insuperable problem, in summary, is that any “fleshing out” of the IM will enrich only what we have in common, not what is individual. It is therefore paradoxical how our morally critical practices could take as their focus *what* someone is, when that ‘someone’ is what we all are. It is as if he is being judged for being one of *us*, by the rest of us. A judgment of any one would be a judgment of all. And then there could be no judgments.

10.7 Relativism and Theory

The practice of morally judging people inverts the often unspoken assumption that what is more general is more accurate, or closer to the true nature of things. A motivation I discussed above for this is that truth must be conceived as independent or universal, to avoid an unsatisfactory dependence on particular and contingent modes of representation.

This moves some to characterize reality in a way that is opposite to the unsatisfactory one. Forms of this reaction demand that morality be impersonal rather than personal, objective instead of subjective, ordered (systematic or coherent) instead of arbitrary, determinate rather than indeterminate, rational rather than non-rational, a matter for genuine disagreement rather than a matter of taste, and several other possible contrasts. Possible dissent, as opposed to consensus, is another of these oppositions.

The oppositions are, I shall argue, only illusory. More precisely, thinking that reality must be characterized in alignment with the extremes in the oppositions above is mistaken. The infinitism in the VFN and the IM is one way of ensuring alignment with one or more extremes. I have argued that the infinitism is problematic on its own terms, but it might have been acceptable if it was the only alternative. However, dependence on

other people, on tradition, history, social practice, the stability of language among other forms of dependence provide an alternative. This alternative can, I shall argue, defuse the pressure to move toward either extreme.

The specter that is raised if we do not align with objectivity, rationality and the allied extremes in characterizing reality, is of some flavor of *relativism* grounded in *nihilism*. The bogeyman introduced is not only an “-ism” which claims that what is right varies from culture to culture, but is combined with another “-ism” which claims that a culture’s morality has no further ground. It is both that whatever I say is right and that what I say need have no ground for critical assessment. If we prefer the destruction of the world to raising one little finger, who is to gainsay us?

It is, to be sure, the nihilism, not the relativism, that moves proponents of the IM to insist on an independent, universal moral beacon. Relativism without nihilism need not be unsatisfactory, unless one is dogmatic about what can count as a ground. In one sense, the non-relativist also allows that morality is dependent, he just restricts the domain of dependence to some specification of the factual. But this is what is at issue: what is to count as a morally salient fact? The account I have given above argues for one answer to that, rather than assuming, from metaphysical considerations, what is as a genuine fact.

Relativism can be separated from moral nihilism. Morality need not be everywhere wholly determinate, without thereby being groundless. For example, all cultures may converge on an understanding of marriage in which fidelity (not necessarily sexual) is essential. However, cultures could still differ over whether fidelity requires monogamy or whether fidelity is consonant with polygamy. There may be two paths up the same mountain. Nothing about that understanding of relativism requires nihilism.

10.8 Specimens of Relativism

A problem is that there is a dearth of examples of a culture sufficiently familiar yet alien enough to be the object of an investigation of relativism. It is not sufficient to choose a profoundly alien and unfamiliar culture, such as a primitive people in the heart of Borneo. Scarcely anyone knows anything about the character of life among them, not even anthropologists. Indeed, it is notable that many anthropologists who do live among primitive

peoples become culturally sympathetic.⁶⁶ Nor is it sufficient to pick a single isolated feature of another culture, such as female circumcision or polygamy. First, removed from its social context, it may be difficult to uncover the practice's ground. Second, any simple socially non-destructive practice, such as polygamy, may not be obviously wrong or morally troubling.⁶⁷

Similarly, any case worthy of investigation must reflect a culture that is *collectively* distinct. There are dozens of kleptocratic or self-interested elites oppressing others in the past and present. There are many cases of one ethnic group oppressing another, or even of one madman visiting his brutal fantasies on his countrymen. However, these are hardly examples of whole cultures living differently. By that culture's lights, the majority are simply wronged by a minority.

Serious consideration reveals that it is rather difficult to find examples of extant cultures that are plausibly morally distant instances of the wholesale type of relativism feared. The difficulty presses the question whether the specter of relativism is anything beyond a logical possibility, an idea sportingly endorsed for the sake of argument.⁶⁸ It is a serious question whether there are cultures which do provide appropriate data for relativism.⁶⁹ I cannot however exhaust the topic here.

Instead, I offer China, particularly during the time of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), as a possible example of thoroughgoing relativism. China has the advantage of being a long established, stable civilization which is both familiar and remote to Westerners. In order to capture the lived character of the society, rather than a social science characterization, I offer the conversations and observations of Colin Thubron, a writer traveling in China less than a decade after the Cultural revolution. He traveled without guide, without translator (he spoke Mandarin), and without government oversight. I shall describe Chinese culture during the Cultural Revolution next. In §10.10, I will apply the insights regarding dissidence and consensus revealed by the investigation to showing how the idea of Moral Consensus defuses the concern prompted by relativism and nihilism.

⁶⁶A famous example of this is E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937).

⁶⁷The general obstacles to understanding (primitive) peoples are famously discussed in Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958).

⁶⁸Relativism may be hypothetically endorsed, when for instance it is part of a theoretical sceptical challenge.

⁶⁹Sperber argues that empirical anthropological evidence of moral relativism is at best fragmentary, in Dan Sperber, 'Remarques Anthropologiques sur Le Relativisme Moral', in: *Fondements naturels de l'éthique* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1993).

10.9 China, the Chinese, and the Cultural Revolution

Thubron begins with the barest outline of the decade of the Cultural Revolution and the collective shift from the inside, not the outside, it comprised.

... China sank into a terrified collective madness. Nobody was safe. Officials, doctors, teachers, scientists—all the elites of the professions and the arts, anybody tinged with privilege or the West (and millions who weren't)—were ritually humiliated, ingeniously tortured, exiled, beaten to death. In the peculiarly Chinese 'struggle sessions', the victim was subjected to remorseless psychological and physical battering by hundreds of jeering co-workers over days or weeks, his every word contradicted, his past shredded by accusation, his will broken, until he groaned out a confession.⁷⁰ ... Stamp-collecting, chess, keeping goldfish—nothing was innocent.⁷¹

A million were killed; some thirty million more were brutally persecuted, and unknown millions starved to death.⁷²

Collectivity

The events and the shifts in outlook from which they sprang were widespread in the population. Everything, everywhere had shifted. Right and wrong were relative to the present, not, seemingly to the past. It seemed everyone was a part of it.

In the anarchy of the Cultural Revolution ... the Chinese people had not merely been terrorized from above but had themselves—tens of millions of them—become the instruments of their own torture. The land had sunk into a peculiar horror.⁷³

Nor was it an ethnic minority or one region against another, the leading edge of the terror, the Red Guards, were homegrown.

"The Red Guards came here all right," he said. "Some even came *from* here. My family was branded Capitalist because we owned four shops in the silk business."⁷⁴

Nor was it a revolt by the poor or excluded against the advantaged elite. Here Thubron speaks to a teacher at the Shanghai Conservatory.

⁷⁰Colin Thubron, *Behind the Wall: A Journey Through China* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 26.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid., p. 2.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 132.

Music, surely, would be the least politicised of the arts. Who had the Red Guards been here?

“Just our students,” he said. “Ordinary students.”

— “Were they cruel or just . . . frightened?”

...

“Some refrained out of pity or disagreement. But most went along with the worst group, who were perhaps politically ambitious.”⁷⁵

Thinking that it was then a minority, he asks, “How many took part?” The embarrassed answer came, “Perhaps eighty . . . ninety percent.”⁷⁶ The scale of this conformity can obscure the individual experience. Thubron elicits a personal recollection from a man he meets at the zoo.

“That year we beat up several people in the street,” he said. “If our leaders said, ‘He’s reactionary! Beat him!’, we beat him.” . . . “People said hit him, so you hit him. It was simple. It wasn’t even personal.”⁷⁷

The man had the feeling that he had been somebody else at that time. “Yet I remember it very distinctly. Everything. We only had one idea then. Whatever Chairman Mao said was right, God-given. Our heads were empty. Perhaps we had gone mad. We didn’t think at all.” . . . “And now it seems like a nightmare.”⁷⁸

He was deeply bewildered at his own past. Once authority had sanctioned violence, no monitor inside him had called a halt.

...

And what had he done?

...

“I was at high school then, when some of us attacked our teacher. Those whose work he’d criticised were out for revenge, of course, and others joined in, but not me. They starved him of food and water, then ‘struggled’ him for being a revisionist until he confessed.”

...

“He’s principal of the school now. I go to see him sometimes.”⁷⁹

Dissidence

Even in this bewildering chaos, others resisted, clinging to truth—to right and wrong—as they had understood it. Crucially, they understood it as distinct from the present, or at

⁷⁵Thubron, *Behind The Wall*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, p. 27.

least not relative to it. If anything, they understood it as relative to the past, to how things had always been. In this sense, it was a constant onto which they could fasten. Resistance was possible, and by appeal to the same grounds that had seemingly been upended.

“I was held like this and subjected to hours of beating and shouting, many times. But I refused to say anything. I kept telling myself: *I’ve loved my country. I’ve never betrayed it. This can’t go on.* I never uttered. That’s probably why I was sent to prison for two years.”⁸⁰

Still others were able to bring a respite to the madness, using the familiar exhortations one has always made to one’s fellows.

“The Red Guards arrived planning to smash up the mosque, but I sat them down and talked to them. I told them this was a historical place of great importance. Then . . . then they just left. They simply went away.”⁸¹

A Familiar Madness?

How mad was this collective madness? The very ordinariness of the motives and grounds that gave rise to this extraordinary horror suggest that China during the Cultural Revolution was changed, but not *discontinuously*.

I remembered Mao Zedong’s belief that the Chinese were a blank sheet of paper on which could be written a poem of creative and unending revolution. . . . But men turned out to be different of course.⁸²

A Chinese Christian priest offered halting, and familiar, explanations.

“The personality cult had something to do with it, and crowd psychology . . .”
 . . . “The Gang of Four took advantage of the young people’s devotedness, loyalty to . . . the leaders . . . Everything was done in the name of the revolution, then the devil, the evil in man broke out . . .”⁸³

What moved the Red Guards was not *formally* any more absurd than what has moved any idealist, or would move one if he were committed to the ideal embodied in the IM or the VFN. The priest continued:

“Yes, the Red Guards were good at heart. They were following an ideal.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰Thubron, *Behind The Wall*, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, pp. 255–256. The contrast with the Taliban destruction of the Bamiyan buddhas in Afghanistan is instructive.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 99.

Indeed, both good and base inclinations remained. In the case of base inclinations, the same inclination fastened onto a new abstract ideal held by a new group.

“I had to be a Red Guard, but I always stayed at the back. I couldn’t hit anyone. I just couldn’t do that.” ... “I felt too much pity.”⁸⁵

“This terror of the gossip was worst in the Cultural Revolution. ... My husband used to believe we were less selfish than Westerners, but I can tell you the selfishness is just extended to the group. You identify your interests with theirs.”⁸⁶

Rather than madness, grounded in nothing, emerging *ex nihilo*, the revolution such as it was began with and was constrained by the deep substance of Chinese culture and history.

Mao Zedong had described the peasant as a blank sheet of paper awaiting Revolutionary inscription, but in fact the paper had always been scored with a deep, incoherent language of its own. The old ways continue everywhere under Marxist disguise. Now, as in imperial times, rule is less by law than by a collective morality. Beneath the age-long supervision of one another in clans and street committees, lies the timeless ideal that a person melt harmoniously into the mass rather than visit his individuality upon it.⁸⁷

If Thubron is right, it shows that the significant terms of conformity *and* dissent emerged from the one root, the Chinese character. This leave the idea of dissidence—a non-conformist grasp of right and wrong—untroubled during the Cultural Revolution. The possibilities for dissidence remained in the middle of the “madness”; suggesting that the same grounds for right and wrong, for shame and embarrassment, for recognizing error were at work before, during, and after the horror.

“Did people believe their own confessions?” “No, not often, no.”

...

“I’ve never talked to my teacher about these things. And he’s never asked me. It’s difficult.”⁸⁸

The too familiar empty language of officialdom is used by a top official to describe the new consensus after the Cultural Revolution:

“During the Cultural Revolution we had a wrong policy. The Gang of Four used Revolutionary slogans to lead students astray. Intellectuals were crushed

⁸⁵Thubron, *Behind The Wall*, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 251.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 27.

...⁸⁹ “the Cultural Revolution, a tragic mistake ... a necessary lesson ... Gang of Four ... pernicious ... mistakes ...”⁹⁰

These are not special kinds of mistake, whose meaning is inextricable from the decade of terror. They are terrible, familiar mistakes that solicit ordinary responses: hatred, incomprehension, and relief. Nothing about these responses suggests that they, at least, are relative.

“What do people feel now?”

“About Mao? I can’t speak for everybody ... but I *hate him*.” It was the first time anybody had said this to me—no cult slogan about ‘mistakes’ or ‘he was seventy per cent good, thirty percent bad’—just pure hatred for what he had committed.⁹¹

“And do you know who broke [the violin in a church]? Red Guard students from the Shanghai Music Conservatory.” ... “How could anyone break a violin?”⁹²

Inertia and Shared History

Shared history and life may provide anchors for motivations, language, and responses in ways difficult to comprehend for those outside it. It is as if moral reality never changed, but became cognitively occluded by pathological mania.

“But now everything has changed, just as I knew it would. We’ve got our sanity back.”⁹³

Thubron feels for a familiar purchase, but finds instead “mind-crushing discipline, the Confucian respect for rote-learning and inherited learning,”⁹⁴ explanations that assert the separateness of the Chinese:

“This confessing is our custom, you know. You choke down what you really feel.”⁹⁵

Experienced with Soviet Communism, Thubron begins to understand how the seemingly revolutionary character of an alien ideology was received so easily.

⁸⁹Thubron, *Behind The Wall*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁹⁰Ibid., pp. 92–93.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 132.

⁹²Ibid., p. 148.

⁹³Ibid., p. 299.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 93.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 27.

The old submersion of the individual, I thought, was perhaps why Communism here saddened me less than in other Marxist countries. It seemed to do less violence to its people. Here history had anticipated it. The constraints it imposed were already internalised.⁹⁶

Christianity, an emigrant, shorn of individual conscience, was made to fit the prevailing culture of rote lessons and sermons and was naturally no bulwark against seminarians turned Red Guards storming the Church. Instead, the deeper consensus, the deeper reality re-asserted itself.

So [the priest's] pupils, I thought, had turned out less Christian than Chinese.

...

Here at worst a person relinquished all responsibility, all self. Conscience was stillborn. To dissent was to defect from Nature, from the very order of things.⁹⁷

For Thubron this recognition prompted questions of basic intelligibility:

What had happened, I wondered, to the sacred drama of grace and atonement?
To consciousness of sin?⁹⁸

Further, faced with overwhelming difference, it is natural to ask after one's own propriety or sanity.⁹⁹ Thubron encounters a French businessman, at sea with the Chinese:

"If you're in this country long enough you become unhinged. You start to think you're mad and they're sane." ... "You wonder: how can I be right and all the others wrong? Quarter of the world!"¹⁰⁰

Relativism and Aliens

So while I have labored to make vivid that what animated and constrained apparent madness was both familiar, sane, social, natural and historical, there is also truth in the idea of relativism. Peoples are collectively different in ways that go deep, revealed only in their actions and behavior. The grounds of that behavior can be opaque to one who has not shared their life, or what I would call aspects of their moral world. Yet there is also that which is common to us all. We can glimpse—become aware of—their world, have an intimation of what it might be like to conjoin our worlds. Thubron experiences this talking to the priest.

⁹⁶Thubron, *Behind The Wall*, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 99.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 98.

⁹⁹See §6.7.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 93.

At that moment I saw myself in his eyes: a spoilt Westerner, sentimentally concerned about pain, favoring an incontinent sympathy above moral decision.¹⁰¹ I sensed that my questions were subtly irrelevant to them, my Western preoccupation with suffering and conscience merely a measure of my isolation, a sign of my not understanding.¹⁰² “Maybe in those years you might find people lacking pity,” the priest answered levelly. “But with us the teaching of *ren* is very old—older perhaps than anything similar in the West.” His voice held only a shadowy reproof. “*Ren* is the Confucian ‘loving kindness’.”¹⁰³

Even this glimpse is through a glass darkly.

... [I] knew that in “loving kindness” he had given *ren* a Christian wholeness. ... But *ren* belonged to the cooler realm of charity and mutual benefit in a balanced social order.¹⁰⁴

The familiarity of the Chinese as fellow humans demands over and over that the most basic questions be asked, even if answers could only be snatched at clumsily. In this way, one’s expectations of what is intelligible behavior (one’s *Einstellung*) are calibrated, changed and expanded.

Who are *they*? ... How could they be so led? How could they do what they had done? And had they ever changed—this people of exquisite poetry and refined brush-strokes, and pitilessness?¹⁰⁵

Once the armour of social constraint had been stripped from him, the person inside had been exposed as a baby: conscienceless. Was that China, I wondered bleakly, or just him? Or perhaps it was no longer him? In any case, where was that feeling of pity which Mencius said was common to all men?¹⁰⁶

A review of an alien—relative to the Occident—culture reveals that understanding requires not abstraction, but concrete detail. It does not require discarding what is known and how it is known, as the IM enjoins. On the contrary, involvement, not detachment, is the route toward the true nature of the Chinese.

¹⁰¹Thubron, *Behind The Wall*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, p. 28.

10.10 Moral Consensus

My goal in dissipating the apparent madness of the Cultural Revolution to emerge with somewhat ordinary explanations has been to construct an alternate characterization of reality—specifically moral reality. This characterization neither suggests relativist-nihilist concerns nor endorses the methodological assumption that what is more general is more accurate. I shall call this characterization, following Kolnai, what is understood in the *Moral Consensus*.¹⁰⁷ I have illustrated its role in my discussion of the Cultural Revolution above.

Moral Consensus is, we can say more precisely, that part of our experience that is integral to the significance of our moral language and its referents. In this sense, it is a ground for (the possibility of) meaningful moral thought. It is not the only one. Like the fundamental idea of reality that science attempts to characterize, the reality understood by the Moral Consensus is too fundamental to admit of precise characterization without distortion. One notion of reality offered by science is expressed in the phrase “what is there anyway.”¹⁰⁸ If that is sufficient, so is speaking of “how things are anyway” or even “how things should be.” For example, we live in the shadow of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb. That is how matters stand independently of what anyone thinks. That one’s responses must be appropriate to how matters stand—if they must—is not something that depends on anyone’s thinking it so.

Coarsely, this example and my explanations of the Chinese were grounded in history. The facts of history feature in explanations, vindictory or otherwise. History is substantial, it is not nothing. It admits of reference, truth, falsity, necessity and much else of metaphysical pedigree. Moreover, the content of history is not arbitrary or whimsical. At any one time, historical reality has a form. It might not have had that form. It was not pre-determined that the atomic bomb would be used. But, whichever form history does have constrains the reality that follows. History has, roughly, an essential continuity that, while not determinate, constrains discontinuity or change.

The Moral Consensus, like history, can change. What was possible may become unthinkable (or vice versa). When it does, naturally it is because of what has happened,

¹⁰⁷Aurel Kolnai, ‘Moral Consensus’, in: Francis Dunlop and Brian Klug, editors, *Ethics, Value and Reality: Selected Papers of Aurel Kolnai* (London: Athlone Press, 1977), pp. 144–164.

¹⁰⁸Cp. §6.6.

what was thought and what was experienced. This is one expression of that constraint.

“But the Cultural Revolution won’t return. Not like that. You see, *everybody* suffered then. I think we all feel shriven in a way, exhausted . . .”¹⁰⁹

Change in the Moral Consensus is constrained insofar as it is not any form that can emerge.

Kolnai describes the constancy of moral categories over others:

Yet, how much more striking is the discordance between the factual beliefs of men, their religions, their para- or non-religious outlooks, not to speak of their dominant individual and collective interests, than between their moral beliefs all over the world and along its history!¹¹⁰

The evidence is that the same language, the same critical terms have persisted in largely the same form over time, giving shape to the categories internal to any Moral Consensus.

Kolnai again:

Why are ‘western bourgeois’ labelled [*sic*] ‘imperialist brigands’ and anti-communists of modest origins decried as ‘class traitors’? Because brigands always are and have been frowned upon morally and traitors have been morally despised ever since and long before the times of Thersites.¹¹¹

Thubron found as much in a Chinese school book.

I scanned the first exercises in the 1971 book. Its sentences swam to meet me like parodies: “ . . . Translate: *Unite and defeat the US aggressors and their running dogs!*”¹¹²

So, far from being relative, the universals in morality are not so-called “subjective universals” of sentiment, but moral categories like being unthinkable, treason and theft. It is these moral categories that are embodied in the Moral Consensus. They are understood via the Moral Consensus as being characteristic patterns (deformations) of relationships in reality—inter-personal reality, as I have described it.

Socrates is among the greatest of dissidents. However, he was a strange man, spending his time talking to boys in the market, questioning, as if a fool, the basics of Greek civil life: courage, justice, piety and love. The threat he presented to Athenian society was real.¹¹³ For, if what he said was right, things would have to change, more or less as

¹⁰⁹Thubron, *Behind The Wall*, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

¹¹⁰Kolnai, ‘Moral Consensus’, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 144–164

¹¹²Thubron, *Behind The Wall*, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

¹¹³For details, see Marina Barabas, ‘The Strangeness of Socrates’, in *Philosophical Investigations* 9 (1986), pp. 89–110.

drastically as Callicles said.¹¹⁴ But the questions Socrates asked did not appeal for their meaning to something outside Athenian society. The meaning—and the threat and the consequences—was internal to the Moral Consensus: they *depend* on each other. Socrates was not trying to abolish the moral order so much as bring into clearer relief what everyone already experienced, what was pregnant in their shared conceptions of justice, courage and love. His was a dissident conscience *within* the Moral Consensus, not a dissidence *against* it.

I have already suggested that it is not clear what, short of the pathologically disordered or genuinely nihilistic, would constitute a genuine challenge *against* the Moral Consensus. But the possibility and existence of dissidence is not *ipso facto* such a challenge, since it may be *within* that consensus.

Nor does 'Consensus' require a wholly determinate character such that any dissidence within is also dissidence against. When Copernicus and Einstein challenged the existing order, they did so as scientists. Science was, during the transitions engendered by new theory, less determinate than times when its content was not in dispute. When Luther challenged Rome, he did so as a Christian.

If our conceptions and experience of the moral (and much else) are indeterminate, then there is a role for dissidence so-called to clarify and interpret our shared moral experience on the one hand, and extend it consonantly on the other. Part of the proof that Socrates' dissidence was indeed consonant is shown by the followers he had (e.g. Plato and Xenophon), their followers, and the appeal he retains today.

Accepting the character of such extensions is of a piece with what I called 'narrative logic' in §7.6. In that way, rationality is as much a part of the Moral Consensus as it is in Scientific Practice, at least if it is taken minimally as what tends to convince or move us.¹¹⁵ How far rationality depends on the Moral Consensus of a society instead of the Moral Consensus seemingly familiar to all humans varies. Kolnai remarks that the so-called miraculous spread of Christianity by apostles armed with little more than their own exemplary living is not so surprising, for it drew on pre-existing categories. By contrast:

It is extremely unlikely that the sight of, say, Thugs living up perfectly to their Thuggish standards would morally bemuse us and convert us to Thuggism as a principle or attitude superior to our own Christian or humanitarian habits of

¹¹⁴See §4.3.

¹¹⁵The capitalization 'Scientific Practice' is a suggested similarity with Moral Consensus.

mind.¹¹⁶

10.11 Common Humanity Redux

My aim in this chapter was to respond to concerns from a certain stripe of realism about the ground of morality and the methods by which we understand it. The concern arose from the seeming contingency and dependence of the explanation of morality I gave in previous chapters. I suggested that a metaphysically less-committed way to express the concern was to account for the possibility of dissidence: where a few are better placed to grasp moral truth than most. The assumption I have shown as mistaken is that the better POV is an impersonal, abstract, transcendent or universal one.

Beyond the difficulties internal to and consequent on this assumption, I have also shown it a mistake to think that it is the sole alternative to intolerable consequences. I have shown this by providing an alternative that accommodates dissidence. More importantly I have done it by showing that understanding dissidence *or* conformance to a particular Moral Consensus requires more detail not less: more about individuals' lives; more knowledge of a community's ways; in short, particulars, however contingent, rather than commonality or generality. In the absence of such contact and understanding, it should be no surprise that people remain alien, even with perfect knowledge of what is common. Knowledge of what is common is not enough, it is not even a start.

In my response, I also wanted to extend my account of moral reality with the idea of Moral Consensus. I have wanted to move back and forth between aspects of moral reality. On one aspect, moral reality has a definite form that provides evidence, is explained, is something to which we respond with necessity or fidelity. On another, given the personal dimension of morality, moral reality is formless until given shape by the anomalous individual will. On a third, moral reality is different again because it is ordered in conformance to the conditions and character of human life, i.e. the natural history of man. These three elements recall the tripartite account of harmony given in §4.6.

The methods of inference, evidence, explanation characteristic of distinctively human thinking are first learned from others, in a kind of "apprenticeship."¹¹⁷ Later, as we master

¹¹⁶Kolnai, 'Moral Consensus', *op. cit.*, p. 159.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 147.

them, we operate more or less independently of our teachers. In the case of science this independence may be largely complete. Strictly, a mathematical genius may complete his proofs without anyone else, and in complete ignorance of contemporary events.

In morals this is not so, for the data of morals is our experience of others. The reciprocity of responses, evaluations, and so on depends on others even when one has become morally competent and autonomous.¹¹⁸ Others are the Moral Consensus one is seeking to investigate. This is a difference in the nature of the enterprise of understanding from the one intuitively supposed in science, mathematics and logic. Moral understanding is an enterprise that is not only inextinguishably human, but also one constrained to one's time and place.

Such limits on the understanding may seem arbitrary if one clings to the fantasy of conceiving determinately the true nature of things (or is dogmatic in denying the anthropomorphic content of knowledge). I think Wittgenstein pointed to this danger when, in discussing the logico-grammatical structure of language, he said:

The rules of grammar may be called "arbitrary", if that is to mean that the aim of the grammar is nothing but that of language. If someone says "If our language had not this grammar, it could not express these facts"—it should be asked what "could" means here.¹¹⁹

I interpret this remark as saying that facts that could not *in principle* be expressible could neither be a part of language nor feature in our lives, i.e. be part of our life with language. It is a remark about the conditions for meaningful thought, for the possibility of 'these facts' to be meaningful or demonstrative.

For some this will remain unsatisfactory. The idea that the gaps between people and communities could be bridged by focusing on seeing just one thing the *same* way and working from that is a powerful one. If what I have said in this thesis is on track, then the way to bridge the gaps between peoples' worlds, or just within one's own, is not by focusing on the minimum we have in common from a transcendent position. Rather we must attend to the particular, to peoples and individuals and the qualities of their lives.

Any appeal to a commonality among us assumes that others' dispositions—fears, wants, proclivities—are the same as ours. The assumption is based on a belief that there is a distinctively human soul that responds to our appeals. It is not a belief, I think, whose

¹¹⁸Kolnai, 'Moral Consensus', *op. cit.*, p. 147.

¹¹⁹Wittgenstein, *PI*, *op. cit.*, §497.

truth could be warranted, anymore than reality itself can be. Therefore, the motivation to take others morally seriously, as one does in criticizing them, is one without an end.

11 Concluding Remarks

Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

11.1 What have I explained?

The question to which I have addressed myself has been, what is the nature of our understanding of moral situations and the criticisms we make concerning our responses to them? I used decision-making as a point of entry into the development of an answer. Decision-making in moral contexts is formally describable by questions in the immediate form, "what should I do," and in the reflective form, "how should I live or be?"¹ The latter question is often offered as the root conception of morality. Perhaps it is if one begins from a conception of moral understanding that is focused on the individual's understanding of his confrontation with the world.

There is another conception of moral understanding whose focus is expressed by the phrase, "how things should be." This can be placed in the interrogative form, "How should things be?" However, it can also be placed in the imperative form, "This is how things should be!" (Indeed, it can be put in optative form too, "I wish this is how things should be.") The explanation of moral understanding I have offered also explains how one understands "how things should be."²

The contrast is between understanding one's moral task as principally choosing what to make by one's will and bringing one's will into accord with what is. It is a contrast, again, between the individual as both in and out of the world. These contrasts come together in trying to elucidate the internal and external—i.e. recognitional and impositional—senses of "how things should be." I have elaborated this contrast in the chapters above in providing conceptual elucidations of key concepts that make up this contrast. On the one

¹Cp. §3.2.

²Here, I think 'ought' may be harmlessly substituted for 'should'.

hand, there are the external elements of moral reality: lives, communities, relations and facts. On the other, there are the internal elements of moral subjects: the will, attention, decisions and responses.

My account of moral understanding aimed to span this contrast by showing how criticism of moral understanding stabilizes internal and external elements, yet leaves them dynamic and interactive as opposed to inert or hypostasized. That is a reason for focusing on moral criticism—the ability to make, accept and reject it—as the central expression of moral understanding. With criticism as a focus, it is natural that I should have focused on the language of criticism as the phenomenon which requires explanation. The explanation I have given then is that our moral understanding is constituted by our ability to use the language of criticism. That does not make morality essentially linguistic, even if its persistence or subsistence depends on living lives with language. My explanation has, I think, showed as much.

11.2 Have I met my stated constraints?

In §1.4, while enumerating my assumptions, I listed three constraints on an acceptable account of morality. The constraints were that the account be usable in making actual moral decisions; should reflect the language of actual moral decision-making; and be applicable to moral instruction. My focus on the language of moral criticism pays dividends in meeting these constraints.

The second constraint is met reasonably straightforwardly. Although I have sought to refine the meanings of certain key terms in my account, and though the *role* of critical language has been extensively elaborated, the *use* of ordinary critical language has scarcely been revised.

Similarly, the third constraint is also met directly. Moral instruction will involve in the first instance, teaching students the meanings of critical terms. The meanings of such terms will of course also include the conditions for their application. Naturally, linguistic instruction is not wholly determinate or complete in the classroom. If it were, there could not be developments in language use in ordinary speech, but also in specialized areas such as poetry, prose and rhetoric. That moral terms are used for moral criticism does not present any special problems, though as with any domain there may be related concepts

that require elaboration. When these related concepts are for external elements of moral reality—e.g. lives, communities, inter-personal relations—again there seems no special problem for teaching them.

Concepts related to internal elements will require instruction in terms of decision-making. That is integral with the question of whether this account is applicable to actual moral decision-making—the first constraint. A self-conscious heuristic for moral decision-making may be coarsely elaborated. First, consider who may be affected by your decisions? Second, consider the nature of your relation to them and what obligations that brings in train? Third, consider what kind of criticisms they might properly make of you if you were to act as you intend? This is enough to indicate how this account differs from accounts which focus on consequences or the universalizability of one's decisions. It is also imaginable how one might instruct another, for instance by drawing attention to the nature of an inter-personal relation or to the application of a particular criticism to a putative decision. No doubt, the anatomy of decision from chapter 2 could also be used.

This can only be half the story, for I have allowed that not all decision-making is reflective or self-conscious in the manner just described. Often one acts automatically or unconsciously, and yet one is held (or holds oneself) morally responsible. Moral understanding must be internalized if it is to produce a high proportion of appropriate responses, particularly in unreflective circumstances. It is far less obvious how one might aim in instruction specifically for the internalization of what is taught. Sometimes repetition or conditioning is one vehicle for this. This is, however, difficult to distinguish from reflex or mere constraint, neither of which is suitable for moral criticism.³

It is for this reason that I mooted an account of the nature of discussion and argument in chapter 7. The idea I developed there is that in argument we are seeking to shift someone's point of view such that what we are arguing for will seem logical (in the narrative sense) or natural. A shift in point of view is, plausibly, an internal shift. I think, therefore, that my account meets the first constraint I suggested, even if, as I stressed, there is no guarantee of success in argument, nor any sanction beyond increased distance between the disputants.

³This is amply demonstrated in Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

11.3 How could this be developed further?

The breadth of this investigation has been large. That has meant that my investigation has addressed several inter-related issues in moral philosophy. Some of these issues have been theoretical, e.g. issues of moral cognitivism. Others have been phenomenological, e.g. the topics of remorse and apology. I am conscious that none of these received comprehensive attention. However, in order to outline a complete explanation of morality within the constraints of a doctoral thesis, I had to pick my points carefully.

Broadly, I think my account could be developed in two directions: theoretical and applied. Each would address the thinner parts of my account. My account requires a theory of action that does not originate exclusively in an agent's capacity to cause effects in the world. Specification of moral understanding is an aid to such a project, because it refines the variety of motivation. My account needs integration with an account of moral semantics. The specification of the objects of moral understanding make plausible specifications for the referents of moral terms. In my account, I have made use of fine-grained epistemic divisions between the cognitive and the conceptual, as well as ideas like awareness, realization and an *Einstellung*. I should like to develop these further. I have both assumed and elaborated a notion of moral reality. If I were to focus further theoretical developments of my account, I should like to draw together the above strands into a careful elaboration of the *experience* of moral reality.

With regard to the application of morality, I sketched some considerations in favor of demarcating the moral and the ethical, as well as the prudential. These distinctions, probably revisionary in nature, would, I think, be useful to refine. I have not made an argument for that claim, nor much of the demarcation, but I would like to do so. In the same vein, I am interested in distinguishing political, communal, and moral obligations. I am unsure whether my account will prove generally suitable to making these distinctions.

Certainly, I am more confident that the account can be used for programs of moral education, for the reasons I described above. In addition, I am confident that several areas of applied moral philosophy—e.g. medical ethics, engineering ethics and bio-ethics—can be profitably pursued by focusing first on the nature of the relationships and authority we bear to each other as doctors, patients, industrialists, citizens and human beings, rather than on salient consequences or legal principles. Again, the idea of moral reality and its

dissolution is one that is applicable to areas where it is necessary to restore what wrongdoing has destroyed. One example is in the penological field of restorative justice, where criminals are encouraged to communicate acknowledgment of the wrong they have done the victim of their crime.⁴ Another is the Truth and Reconciliation commission in South Africa. The advantage of my account is that much progress can be made merely by seeking to elicit or refine, element by element, the Moral Consensus on the nature of particular inter-personal relations or the application of critical terms.

11.4 Final Thought

By my stratagems and skirmishes with a range of issues in moral philosophy, I hoped to have indicated how to break through the defensive lines of established doctrines. I do not claim to have defeated conclusively every issue I have addressed. But, *in toto*, I wanted to make clear a strategy by which one could win the battle. For that reason, I offer the account of morality above as a substantial corrective to several persistent difficulties in moral philosophy and, as such, an extension to the knowledge within the discipline of philosophy.

⁴For more on this idea, see Roger Graef, *Why Restorative Justice? Repairing the harm caused by crime* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2000).

Afterword

It seems to me a good question not often, and even less often convincingly, answered as to the motive for asking and answering the questions philosophers pose. To some extent, philosophy is an enterprise, particularly in its recent professionalized academic form. When it is, it often uses the methods and adopts the motives of its allied disciplines: mathematics, science, and the social sciences. When philosophy is not an enterprise, the motives for these questions must be personal, as they are with literature.

George Orwell provided four reasons for why he wrote: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose.⁵ I cannot in good conscience disclaim the first two, though I hope to have minimized the impact of each. Orwell elaborates the historical impulse as the “desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity.”⁶ This work has been informed by the philosophical knowledge and skills I have gained in over a decade of study. However, I am not a scholar, and I doubt whether what I say here will be used by posterity. Nor can I without hubris offer my explanation above as *the* truth, though I present it as true. I find that it illuminates some of our world, though again in what light I cannot be sure. My motives, like Orwell’s, are mostly political, in a broad sense. He had a “desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples’ idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.”⁷ Similarly, I have conceived the form of the account presented above as a point of view in which some attitudes, actions, and responses will seem natural while others will seem unnatural, perhaps eventually unthinkable. In my lifetime, in Western society, I have observed the withering of the ideas of personal responsibility and community. I think this is a dark portent and I am moved to urge my explanations as an alternative point of view.

⁵George Orwell, ‘Why I Write’, in: *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, volume 18: *Smothered Under Journalism* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), pp.316–320.

⁶Ibid., p. 318.

⁷Ibid., p. 318.

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Appendix A

Translated Materials

Simone Weil, "L'amour de Dieu et le malheur," in *Pensees sans ordre concernant l'amour de Dieu*, Editions Gallimard, 1962, pp. 108-9. Referenced on page 265.

Mais ce qui est en fait perpétuellement présent, ce que par suite il est toujours permis d'aimer, c'est la possibilité du malheur. Les trois faces de notre être y sont toujours exposées. Notre chair est fragile; n'importe quel morceau de matière en mouvement peut la percer, la déchirer, l'écraser ou encore fausser pour toujours un des rouages intérieurs. Notre âme est vulnérable, sujette à des dépressions sans causes, pitoyablement dépendante de toutes sortes de choses et d'êtres eu-mêmes fragiles ou capricieux. Notre personne sociale, dont dépend presque le sentiment de notre existence, est constamment et entièrement exposée à tous les hasards. Le centre même de notre être est lié à ces trois choses par des fibres telles qu'il en sent toutes les blessures un peu graves jusqu'à saigner lui-même. Surtout tout ce qui diminue ou détruit notre prestige sociale, notre droit à la considération, semble altérer ou abolir notre essence elle-même, tant nous avons pour substance l'illusion.

Simone Weil, "La Personne et le Sacré," in *Ecrits de Londres et Dernières Lettres*, Editions Gallimard, 1957, pp. 12-13. Referenced on page 290.

Qu'est-ce qui m'empêche au juste de crever les yeux à cet homme, si j'en ai la licence et que cela m'amuse?

...

Ce qui la retiendrait, c'est de savoir que si quelqu'un lui crevait les yeux, il aurait l'âme déchirée par la pensée qu'on lui fait du mal.

Il y a depuis la petite enfance jusqu'à la tombe, au fond du cœur de tout être humain, quelque chose qui, malgré toute l'expérience des crimes commis, soufferts et observés, s'attend invinciblement à ce qu'on lui fasse du bien et non du mal. C'est cela avant toute chose qui est sacré en tout être humain.

Simone Weil, "La Personne et le Sacré," in *Ecrits de Londres et Dernières Lettres*, Editions Gallimard, 1957, p. 17. Referenced on page 193.

Ce qui est sacré dans la science, c'est la vérité. Ce qui est sacré dans l'art, c'est la beauté. La vérité et la beauté sont impersonnelles. Tout cela est trop évident.

Si un enfant fait un addition, et s'il se trompe, l'erreur porte le cachet de sa personne. S'il procède d'une manière parfaitement correcte, sa personne est absente de toute l'opération.

La perfection est impersonnelle. La personne en nous, c'est la part en nous de l'erreur et du péché.

Simone Weil, *Cahiers I*, Librairie Plon, 1951, p. 20. Referenced on page 293.

Bien et mal. Réalité. Est bien ce qui donne plus de réalité aux êtres et aux choses, mal ce qui le leur enlève.

Les Romains ont fait le mal en dépouillant les villes grecques de leurs statues, parce que les villes les temples, la vie de ces Grecs avaient moins de réalité sans les statues, et parce que les statues ne pouvaient avoir autant de réalité à Rome qu'en Grèce.

Appendix B

Additional Diagrams

The following diagrams may be an aid to understanding ideas in some chapters. They were an aid to the author.

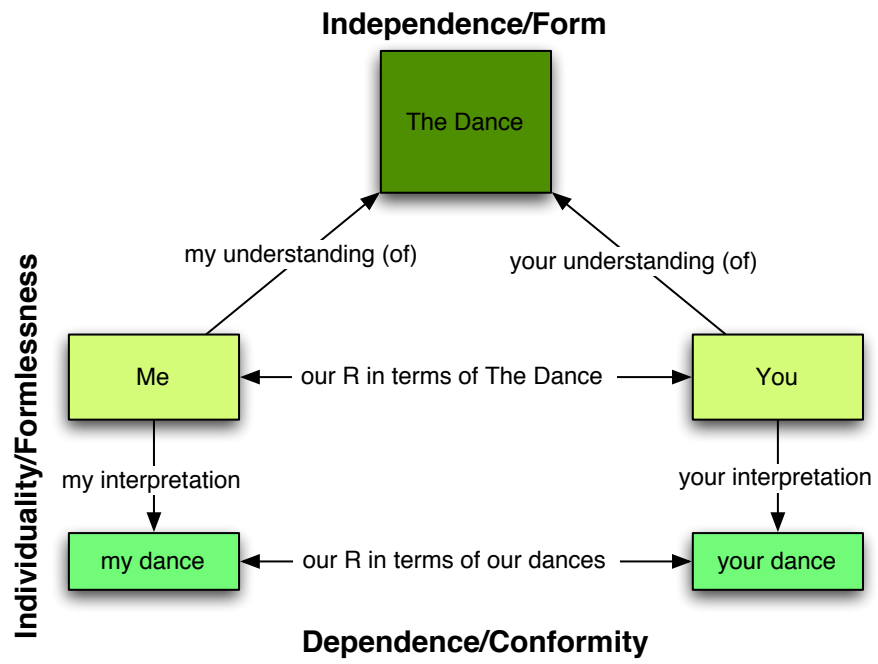


Figure B.1: Tripartite Relation in Chapter 4

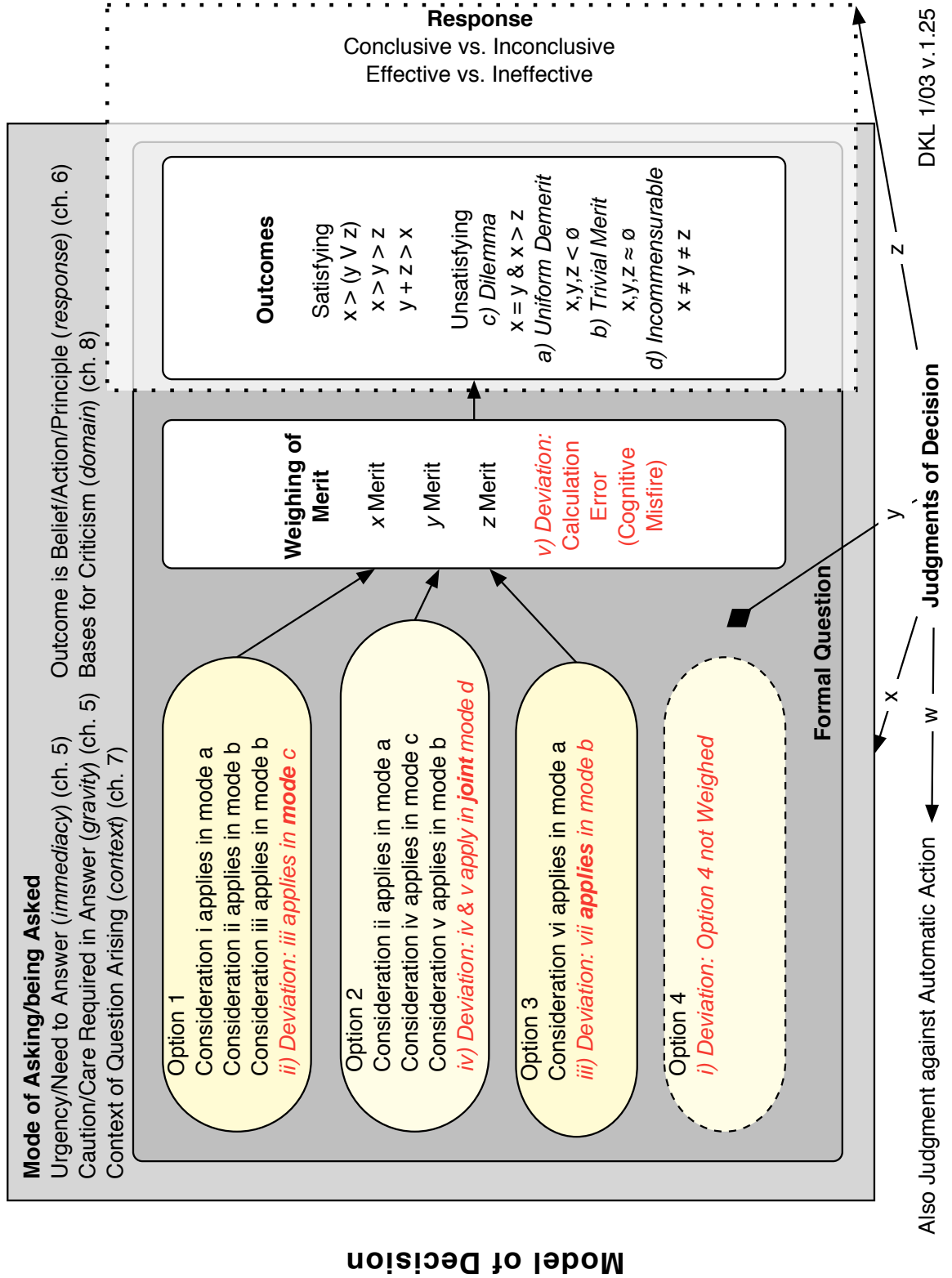


Figure B.2: Model of Decision in Chapter 2

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COLOPHON

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