

5-2017

# Virtuous Particularism: The Case for Contextual Value and Moral Sensitivity

Amar Ojha

*Bates College*, [aojha@bates.edu](mailto:aojha@bates.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scarab.bates.edu/honorsthesis>

---

## Recommended Citation

Ojha, Amar, "Virtuous Particularism: The Case for Contextual Value and Moral Sensitivity" (2017). *Honors Theses*. 205.  
<http://scarab.bates.edu/honorsthesis/205>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Capstone Projects at SCARAB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of SCARAB. For more information, please contact [cbell@bates.edu](mailto:cbell@bates.edu).

Virtuous Particularism: The Case for Contextual Value and Moral Sensitivity

An Honors Philosophy Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Philosophy  
Bates College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by

Amar Ojha  
Lewiston, Maine

3-27-2017

## Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have come to fruition if it were not for the guidance, support, and encouragement of my thesis advisor Susan Stark. I am particularly grateful for her ability to make once daunting literature easily accessible to students and for her clear and precise approach to philosophy. I also want to thank my major advisor, David Cumiskey, for his insurmountable enthusiasm for teaching a class that first drew me to the department, as well as all of the philosophy professors at Bates who have worked to make it one of the strongest departments at the college.

A special thank you goes out to my friends for their ability to make every day of thesis writing and my Bates career a better one. In particular, I want to thank the lovely folks of ΣΘΥ, Jamo and Ben for thought-provoking pillow talk, Meghan for hours of philosophy and ping pong, Hannah for her continual support and friendship through the years, and Noah who helped me hash out ideas throughout this past year.

I would finally like to thank my family for their unwavering support, encouragement, and love through these past four years at Bates.

“What happens when people open their hearts?  
“They get better.”

— Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Reasons to Suspect Moral Principles	7
§1.1 Principlism: An Intuitive Strategy for Problem-Solvers	7
§1.2 Rational Thought and Consistent Answers	8
§1.3 What is a Moral Principle?	10
§1.4 Absolute and Contributory Principles	12
§1.5 Accuracy and Reliability of Principles	14
§1.6 Overriding a Principle	16
§1.7 Deflating a Principle	17
§1.8 Atomism about Reasons	21
§1.9 Where Else to Look	24
Chapter 2: The Particularist Answer to Moral Questions	26
§2.1 Particularism: A Careful Case-by-Case Approach	26
§2.2 The Unreliable Nature of Reasons	27
§2.3 Particularist Consistency and Accuracy	29
§2.4 Particularism's Holism about Reasons	31
§2.5 Dancy's Strong Particularism	34
§2.6 Natural Features and Moral Reasons	39
§2.7 Rossian Principlism as a Compromise	41
§2.8 What about Kantianism and Utilitarianism?	45
§2.9 The Lack of Content in Particularism	47
Chapter 3: How Holism Informs Perception	49
§3.1 Metaphysical Claim about Nature of Reasons	49
§3.2 How Holism Precludes Naturalism	53
§3.3 Strong Holism Versus Weak Holism	57
§3.4 Compatibility with Generalism	60
§3.5 Holism of Similarities	64
§3.6 Moral Perceptual Capacity	67
Chapter 4: Sensitivity to the Good	71
§4.1 Seeing is Knowing and Knowledge is Virtue	71
§4.2 Moral Motivation	74
§4.3 The Continent Will and the Virtuous Person	76
§4.4 The Situationist Challenge to Character	80
§4.5 The Undesirable Moral Saint	85
§4.6 Practices of Unselfing	88
§4.7 Experiencing the Good	91
Conclusion	95
Works Cited	97

## Introduction

We follow principles all the time: when we are writing a sentence, driving a car, or playing chess. We are said to be principled when we uphold our values and refuse to engage in malicious or dangerous behavior. In this work, I wish to challenge that assumption. I argue that the morally righteous agent is not one who possesses the correct list of rules and knows when to use them, but rather, is someone who can see the moral situation for what it is. In other words, the moral good can be realized through a sharp moral perception, not through a strong will or ability to adhere to principles.

Admittedly, principles are useful. It is far easier to instruct children to avoid strangers than to, teach them how to distinguish the good Samaritan from the sketchy character. A straightforward law against stealing is easier to enforce one that distinguishes between when it is right and wrong to steal. Morality is a uniquely human enterprise, and as humans invested in the rationality, consistency, and intelligibility of our actions and beliefs, principles make sense to us.

Take the following example. Your friend believes the following few things: the well-being of lungs is essential for breathing, lungs ought to be protected from pollutants and irritants whenever possible, smoking cigarettes damages lung functionality. For this friend who is committed to lung maintenance to then smoke cigarettes while still holding all those beliefs to be true would strike us not only as strange, but as inconsistent, irrational, or unintelligible. The friend's beliefs are at diametric odds with their actions. They are either wrong in their beliefs or are wrong in their actions. Both their beliefs and actions cannot coherently stand to be true, taken together.

Principles make intelligible our decisions by standardizing our beliefs and actions. It is unintelligible to perform an act directly opposed to a belief. It would strike us as nonsensical,

therefore, if we observed a self-professed vegetarian enjoying a steak dinner. Holding true to principles helps to align our beliefs and desires into an intelligible narrative. We want principles to be consistent. If a set of twins were caught lying by their parents, we would find it inconsistent for them to forgive one child but admonish the other for the exact same act. A strict reading of principles, whatever they may be, would leave no room for exceptions. For instance, Kantian deontology may require that we always tell the truth. We then might find ourselves in a situation in which truth-telling is not only uncomfortable but may be the wrong thing to do. Say a child asks your opinion on a particularly egregious drawing of which they are quite proud. Would the right thing be to tell the honest truth or to spare the child's feelings? Take a far more extreme example in which Nazi soldiers ask if you know the whereabouts of a Jewish family, which you do. In this instance, what would be the right thing to do? Most would hesitate to tell the truth if at all. Many might believe that in this case lying is the morally right thing to do. The point I want to make is that principles may be useful tools that generally guide actions but are often not as sensitive to contexts as they should be. An excellent rule of thumb is to not shove people. But the principle temporarily loses its reason-giving power when an individual is in danger of being struck by an oncoming vehicle and immediate action is required.

In this work, I want to argue that it is not enough to say that we can sometimes override principles, that sometimes our concern for the child's feelings outweigh our commitment to truth-telling, even though honesty is always the right thing to do. I argue instead that sometimes the nature of moral properties themselves must change according to contexts. Stealing in one instance may be wrong, but in another, it very well may be the right thing to do. Killing an animal is almost always the wrong thing to do. If a beloved pet is suffering from irreversible ailments, however, euthanasia might be the right answer to an unfortunate situation. Just as

chemists speak of elements with a positive or negative oxidation state based on the element's valence, we can think metaphorically too of moral features as carrying a positive or negative valence that counts in favor or in disfavor of an action, respectively. There are two ways we can think of moral valences: either as fixed or as flexible.

The atomist about reasons holds to say that moral valences are fixed. The principle of kindness, for instance, always has a positive valence. In other words, performing acts of kindness is a right-making feature of an action. If the act of stealing was wrong, then stealing always carries a negative valence and would count against performing acts of theft. Even so, the atomist about reasons must add up all of the valences of features to figure out what to do. Say someone needs help loading furniture into a car. The kind thing to do here would be to help. However, say as you are loading furniture alongside the stranger, you learn that they are in the midst of an active robbery. Now, the negative property of stealing might contribute significantly more than the positive property of helping, so the right thing to do would be to stop. The magnitude of valences, therefore, might change. In a game of musical chairs, the kind thing to do may be to play with the children who are asking you to. The act of chair-theft (taking that which does not belong to you) involved in the game might suggest otherwise. However, in this case, the goodness of joy you would bring about far outweighs the badness of taking a chair from another.

I want to challenge this view about the values we assign to moral properties. I argue that the valences of moral features are not fixed. That is, individual valences do not just differ in *magnitude*, but may also differ in *direction*. The very same feature may, in one case, count as a right-making feature, but in another case may count as a wrong-making feature. Moral valences are flexible in this account. Helping, in the context of helping someone pick up dropped papers is the right thing to do. Helping, in the context of helping someone load stolen goods in a truck



is the wrong thing to do. These axiological fluctuations are not arbitrarily determined but are dependent on context. Principles, I argue, do not provide a flexible enough framework to account for this sort of variability.

Moral principlism fails primarily because of its shortsightedness on how features contribute to the overall moral picture in a situation. We cannot possibly know enough about a given context to decide beforehand that “helping is good” or “helping is bad.” We need to be sensitive to the context in which we are deciding for or against an action. This line of thinking is endorsed by the moral particularist, who suggests that it is not principles that should guide action, but particulars. Particulars are the relevant content that make up the moral situation. Features might affect each other in ways that we would not know they could until we realize their effects on our overall consideration. The feature of having a birthday cake for a child seems to be a good-making feature, as it would bring about immense happiness. The feature of the child being diabetic would change the way we now think about the first particular, now making it a bad-making feature in the overall situation. It is too fast to say “cake is good” or “cake is bad” without considering the context in which the cake is situated.

Moral particularism, I argue, correctly calls for an emphasis on particulars as action-guiding. Most important in this view is that it considers moral reasons holistically, that is, not atomistically. It does not morally stamp a positive or negative valence on an act but considers the entire relevant context present in order to fully inform the moral agent of whether a feature is relevant and if so how it counts towards the act. Particularism might be so strong as to say that we know absolutely nothing about how reasons behave until we see them in their contexts. I take this to be a radical version of particularism, and one that leaves little to no room for general guidelines and experiential knowledge. As creatures that learn and apply knowledge to new

situations, humans do pick up on how often reasons count in particular ways. We might be able to say that dismembering a human is the wrong thing to do because in most cases we encounter or can imagine, it is wrong. Might there be a context in which it is the right thing to do? I think most people would agree that a surgeon performing a medically necessary amputation that might save someone's life is the right thing to do. Even if we do need to see situations holistically, as the particularist suggests, we can still learn from experience and carry knowledge from case to case. Knowing how reasons tend to interact with one another, however, might not be enough to codify generalities into moral principles given the incredible richness of difficult situations. In these cases, we might need to be present in the situation to figure out what the morally right thing to do would be.

I think it is not enough for moral particularism to say that we must be present in the situation to know the right thing to do. Clearly, we need to be *aware* of particulars, or the salient features, but this necessarily requires us to correctly *perceive* situations. I do not think that moral particularism tells us how it is we can clear our moral vision. To address this, I turn to virtue theory to help answer the question. Virtue theory speaks of the virtuous person as being able to correctly see situations for what they are and perform the actions required by the situation before them. This, to my mind, is the ideal particularist. I discuss the practicality of said virtuous person and even if this sort of character is possible or desirable. Ultimately, I conclude with what I take to be a major obstruction in our moral vision, our egotistical selves and a process by which we might be able to escape this murkiness and become morally sensitive to particulars.

This thesis is organized as follows: In Chapter 1, I describe the case for moral principlism and why this traditional view is both intuitive and attractive. In Chapter 2, I offer moral particularism as a sufficient answer to problems faced by moral principles. In Chapter 3, I defend

holism about reasons as being a perceptual capacity by which we can become sensitive to moral particulars. In Chapter 4, I outline virtue theory as painting a picture of how it might be that we can sharpen our moral vision without sacrificing other human goods to become the virtuous particularist.

## Chapter 1: Reasons to Suspect Moral Principles

### §1.1 Principlism: An Intuitive Strategy for Problem-Solvers

To be principled is to adhere to a set of rules and know right from wrong. As the expression makes clear, we equate principles to morality because we believe in the instructive weight of moral principles. Even if we do not explicitly realize it, we internalize the reasoning power of moral principles and many of our decisions are rationalized by them. What I mean by this is that we cite principles to demonstrate how our acts are justified by principles that give us reason to act. We chastise the child who pockets chocolate at the grocery store because of principles regarding ownership and theft. Philosophers pull the trolley lever to kill one person instead of five because of the principle of minimizing harm. Principles in this sense provide a reason to behave one way and not another. It is clear that we cite principles to justify our decisions and distinguish right from wrong and good from bad. But why do we turn to principles? And more importantly, do moral principles consistently give us a reliable reason to follow them? The answer to the first question, I believe, can be found in the sort of creatures that we are.

We are problem-solving animals and pattern-seeking creatures. Faced with far-reaching and seemingly unrelated questions, we look for patterns to inform our decision-making. Emergent patterns, a set of certain features, for instance, may call for a specific principle. We categorize problems and find principles that correspond with different sets of situations. Certain situations have to do with honesty while others have to do with property rights. Categorization of similar features to solve these moral puzzles serves two important purposes: first, it allows us to answer seemingly dissimilar questions with relative ease, and second, it gives us some sense of

consistency, as principles remain constant over time. This intuitive view is the idea that moral consideration and judgment rely on moral principles and the view that champions this intuition will be referred to as principlism. This view is also sometimes called ethical generalism.

In this work, I ultimately disagree with principlism, which claims that the best way to answer moral questions is to utilize principles; however, I admit that we do need to figure out how to solve the problems that moral principles try to address. These far-reaching questions require solutions and the decisions we make in the moral realm are of great concern. They range from personal ethical dilemmas to interpersonal disputes to societal qualms to geopolitical conflicts. Before going into what I propose to be an adequate replacement for moral principles, let us first turn to what it is that principles are doing.

## §1.2 Rational Thought and Consistent Answers

The sort of animals we are, pattern-seeking categorizers, explains why we evolutionarily may think the way we do. But there is a social dimension to citing principles as well. We want our decisions to make sense to others and ourselves and reflect some understandable pattern that is internally consistent. In other words, we do not want our beliefs and actions to contradict each other or be self-defeating. To make our decisions rational and intelligible, a key feature of our course of action is consistency. For instance, if someone observed it raining outside, stated they owned an umbrella, had no intention of getting wet, yet intentionally forewent the use of one, we would find this to be inconsistent with their understanding of the world. Their action would rightly be considered irrational. This consistency leads to generalizability. If we note an act to be wrong in one situation, we can carry that knowledge over to another situation and make a similar

judgment, especially if we found that judgment to be the right one. Philosopher David Bakhurst describes R.M. Hare's explanation of this as such:

Hare argues that when we judge a particular action, *A*, 'wrong,' we do so in virtue of some of its non-moral properties, say *xyz*. Consistency then demands that we find any action wrong that shares just those non-moral properties. Thus our judgment in the particular case is 'universalized' into a moral rule: any action which is *xyz* is wrong. (162)

Moral principles can be thought to be constituted by non-moral properties, *xyz*, which make up one action, *A*. If those same wrong-making properties taken together, *xyz*, are found in another case, we satisfy the consistency principle by calling out *xyz* in action *B* as wrong. In this sense, the particular case that is made up of those non-moral properties can be applied or universalized into a moral rule that is applicable in other similar cases. Principles, then, arise from the collection of features that have been marked as right or wrong, and any future appearance of this collection can expect to be judged by that principle that was employed in a similar instance constituted of similar properties. To materialize Hare's explanation of consistent judgment of properties into a concrete non-moral example, take Michael Smith's analogy from art.

Consider, Smith suggests, two paintings that are completely and exactly identical in all natural properties. Each atom is in the exact relative location to every other in each of the two paintings, substantially indistinguishable, such that all phenomenological properties perceived are also identical, including but not limited to color, texture, brushstroke, painting, lighting, shadow, highlight, contrast, composition, etc. Suppose that someone found the first painting beautiful and awe-inspiring and the other dreadful and ugly. Immediately, we recognize this judgment to

invoke some sort of inconsistency, as there exists no relevant difference between the two and therefore cannot merit a discrepancy in evaluation (22). As such, we would take this judgment to be nonsensical, as there is nothing to which one can point that would differentiate one from the other. Note, this sort of argument may also be employed in arguing against moral relativism, where the same heinous act is condemned in one cultural setting but embraced in another, where the elements making up the moral situation are similar or even identical but the agents have different conceptions of right and wrong. In this sense, we wish to say two things. First, there must be some relevant distinguishing feature to which we can point that would make something right instead of wrong or vice versa and cultural standards do not suffice as changing moral properties. Second, there must be some objective metric to which we can all appeal in making moral claims, accessible to all. Universalizable moral principles seem to fit the bill.

### §1.3 What is a Moral Principle?

Principlism is usually assumed in moral theory, yet rarely defended as a concept in explicit terms. The view holds that moral questions are best considered and answered when principles are applied to a moral problem. But what exactly are principles? David McNaughton characterizes a moral principle as “[a] finite check-list of non-moral properties which are morally relevant to the rightness or wrongness of an action. With the aid of such a check-list the agent could examine any actual or possible action and determine its rightness or wrongness by consulting [their] list” (192).

McNaughton is saying a few things here: there is some connection between the moral and non-moral; certain non-moral properties are morally relevant; and the agent must examine, foresee, and determine the right action most consistent with the principle(s). It might also help if

the list is a reliable one to consult. Now defined, moral principles still bear the question of what they offer practically and metaphysically that make them an attractive and viable tool.

As stated earlier, practically, principles appear an expedient way to answer problems consistently across distinct yet similar scenarios. Commonalities are noted across situations and an assessment of the situation leads agents to deploy the principle most relevant to that circumstance using the mental checklist McNaughton mentions. This requires that we get the principles right and that they are executed appropriately and contrasted against competing principles, requiring an ability to discern relevant properties in evaluating the right principle to use. So the individual who is conflicted about stealing a can of beans may have to deliberate between various principles related to property, value, sustenance, punishment, etc., while not necessarily having to think about principles related to, say, the treatment of crustacean lifeforms. This seems obvious, yet is an important point to make, because this sort of deliberation is often done subconsciously and only the trickier ethical questions require conscious deliberation. The ability to discover relevant features in the matrix of existence will play a particularly crucial role later in the challenging view to principlism.

From the mix of moral ingredients present arises the problem of which recipe to use for the best outcome. Principles often come into conflict with one another and some of the most heated questions in the political arena are of this sort. The debate surrounding abortion, simply put, can be viewed as two fundamental principles pinned against each other: one principle might be the right to one's decisions involving one's body, that is, having autonomy over how one can use one's body and the other might be a principles about the specialness and protection of human life



in all its forms<sup>1</sup>. Most people in this debate, I believe, recognize the weight of each principle in its own right to some extent, but given the context of an abortion the difference of opinions can be accounted for by how much weight each principle is granted, for differing reasons, and therefore, which principle ultimately is prioritized in one's conception of the good and what is right. To better consider the weight of each principle, so to speak, it reasons to turn to the question of the nature and function of a principle. Let us consider two distinct ways in which principles might function.

#### §1.4 Absolutist and Contributory Principles

We can think of two different conceptions of principles: absolutist and contributory. The absolutist conception holds that moral principles are exceptionless and that all actions as they relate to that principle are painted with an overall moral valence, either positive or negative, and often with a directive or obligatory force to them (Dancy 17). An absolute principle against stealing would mean that stealing is always wrong, all things considered, without exception, and can be imagined to carry a negative valence associated with that property. In fact, any behavior that incorporates theft for whatever reason is wholly wrong given the negative valence of the act and must be avoided. The contributory conception of principles is a bit laxer and more nuanced, in that the act of stealing will always still count as a reason to avoid an action, but it is merely contributing, not wholly defining the entire action with a specific valence. Instead of painting the entire act as negative with wide brushstrokes as the absolute principle might, the contributing principle might demarcate the act with sprinkles of negative. In that sense, to return to the

---

<sup>1</sup> I avoid the phrase "sanctity of human life" to prevent interjecting a supernatural claim, as the "specialness of human life" carries a similar effect.

principle against stealing above, stealing is always to be avoided; however, other principles may be at play that change the overall valence by contributing principles that give it a more overall positive valence. The question to act then becomes a measuring act that considers all principles that have contributed to the act. The principle against stealing contributes to the argument to not take that course of action but does not outright determine the decision entirely.

Take the children's game musical chairs in which one has to "steal" a seat from others in order to win<sup>2</sup>. The absolutist child about principles would have to refuse to play, out of principle, in that stealing in any form is always wrong and completely colors the game with a negative valence, something to be avoided and deemed wrong. The contributory child about principles would say that the stealing *aspect* of the game is wrong; however, there may be other factors at work that outweigh the wrongness of the stealing that will inevitably occur in the situation, such as the fun of the game, thereby making the overall valence of choosing to play the game positive and thus allowing the child to participate. This second child would still acknowledge that they may be taking that which is not theirs, a chair up for grabs, but this contributory aspect of stealing may be greatly minimized in their consideration. Notably, in both instances, the agents understand stealing as always being wrong; it always counts as a reason to not do something. Now, if the children failed to see taking chairs in the game as stealing at all then the principle against stealing would not be a relevant one to evoke. In both conceptions of moral principles, stealing *invariably* counts as a reason to not do something.

The convenience of being able to categorize unique and novel situations into groups to which principles can then be applied seems to be a reliable and effective method insofar as the

---

<sup>2</sup> While this may not be the best example of a game involving stealing, it is a well-known one that serves the purpose of making the point. Another game involving stealing would also do the trick.

principles are sound and actions executed accordingly. Metaphysically, principlism makes a grand claim: there exist fundamental ideas that can always be applied to moral questions to determine the best course of action. Granted, this is not to say that principlists believe that humanity has succeeded in finding the right principles, but that these principles can and might exist. A weaker account of principlism may make a less profound metaphysical claim, opting instead to say that while principles may not be woven into the fabric of nature, they can be of practical use to humans in generating correct answers to moral problems. The following section discusses how this generalist view faces serious difficulties.

### §1.5 Accuracy and Reliability of Principles

The most apparent problem principlism faces and the one tackled first, is a practical concern regarding the accuracy of principles. It is difficult to come up with or to discover the correct set of principles, assuming there is one. This stems largely, arguably, from the complexity of moral questions and a variety of conceptions of the good. In this sense, principlism's attempt to simplify and standardize these moral questions falls short of its goal. This is a practical worry and what I refer to as the difficulty problem of principlism. The most evident manifestation of this problem is the historical success, or lack thereof, of coming up with adequate principles that work across situations. A concrete example may better demonstrate this point, employing perhaps a rather uncontentious and seemingly sound principle. Take, for instance, the nearly ubiquitous principle to not kill. There are enough moral situations that involve killing that some thinkers have been able to work out why it is wrong to kill for a number of reasons and distill this down to the principle that one ought to avoid inflicting death upon others. This seems straightforward. But what about instances where killing might be justified? Might there be

scenarios, say, of self-defense, abortion, or euthanasia, to name a few, in which causing the death of another person is justified? We may say something to the effect of the importance of self-preservation when facing an imminent and unavoidable threat to justify killing for self-defense, especially where this was the only means by which to protect oneself. Similarly, death may be the thing that we want in some cases. Take the terminally ill patient who is content with ending their suffering and wishes to go out on their own terms, and would prefer a comfortable death to a drawn-out cessation of identity and functionality. Yet any principlist, whether holding an absolutist or contributory conception of principles would say that the act of killing is *always* wrong, no exceptions, in that the principle counts as a reason to not kill. Principlists may come back to say that this is surely not what they meant by the principle, and they are granted this for the sake of argument. We worry not about well-intended protection of a good life and ensuring comfort for living persons that may involve killing, such as in the cases of self-defense, abortion, or euthanasia. Rather, we worry about the malicious intent and violent behavior that is troubling in killings. Yet here too we face difficult questions. What constitutes a person? How responsible are agents for malice? The point with these examples is not to be taken flippantly; rather, this is intended to demonstrate the practical difficulty in establishing exceptionless principles that are to hold true across temporal and spatial dimensions, given the complexity and variety of situations most humans encounter. It seems, at least, that coming up with principles to hold true consistently is a difficult task for the principlist. But this does not imply that it is necessarily impossible, as it could very well be the case that the right principles exist, whatever they may be, and that human beings simply have not yet found them. I argue that not only does principlism face serious difficulty, which it does, but rather and moreover, the entire enterprise may be impossible because of what it claims.

## §1.6 Overriding a Principle

In the cases above, we need not believe that the principle to not kill is hopelessly simple, but rather, for each example there exist other principles that override the straightforward principle. As such, we need not abandon all principles but rather prioritize them in some systematic fashion. The ordering of principles may also vary, it would seem, given the context of the situation. Sometimes we recognize stealing to be indefensibly wrong. Other times, there may be other principles that override this concern. This is not to say that we then believe stealing to be right henceforth, but that other considerations have taken precedence. This understanding offers a counter to Hare's explanation of principles above, that any instance of *xyz* will be identified with a moral property of rightness or wrongness, from which we can construe principles to employ in similar circumstances in the future. Notably, there is difference between Hare's example of moral situations and Smith's analogy from art and real life. Differences do exist between seemingly similar scenarios or works of art and real-life moral problems. Bakhurst pushes back on Hare's view as being incomplete and thereby mistaken:

This version of universalizability is too crude, for though *A* may be right in virtue of *xyz*, action *B*, which is also *xyz*, may yet be wrong in virtue of further properties. If I approve of an action because it is kind and generous, I am not thereby committed to approve of the gift of stolen property however kindly and generously meant. The universalizability theorist must therefore move to the view that if we call *A* wrong in virtue of *xyz* we must call any action similar 'in relevant respects,' where a party is relevant to *A*'s goodness if its presence or absence would affect the value of *A*. (162)

Bakhurst here touches on an important point. Even though properties of kindness and generosity contribute to an action's goodness, they may be overridden by other factors, such as if the gift was not acquired justly. This is not to say that the thief gift-giver is not kind or generous in giving the gift, but rather, that the approval of the receiver and the overall moral picture has shifted slightly, in that we are now more reluctant to accept this present. This is a clear instance of principles being overridden by other considerations, which still holds principles to be true, but gives more weight to some than to others. I go on to argue that it is not enough that principles are simply overridden by other principles but I want to emphasize how it might be that a principle does not always hold true using the intuitive idea of overriding principles. The important point to be gleaned from this section is that certain considerations may help to discount a general assessment or principle. This concept will resurface in coming sections. But might there be a reason to completely discount the enterprise of principles as a whole, moral and otherwise? Some philosophers believe so. In what follows I look at one compelling case against principles, and therefore principlism as a theory.

### §1.7 Deflating a Principle

Science is generally understood to rigidly adhere to certain principles about the way the world works, so it seems strange think of a scientific argument dismissing principles. One of the most articulate thinkers on this point may be Nancy Cartwright, who argues for the nonexistence of true regularities at the phenomenological level<sup>3</sup>, arguing instead that all general regularities in

---

<sup>3</sup> Phenomenological is used here to refer to occurrences or happenings, not the study of consciousness.

science, or principles, exist only at a theoretical level (89). In summary, her point is that while scientific explanations or theoretical laws may be useful, which they are, they do not describe reality, but only highly idealized objects in model circumstances. In a similar vein, it could be understood that in complete isolation of all else, moral principles may have an easier time operating when context is irrelevant and there is only one moral aspect at play, whatever it may be. Imagine an act of theft occurring in isolation from any and all else in which the principle to not steal may, in fact, perfectly capture the true moral valence of an action. Similarly, scientific experiments are conducted in intentional isolation from all other possible interference or irrelevant variables for the purpose of an investigation. This is not to say that scientific investigation is fruitless; it is not. What it does mean is that scientific theories deduced from isolated instances where everything else is accounted for fails to provide much use in scientific practice and understanding. Similarly, thinking about principles in isolation may be philosophically important. It is, in fact, worthwhile to think about the abstracted concept of, say, killing, apart from all else and understand it metaphysically, but that does not necessitate that whatever understanding we come to about killing will necessarily be directly applicable to moral decision-making.

Much of Cartwright's criticism of scientific theoretical laws lies in the *ceteris paribus* assumption<sup>4</sup> that science generally makes and deliberately tries to achieve in studies. When

---

<sup>4</sup> A *ceteris paribus* assumption is one that considers all other things as equal or held constant, and is often made in scientific thought and practice in an effort to reduce confounding variables that may interfere with the phenomenon, causality, correlation, or relation of whatever it is that is being studied. In other words, it tries to strive for isolated conditions in order to focus on only the subject of interest. An example as such may be controlling for pharmacological interventions in a study that investigates the effects of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) interventions in persons with an anxiety disorder. As a result of this control, any significant finding between anxiety levels and CBT intervention can be directly related to one another, and not due to pharmacological or any other variables, assuming all else is also accounted for.

science makes all else equal, holds constant, or accounts for everything it can, it does come up with useful information theoretically, but fails to consider phenomena as they exist and behave in the real world. If a car has a mass of  $x$  and is driving at a velocity of  $y$  kilometers per hour, what force is required to stop the vehicle in  $z$  meters? This is a fairly standard problem with which most physics students are well acquainted. The first step may be to figure out the kinetic energy the car has before figuring out the force required to stop the moving vehicle, determined by this formula:  $\text{kinetic energy} = 0.5 \times \text{velocity}^2 \times \text{mass}$ . Developed in part by Gottfried Leibniz, Johann Bernoulli, Willem 's Gravesande, Émilie du Châtelet, and others, the principle of kinetic energy holds true, reliably producing the expected results. But it does so only under ideal conditions, that is. Other forces are not accounted for in the principle of kinetic energy, such as those of friction, gravity, air resistance, perception time, reaction time, magnetism, electricity, etc., that are at work. Cartwright considers the formula for kinetic energy, then, to be rendered facile:

Some other view is needed if we are to account for the use of laws in explanation; and I do not see an obvious candidate that is consistent with the realist's reasonable demand that laws describe reality and state facts that might well be true. There is, I have argued, a trade-off between factual content and explanatory power...If the laws of physics are to explain how phenomena are brought about, they cannot state the facts. (72-73)

The scientific thinker will realize that, of course, natural conditions are not ideal conditions, and further, that these aforementioned forces are at play in any real scenario outside the controlled experimental setting or textbook physics problems, both of which we can argue do not represent reality in any meaningful sense. An objection can be raised here, that there are other principles



that can account for these extraneous factors, each and every one, in fact, and when all is said and done it might still be possible to determine the force and kinetic energy required to stop the moving car. The moral parallel may run, then, as such: determine the moral consideration of the struggling person trying to load a couch in their truck and the able-bodied passerby observer. Straightforwardly, all else constant, it would be morally sound to help the individual load the piece of furniture onto the truck. Again, moral cases, like scientific ones, are not this straightforward, so this principle will not apply quite as easily as it seems *prima facie*. Instead, say the struggling mover is actually a robber, and furthermore, that by stopping to help, the individual will miss an opportunity to see their child's soccer game, a promise made in good faith. Clearly, the moral consideration has shifted, but again, not arbitrarily, but arguably by principles that could still be taken in concert to determine the appropriate moral consideration. Say we did have all the principles needed; what would the problem be? This foundationalist account may seem to capture the sort of thing we are after, in both science and morality, in that different principles can serve as building blocks to get us the correct answer; however, it fails to account for the *variability* of reasons. Helping the struggling person load heavy things on a car may sometimes be a reason to not perform an action, such as when it constitutes stealing. It is not that loading items is outweighed by another consideration, but that the valence property itself has entirely flipped to its polar opposite in a deeper sense. Similarly, treating light as a particle to be tracked and measured appears unproblematic, until we realize that light can fail to behave as a particle but may behave as a wave instead. The underlying property of this thing of interest, light or loading furniture, changes entirely as a result of contextual happenings. And what principles fail to capture is the differing ways we ought to interact with and understand phenomena as a result of fluctuations in the nature of things. This discussion of Cartwright's

view is meant to demonstrate two things. First, principles face a serious challenge in their applicability to situations. Second, even scientific principles, generally understood to be robust, face similar challenges that moral principles face. While in science this is best understood as some constitutional change, in moral thought these changes can be characterized as a change of moral value assigned to a reason.

I want to, however, emphasize where my view differs from Cartwright's. Much of her writing on the topic appears to dismiss principles as fairly useless or at least unhelpful. I deviate from her view on this and argue in §2.5 the "rule of thumb" role that principles may play and go as far as to argue that principles may even be necessary to bring someone, the developing moral agent, that is, into the moral sphere. Bringing up Nancy Cartwright's view is meant to illustrate a view from a strong anti-principlist on a spectrum of stances. Furthermore, I think Cartwright brings up a compelling argument as to why we might doubt principles even if we do not entirely disregard them outright. Finally, I think it is worthwhile to differentiate scientific principles from moral ones. The analogy is effective because of our established belief in the reliability of scientific principles; however, there may very well be reason to believe in natural regularities in scientific phenomena in a way that is not the case in the moral realm. Therefore, it might be possible that scientific phenomena are articulable and codifiable in a systematic way that is not the case for moral phenomena.

### §1.8 Atomism about Reasons

Although we have pushed back on principlism there is one aspect of the theory that may be the most appealing of all: atomism about reasons. Atomism in the theory of reasons claims that "a feature that is a reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity, in

any other” (Dancy 74). This is how moral principlism designates value in reasons, consistently across all reasons. This signature characteristic is found in both the absolutist and contributory forms of principlism, in which the feature of something retains the same polar value, whatever it may be, across domains. The positively marked feature of kindness always acts as a reason in favor, whereas the negatively marked feature of hostility always acts as a reason in disfavor. Why might this be one of the strongest arguments for principlism?

Atomism about reasons is reliable because it is consistent, or so the argument goes. The moral agent can always depend on something to count in one way and not any other, irrespective of any other consideration. This makes the deliberative process far more manageable, in that one need now only consider the weight given to each feature without having to worry about the valence taken on by any particular reason, as this aspect remains constant. If not apparent, this idea of atomism is based on the universality of reasons. If  $x$  counts as a reason against action  $A$ , then  $x$ 's presence in action  $B$  can reliably also count as a reason against this new action. The wrong-making or right-making property is carried over from situation to situation. For the principlist, this is not so much an argument as a verbalization of what it is that we already do. We say that the theft of a can of soup is wrong. Similarly, we say that the theft of a loaf of bread is wrong. The wrong-making property of stealing, wherever it appears, counts as a reason against that action. If anything, it appears unclear why this is a contentious idea.

As before, we recognize that stealing may be justifiable in certain cases. Consider the struggling parent who steals baby food from a store because they lack the necessary resources to nourish their child. Many would argue this is perfectly justifiable. Many may even maintain that stealing is wrong—it certainly is not the case that stealing all of a sudden became right—but the wrong-making property of stealing was overridden by another consideration, like the

nourishment of an infant. This, argues the principlist, allows for exceptions, in that we can still find ways to make sense of and act against certain properties insofar as there are weightier reasons that push us in the opposite direction. And many moral theories have adapted atomism about reasons in their own understandings.

Utilitarianism, for instance, operates on the axiom that utility, happiness, or pleasure of some sort is the central right-making property. Performing this utility calculus allows for moral agents to weight competing utility measurements and walk away having made decisions based on whichever course of action produces more aggregate utility. Causing pleasure or increasing happiness, then, is never a reason in itself that counts against an act. In other words, an act can never be made wrong because it brings about happiness or pleasure. The utilitarian can wiggle through tricky cases, like that of sadism, by arguing that even though the sadist may experience great pleasure by bringing about pain, sadistic actions are outweighed by the loss of utility or the manifestation of suffering present in these cases. However, the feature of something being pleasure-inducing always counts as a reason in favor of performing an action. And as such, if the pleasure aroused in the sadist were so great that the discomfort of the victim paled in comparison, sadistic activities would be justified based on the atomistic understanding of utility.

Some may find this problematic. Happiness or pleasure, we might say, is generally a good reason to perform an action, but certain sorts of pleasure-evoking activities might be wrong *because they elicit happiness*, such as in cases of sadism or torture. To take the example from earlier, it might not only be the case that the wrong-making property of stealing is overridden by other considerations in the baby food case, but rather, stealing itself may completely flip its moral valence and may be the right-making property in this case, just as stealing a weapon out of the hands of an attacker to prevent further harm may be the right thing to do. In these cases, it is not

merely that stealing has been outweighed by other factors, but that the property itself has changed. An axiological fluctuation has occurred, in that the wrong-making property of a feature has become a right-making property.

In sum, there appears to be more to reasons than the weighing of features present. The moral person is not a human scale of reasons for and against, but rather, is a careful thinker that knows when reasons count and in which way. These shifts in moral value are not whimsically dependent on the human subject but on the context of other features present. The very characteristics that propped up principlism—consistency, universality, and reliability—proved to be its demise. Atomism about reasons may generally hold true and appear uncontentious, but our intuitions change almost as drastically as reasons themselves when we consider the changing nature of the properties of features.

### §1.9 Where Else to Look

Principlism implicitly makes a bold claim: reasons are invariably relevant, or that atomism holds true. Reasons being invariably relevant amounts to principles ascribing permanent value to reasons that hold across situations. In its attempt to remain consistent and make principles generalizable, principlism assigns an unalterable value to reasons. But it is not enough to say that another principle or consideration may override an existing principle. Sometimes it is the case that a principle fails to count as a reason at all, or in fact, that acting in direct opposition to a principle is the *right* thing to do. How can principlism account for this? Both the absolutist and contributory conceptions of principles still demarcate each reason with a moral valence but say very little if anything as to when or how principles fail to count as reasons at all. To answer this question, we must turn to the values that are being assigned to reasons, or the axiology of

reasons, and in particular, how their fluctuation may occur and what account for that. The next chapter thus considers the opposing view to principlism and, I believe, begins to address some of the deficits faced by principlism so far by focusing not on principles to answer moral questions, but looks to the particulars in each context, and the view is therefore aptly termed particularism.

## Chapter 2: The Particularist Answer to Moral Questions

### §2.1 Particularism: A Careful Case-by-Case Approach

Particularism is best understood as a challenger to principlism, but it has its own claims to posit, as well. In relation to principlism, moral particularism rejects that moral considerations rely on principles. Instead of principles determining moral goodness, it is the particulars of a situation that do the work and establish the rightness or wrongness of a moral reason. Specifically, properties of features are not determined by principles—the principle of ownership permanently determining the wrong-making feature of stealing—but particulars, the salient components in a context, dictate the property of a feature as a reason for or against an act, something that can vary on a case-by-case basis. In this sense, particularism can be thought of as a more context-specific approach than principlism. Onora O’Neill writes of the difference, saying:

Principles (being indeterminate) cannot really help us decide what to do, or alternatively that principles (being algorithms) could help us decide what to do, but at the cost of demanding a leaden and ethically dubious uniformity of response across differing cases. In place of principles, [particularists] suggest, we should focus on the specificities of actual situations, on case studies, on particular examples and exemplars, on the situation to hand in its rich complexity. (16)

The first concern O’Neill raises is that principles are indeterminate, in that we do not know what they are or which ones to use. Even if we do have a complete list of seemingly reliable principles, atomism about reasons limits their usage. What O’Neill means by this is that

principles supply a “uniformity of responses” that fall short of the tall order of answering questions that are rich in complexity. Instead, she argues, we would benefit from looking at particulars in the situations before us to issue the richness and intricacies of relational properties.

If not principles, then what is to give an act its moral valence, to borrow the analogy from before? The relevant particulars of a situation afford things with moral valences, the work that principles do in the generalists’ view. Valences here again refer to the metaphoric moral stamps that inform agents of a thing’s polarity.

While principlism holds that reasons for action are based on theorized principles relevant to a situation, particularism maintains that reasons for or against actions are determined by particular features and their interactions with one another. What this means is moral salience is to be determined only after arrival to the scene, not beforehand with a handy checklist of principles. Given the emphasis the particularist puts on features and their interactions, let us turn to what the particularist holds true at its core and why this is a controversial view.

## §2.2 The Unreliable Nature of Reasons

At the center of its theory, particularism’s core doctrine revolves around its understanding of reasons. Each relevant moral reason operates contextually, in which the presence of other features in a case are inextricably linked to moral reasons. This need not even be as strong of a claim as to say that each and every relevant feature in a case affects the nature of every other moral reason; however, it leaves open this possibility, and that is significant. What the particularist is saying is that there is no good way to predict the nature of moral reasons until we arrive at the scene and take a look at other reasons and their interactions before determining what sort of valence, or reason-giving force, is ascribed to any moral reason, if any at all. Given



the rich complexity of moral situations, it is too quick to size up moral cases with uniform principles that try to capture the function of each moral reason before knowing other considerations that may very well affect the nature of a moral reason. As such, generalizable knowledge of moral reasons seems suspect. Jonathan Dancy writes of this central tenet as such:

[The] leading thought behind particularism is the thought that the behavior of a reason (or of a consideration that serves as a reason) in a new case cannot be predicted from its behavior elsewhere. The way in which the consideration functions *here* either will or at least may be affected by other considerations here present. So there is no ground for the hope that we can find out where how that consideration functions in general, somehow, nor the hope that we can move in any smooth way to show how it will function in a different case. (60)

It is not sufficient to characterize this as being so extreme as to say the particularist necessarily knows nothing when facing a new moral dilemma. Dancy is explaining the specific aspect of what the particularist does not know, and arguably, what no one could possibly know—the way a host of considerations affects each relevant feature.

The principlist may be the first to point out a problem with this view. How can one remain consistent in a particularist approach if there is no reliable way of conceptualizing moral problems and the nature of reasons? If one cannot carry over moral knowledge from one moral problem to another, does this not severely complicate or render impossible the moral enterprise? It appears as though there is no standard, certainly not one as regimented as that of principles, in the particularist view. Not only, argues the principlist, do we find standards of consistency useful,

but we as learning animals pick up from past experiences and make use of knowledge when applying it to new situations. We use simple moral problems to help make sense of unfamiliar and complex ones by identifying relevant similarities. To toss away the observations of the ways moral reasons tend to function is not only inconsistent but is irresponsible.

I believe that a strong particularist may try to argue that we truly do approach moral situations anew with no ground knowledge of moral reasons, but the weak particularist need not grant the principlist the argument from the experiential use of knowledge. Instead, might not the particularist make a more nuanced argument? It is not the case that we learn nothing from past moral experiences, we certainly do, but we do not learn how moral reasons have to be, simply how they might be. Each new moral experience imparts new knowledge to the agent, informing the individual of how moral reasons might exist and interact with one another. Furthermore, the particularist can very well allude to simpler cases when making a point, insofar as they retain all of the relevant moral reasons and relations from the complex case. More importantly, the particularist will recognize exceptions to generalities and will understand new ways in which considerations may operate when affected by one another in ways the principlist could not.

### §2.3 Particularist Consistency and Accuracy

The particularist must admit the principlist may have an easier time working with moral problems, for the latter must recognize the relevant features of a moral situation and call to mind the corresponding principles to apply, whereas the particularist must not only recognize relevant features but look to others around it and figure out their relations with one another before making any judgment. The second approach seems messier, in that it appears to leave more room for error. The principlist can consistently maintain certain rules: “do no harm,” “be kind and

just,” “bring about happiness without compromising autonomy,” etc. On the other hand, the particularist needs to make their way through the network of moral reasons and assess each one’s valence or force by the presence of every other consideration that affects it. Instead of walking down the list of features and assigning axiological weights to them, so to speak, the particularist must take everything in collectively. Is this not too tall an order? The particularist might reply with some version of what follows: giving consistent answers across domains may be attractively convenient, but accuracy of moral judgment is the prime objective of the enterprise. It is not enough to say that peanut butter sandwiches are generally nutritious. Distributing a handful to schoolchildren will make this abundantly clear: there are cases where the sandwich is not only not promoting wellness but is detrimental to a select few. It is not enough to say that making a promise always counts in favor, or a reason for, an act. There are situations where making a promise is no reason at all, such as when the promise was made under duress. There may even be situations where to break a promise is the right thing to do.

This agnosticism about the reliability of generalities because of the uncertainty surrounding moral reasons’ forces and relevance is why the particularist holds reservations about principles and atomism. Benedict Smith writes of the nature of reasons by saying that “reasons emerge from the relation between certain features of circumstance, where the moral shape that is given rise to by such features is never determinable *a priori*” (23). It is not enough, says the particularist, to atomistically ascribe moral weight to all reasons before taking a look at a particular case. In fact, moral reasons emerge as reasons at all only when understood circumstantially. This is because moral reasons are contextually embedded, and to inspect moral reasons in isolation and apply findings to other cases is to be negligent of all relevant considerations. As with Dancy’s example of redness, Barry Stroud offers another similar example:

If you already know that an object is not square, the experience of its looking square does not give you reason to believe that the object is square. In the right circumstances, an object's looking square could even be excellent reason to believe that it is spherical.

Whether the way something looks is a reason to believe that it is that way or not depends on what else is true in the situation, and on what else you have reason to believe. (89-90)

This idea may not be as contentious as it appears. We trust doctors, for instance, to take the time to examine each patient as a new case, yet expect them to be informed by past experience as well. The physician does not only look at a list of ailments—sore throat, back pain, runny nose, general fatigue—diagnose patients, and prescribe treatments systematically. Instead, the good doctor looks not only at the series of relevant medical features but also at how these items interact with one another to allow the doctor to make a well-informed diagnosis and judgment. Considerations that may be no consideration at all in another case may become highly relevant in this one. And if the doctor saw a similar case, they would be expected to draw from past knowledge. Consistency is not lost in the particularist approach, but rather, accuracy of judgment increases in a comprehensive or holistic approach, as opposed to an isolated or atomistic one.

#### §2.4 Particularism's Holism about Reasons

The last two sections have tried to set the groundwork for particularism's main claim: the moral relevance of reasons is to be understood holistically, not atomistically. This stands in clear contrast to the principlist approach that holds atomism about reasons as true, in which each relevant feature either counts in favor or disfavor, retains this property across all dimensions, and

therefore can be carried over from one case to another. This is true whether it is an absolutist or contributory principle.

The doctrine of holism about reasons maintains that what is a reason in one instance may very well be no reason at all in another, or may even count as a reason for the other side. This uncertainty about reasons may be dissatisfying as it appears to leave the agent groundless, or at least clueless about the way a reason functions. Furthermore, the particularist now has some explaining to do. The ethical generalist may ask, if a feature counts in favor in one instance but fails to count as a reason or in disfavor elsewhere, then the particularist is charged with addressing this inconsistency. This is a fair question to raise and the particularist ought to be up to the task to provide an explanation. In answering, they must demonstrate how some other feature's presence, absence, or interaction with another would sufficiently result in the difference of the feature's property in distinguishing one case from another. It is not the case, or should not be the case, that the particularist's decisions are whimsically arbitrary, but should instead rely on some relevant consideration.

Most ethical observers would recoil at the thought of needlessly killing a dog. We need not even imagine this to be particularly vulgar. Would it be ethically sound to approach a dog with a syringe of pentobarbital and knock out the canine's consciousness until the animal dies within a minute or two? Most people, I imagine, would say no. But consider other features: a loss of appetite, excessive panting, laboring to breathe, old age, decline in mobility, and generally diminished quality of life. In all, discomfort is behaviorally evident. Upon a veterinary visit, the dog has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Now, as unfortunate as it is, euthanasia starts not only becoming a plausible consideration but may even become at some point the right thing to do. Somewhere between sticking a healthy dog with a lethal dose of a seizure medicine and

aiding a dying dog through pharmacological intervention, shift in moral judgment takes place.

Why is this the case?

The principlist would retort, as many people may, that euthanasia remains a wrong practice, regardless of anything else. But this seems too fast. Some of us are moved by other considerations, especially when they are relevant and change the nature of euthanasia in the case. It is not as simple as to say that the cessation of suffering overrides the wrongness of euthanasia. Upon making a decision only one of these principles will come out on top, while the other is temporarily suspended or disregarded. The weightier principle holds fast while the other is tossed by the wayside. The particularist is able to make better sense by saying that the moral reason has changed. *The feature of euthanasia is inextricably embedded in a context that determines the force and direction of the reason itself.* And at some point in the progression of the illness, euthanasia, given other contextual considerations, becomes the moral thing to do. In fact, the particularist may even be able to shift the burden of proof to the other side.

Admittedly, euthanasia in the case of a healthy and happy dog is wrong, says the particularist. But why must we suppose that this carries over to another case, a case that is not only different, but considerably so because of important contextual differences? In other words, just because a feature counts one way somewhere is no reason to believe that it will count in that same way elsewhere. If reasons are to be determined atomistically, which case ought we look at to determine the true nature of moral reasons? The atomist might consider death to always be a wrong-making property in all cases, thereby always standing firmly against euthanasia. The atomist might also be a utilitarian, in which they are contextually considerate when deciding about the wrongness or rightness of euthanizing the dog, but the only relevant contextual features to them would be those related to pleasure and pain and nothing else. Does it do much

good to consider moral reasons in abstracted isolation, considering that this is not the setting in which we find them, to echo Cartwright's concern? In other words, is it not too fast to consider death always wrong-making or pleasure as always right-making? We want our judgments to be rational and intelligible, but we can do so without being atomistic about reasons, argues the particularist. To make our reasoning more rational, it makes sense to look at reasons the way they naturally exist, within situations and interacting with other relevant considerations. Instead of searching for a principle to override a reason of which the principlist at heart may want to change the direction, does it not make more sense to consider the reason itself as undergoing a constitutional change?

So far, we have considered particularism's basic claim of holism and how this view differs from traditions of principlism. In Chapter 3, we will turn to tougher arguments about the contentious view of holism and how it might fit into the larger argument of moral sensitivity. For now, however, let us turn to what I take to be extreme particularism, and why this understanding of particularism may not only be fruitless but is incompatible with our nature as humans.

### §2.5 Dancy's Strong Particularism

To give credit where credit is due, Jonathan Dancy deserves recognition for his clear expression of particularism, what it says, and the implications that arise from it. However, his strong version of particularism, I believe, may not help moral theory in the way he imagines it to. Here I want to argue not only is it possible to hold a particularist conception regarding features, namely holism about reasons, but that generalities help in a way that a strictly particularist view may not leave room for.

First, what Dancy says what the person should do is

compare the activity of choosing some features of the particular situation as especially salient ... with the activity of the aesthetic description of a complex object such as a building. In such a description, certain features will be mentioned as salient within the context of the building as a whole. There is no thought that such features will be *generally* salient; they matter here and that is enough ... [one] picks these features out, but knows that their importance cannot be assessed or even discerned by someone who cannot see the whole building. One could not (and here is one important features of the analogy) discover how the building was by considering its salient features; salient features are not epistemological clues, and by analogy reasons are not clues either. (546)

Both the principlist and the particularist look to and try to correctly identify relevant features, albeit for different reasons. The former looks in order to decide which principle is of relevance, whereas the latter looks to compose a holistic account from the relevant features. I agree with Dancy's latter point, that their importance cannot be assessed in any comprehensive manner without seeing the whole picture, whether it be a building or a moral problem. This is due to the nature of reasons themselves, in that they do not exist in isolation and it is incorrect to consider them as highly theorized models from which to abstract principles, which will later be summoned in other similar cases. It is better, and by better more precise, to look at moral reasons as what they are, circumstantial and always occurring within some contextual framework that inform the moral agent. It is not enough to have a list of descriptions, whether they be architectural features or moral ones, to inform the agent of what the picture is actually like. I believe Dancy's extremism to lie in his claim that there exist no features that are generally salient.



In what follows, I demonstrate why one can hold particularism as true yet not succumb to this radical rejection of not only generalities but our own human tendencies.

There are two implicit arguments that may be at play in the strong particularist idea against all generalities: first, that generalities would not be useful given the axiological variability of reasons, and second, that generalities do not exist to begin with so reliance upon them is misguided.

On the first point, if one admits that reasons may very well change their valences, as it were, and that holism about reasons is the best way to make sense of all relevant properties of features, then generalities may be useless. This line of thinking relies on the fact that one must examine each case anew so holding principles or generalities that tend to hold true may not offer terribly important new knowledge. Even if a moral reason's polarity and magnitude operates in one way the majority of the time, the moral agent must still closely examine the case before making an any a priori judgment about the situation. This is because if the case is a novel one, then it will be constituted of different features, and therefore will consist of different interactions amongst features that may alter the overall picture. It is impossible, says the particularist, for one to predetermine the role that a consideration will play if it is affected by other features. But might not the fact that a moral reason operates in one way ninety-percent of the time be of import and be examined differently than a moral reason that operates in one way only forty-percent of the time? I believe that knowing the ways that reasons generally tend to behave may at the very least inform the particularist of how much attention a particular reason may deserve. This is not to say that this is the only criterion that determines the attention a reason deserves, but might be one insight. Consider the following: a reason that counts in favor of an action only fifty-percent of the time, and therefore often counts for either side, appears to the moral agent to

be clearly obvious. This should alert the moral agent to examine the reason and its surrounding more closely or with further scrutiny, given the capricious nature of this particular moral reason. If the particularist finds what appears to be a good reason to act in favor of an injustice, which is rarely the case, this ought to raise a mental flag for closer inspection for the other reason, because this is very solemn the case. And most would agree we would not want the particularist to swiftly carry out an injustice because that feature was not wrong-making enough given all considerations at first glance. The point here is that it is not wrong for the careful particularist to believe that certain features count in a particular direction more often than another feature might. There is *usually* no reason at all to kill another. The consideration of politeness *tends* to be a reason to act in favor of it. Things that appear red to the eye *more often than not* are, indeed, red. This is not to dismiss holism about reasons, but to make use of past knowledge to paint a more accurate and complete picture of moral reasons. This openness to generalities need not stand in opposition to holism because it still admits no a priori knowledge of the direction or force of a feature as a reason before considering the contextual particulars of a situation but regular behaviors may inform the agent in a way that the strict particularist would not make room for and may increase likelihood of error for the imperfect particularist.

The second point is closely tied to the first. To say that generalities do not exist is to say that moral reasons do not operate in any way most of the time. It is one thing to say that moral reasons *can* count in favor, disfavor, or not at all, and a whole other to say that moral reasons operate with such incredible variability that tracking their behavior or keeping tally is impossible. There, in fact, are ways in which reasons have a propensity to behave, as we can see with certain instances—sadism is usually a wrong-making feature and justice is often a right-making feature, to give two fairly unambiguous examples. The worry here, I believe, is that to say generalities

exist may lead the moral agent to rely exclusively or even heavily on these tendencies. This need not be the case, however. The moral agent can have an understanding of the way that moral reasons often operate and still be scrupulous in their particularist approach. These are not incompatible ideas. Margaret Little appears to hit on this point:

To be sure, no one (sensibly) rejects principles that tell us to ‘respect autonomy’ or to ‘be kind.’ But the particularist denies that we can usefully specify how the demands of kindness and those of autonomy weigh up, or which nonmoral features suffice to make an action kind in the first place. (278)

Understandably, kindness and a respect for autonomy are generally good rules to follow. But what these principles cannot tell us is how these features stack up against other considerations. By placing the emphasis on the contextual relations instead of on the nonexistence of generalities, I believe the particularist has a more practical case to make. To say, as Dancy might suggest, that we ought to approach every case with a blank slate of generalities and cook up a novel recipe for judgment is not only unhelpful, but is outright mistaken. We do, in fact, allow experiences and generalities to inform us. And the particularist has no important ground to lose by admitting this while still retaining and holding true holism about reasons. The particularist’s core point here might be that things like kindness or autonomy might be recognizable moral goods, but not ones that we can reduce to principles or express in non-moral terms. In other words, they are non-codifiable. A similar point can be made in a non-moral example:

Morality could be a lot like chess: there are surely principles that generally apply, but they might admit of important exceptions. If you want to play good chess, a principle like ‘Don’t lose your Queen’ is almost always worth following. But it admits of exceptions: sometimes sacrificing your Queen is a brilliant thing to do; occasionally, it is the *only* thing you can do. It remains a fact, however, that from any position in a game of chess there will be a range of objectively good moves and objectively bad ones. (Harris 8)

The point made here is that certain principles tend to hold true, not arbitrarily but as observations of particulars, but the important point is that the principles themselves ought not be the reason to act, but may sketch a rough idea of how moral reasons generally behave. As Harris points out, in a game of chess sacrificing your Queen may be the *right* thing to do, even if it is generally bad policy. Not running a red light is *usually* a good idea, unless one finds their car going at a speed at which one cannot safely stop. These are not ill-informed decisions, but just the opposite: these are richly-informed choices made because of circumstantial conditions. Again, regularities may not be of profound importance to the particularist, given that the agent must still be taken in reasons holistically, but claiming the nonexistence of regular occurrences is unnecessary. The point of import, however, is that natural features acquire their reason-giving properties from particulars, not principles.

## §2.6 Natural Features and Moral Reasons

A feature’s contribution to the whole picture is informed not by what principles dictate or identify but by the relevant particulars of a situation. Little captures this point in the following way:

The point is not to deny that natural features serve as ‘good- and bad-making’ properties. When classifying an action as cruel or just, we certainly regard the moral status as obtaining ‘in virtue’ of certain of its nonmoral features: those natural features are what make the action cruel, are the reason it is kind. The point, rather, is to deny that such considerations carry their reason-giving force *atomistically*. Natural features do not always ground the same moral import... (280)

I take Little’s point here to be the core of what particularism has to offer the moral agent. Not the relatively moot claim of the nonexistence of regularities, but rather, that natural features determine the valence of actions—thereby grounding particularism in moral realism—and that considerations are properly understood holistically, where context contributes to the moral reason and there is no reason to forcibly carry over reason-giving forces from one case to another. As such, it is not possible to know of the force or direction of moral reasons a priori. This is not inconsistent, as noted before, but allows the particularist the advantage of being able to point to a relevant difference that explains any discrepant change of valence wherever it occurs. There is no reason to believe that the way a reason behaves here explains how it might behave elsewhere. To illustrate natural features’ contribution, Little evokes a helpful analogy from art:

Natural features carry their contribution to an action’s moral status in the way that a given dab of paint on the canvas carries its contribution to the aesthetic status of a painting: the bold stroke of red that helps balance one painting would be the ruin of

another; and there is no way to specify in non-aesthetic terms the conditions in which it will help and the conditions in which it will detract. (280)

To atomistically take from the example above the “bold stroke of red” and permanently demarcate it as either an enhancement or deprecation would be mistaken. As Dancy points out, these features are not only contextually embedded but cannot be entirely understood without reference to and knowledge of their contextual existence. And as Little makes clear, there are instances where a stroke of red is precisely what the painting needs, so to speak, and the color takes on the property of making the overall painting a beautiful one. Similarly, we can imagine paintings that would be ruined by the exact same brushstroke. There is no good reason to believe or expect that aesthetic or moral features atomistically retain their reason-giving properties.

## §2.7 Rossian Principlism as a Compromise

Might we admit to some generalities as well as maintain the need for close inspection of natural features and their relations? This section introduces a compelling view from the principlist W.D. Ross. Particularism rejects a priori moral *judgments* and an extreme view of particularism may be understood to say we have no moral *knowledge* at all until we face the case at hand. There is a glaring problem with this extreme view of particularism. If one approaches each case with absolutely no principles or generalities at hand, how can one go about formulating any understanding or judgment on the matter? There must exist, it would seem, some moral properties or principles, albeit weak ones, that are employed for the particularist to make sense of features and thus situations. This is the view of W.D. Ross, characterized by Bakhurst as such:

...each prima facie principle identifies a property that is 'generally morally relevant,' that is, morally relevant in the same way wherever it occurs. So properties like being a cause of pleasure, being truthful, being law-abiding are 'right-making characteristics' of actions: actions that bear these properties are always the better for them, even though they may turn out to be wrong overall in virtue of further properties. (163)

It is worthwhile to understand how this is different from other generalist arguments. Ross is quick to admit that a principle that counts in one place may play very little a role elsewhere. He goes as far as to say that we cannot be entirely sure of the features at work until we see the situation and all its parts at play, hence the phrase "prima facie principle," one that appears to hold true at first glance but very well may be overridden and therefore not relatively important here given other considerations. Brad Hooker explains Rossian generalists as

...hold[ing] that [no principle] is necessarily always overriding. Rather, each is capable of being overridden by the others. In just this sense, general moral duties (general moral considerations) are in Ross's terminology 'prima facie'. Perhaps a better term is *pro tanto*. The idea is that a duty or consideration is overridable, not that it appears at first glance and yet on closer inspection may prove to be an illusion. (4)

Ross' appeal to particularists, I believe, is in the fact that he does not claim that the reason-giving property of a natural feature is some permanent fixture that must always play a role in the entire picture. Instead, each feature may be overridable. As the saying goes, "the devil is in the details," and Ross understands this. Often, competing principles will come into conflict with one another

and can only be resolved by looking carefully at the specifics of a case to understand which principles ultimately win out. As such, Ross admits to the importance of the interactions between principles, and this is an important point, as it distinguishes his view from that of generalists who maintain a priori moral judgments, one of the principal problems for the particularist with principlism.

What then, exactly, does the particularist find contentious about a generalist view like Ross' that leaves room for close inspection and allows for the incorporation of principles, rules, or obligations that generally hold true, even in a weak form? Hooker expresses the particularist concern as such:

Generalists hold that some properties, whenever they are instantiated, *always* count morally in favor of an action, and that other properties, whenever instantiated, *always* count morally against. Particularists hold that the very same properties may count morally in favor in some circumstances and against in other circumstances. (6)

In sum, while Ross placates some of the particularist concerns, he fails by still atomistically considering properties. In other words, even if he remains flexible with regards to the *force* of a given moral reason, he stands steadfast in his commitment to the *direction* of moral reasons. The particularist goes a step further, and importantly so, by reminding the moral agent that moral reasons can count in either direction, as a right-making or wrong-making property, or as irrelevant altogether. Is there a reason to believe this account?

Dancy argues, according to Bakhurst, "that there is an irreducible plurality of features potentially relevant to the moral assessment of actions and to the constitution of moral reasons,"



reminding us that these numerous features and their interactions will differ across situations. Continuing the explanation, "...and that which properties are morally relevant in some case, and how they are so, is determined holistically by the interplay of the various features of the case" (164). Dancy's exhausted point on this may be well taken, but it seems to leave the particularist with less moral information than that of the principlist, as it seems the particularist does not have any foundational account of what it is that makes something moral to begin with, even if the view correctly identifies the manner in which we ought to understand the varying nature of reasons, features, and properties. This concern is raised by Torbjörn Tännsjö, described once again by Bakhurst, that "...we want to know not just what a justification would look like, but which basic moral beliefs are justified...But [particularists] have no account of what makes a certain 'way of seeing' things correct" (165). In other words, there is no substantial claim as to what is it that makes something right-making or wrong-making, even if particularism seems to get the methodological approach right. And a view like Ross' is grounding in that it takes principles as weak duties that generally hold true until proven otherwise.

Again, Bakhurst captures Dancy's attitude and what I believe he is trying to accomplish, writing, "What Dancy claims is that we cannot predict *exactly* what difference some morally relevant property will make in future cases from the difference it makes in this one" (170). This is because "...features which are sometimes, perhaps usually, right-making characteristics are elsewhere morally irrelevant or even wrong-making characteristics" (Bakhurst 164). He wants us to understand that we do not know how certain properties have to behave in future cases, because their behavior—both direction and force—are determined by the considerations relevant in each case. Here, I wish to deviate from Dancy and what I take to be strict particularism. Although we cannot know exactly which features are relevant and their interplay with one another, thereby

making a priori moral *judgments* impossible, we can retain a priori moral *knowledge* from experience. And this backdrop of moral understanding can populate our understanding and guide us in a very weak sense. This nuanced view, I believe, differs from Ross', in that it is more a pro tanto particularism than a prima facie principlism.

## §2.8 What about Kantianism and Utilitarianism?

Two of the most robust theories of principles are Kantian deontology and utilitarianism. In this brief section, I explain how particularism can resist these two historically compelling schools of thought. Immanuel Kant's deontology proposes that the good action is whatever is carried out by a good will and such a will would be one that is universalized by all rational agents as a duty. These principles, or categorical imperatives, are without exception obligatory to the person. In other words, these are unfaltering principles, which have been arrived at through rational thought or reason. It should be clear from this description that the Kantian is atomistic about a reason's contribution to the overall moral valence of an action. If lying, for instance, is considered to be irrational and not an act carried out by good will, it is categorically imperative or obligatory that the moral agent does not lie. There are no exceptions to this rule and everyone is expected to abide by this duty. I believe, as do particularists, this sort of blanket categorization leaves no room for the rich complexity of moral situations. Can we not imagine an instance in which lying is the right thing to do? In fact, might it not be the case that one has a duty, even, to lie in certain circumstances? The Kantian would resist this but the mature moral agent could imagine a number of scenarios in which a lie is perfectly justified. Kantian deontology also leaves no space for cultural context. This is not to imply that morality is an entirely relative enterprise, because it need not be; however, it must be realized that the same act carried out in two different

societies can be interpreted in two different ways and may thereby warrant a different consideration based on the context in which it is carried out. As such, one might have an obligation in one cultural context to not extend their middle finger but have no such obligation in another society. I think the mature moral agent understands differences like these as a function of contextual situations, something that the Kantian leaves no room for and does not find relevant in their moral discourse. The particularist, as mentioned before, is more nuanced in their approach as to what counts for or against an act.

As for the utilitarian, I want to focus primarily on the atomistic approach to utility that I think undermines the school as too simplistic to capture the complexity of moral dilemmas. Utilitarians, regardless of their stripe, ultimately find utility, happiness, or pleasure to be a right-making feature through and through, and in this regard, are atomistic about this feature. Importantly, then, this means that the appearance of any instance of utility, happiness, or pleasure contributes to the overall rightness of the action. An action can never be made worse because someone is made happier by the action. This is something I want to resist. For instance, take the sadistic torturer. The utilitarian would be right about the victim being made worse off because they are suffering and experience a great deal of pain; however, the utilitarian goes on to say that it would be a better scenario if the torturer is made happier by inflicting pain than if they experience no pleasure at all. The particularist says in this instance the feature of something inducing pleasure or happiness is no right-making property at all. In fact, it is bad or wrong-making that the individual is made happy by torturing another person. The utilitarian is not in a place to make such a claim. For the sake of argument, however, let us say that the reformed utilitarian has thought about sadistic pleasure and wants to differentiate between the types of utility, happiness, or pleasure. In this new form, pleasure, if it is sadistic, is a wrong-making

feature. Pleasure that is not sadistic remains a right-making feature. What is the particularist's concern then? A particularist may argue that it is not only sadism that the utility needs to worry about. Say that the utilitarian may need to also worry about other features as well. Take, for instance, the pain of sore muscles after exercising. This pain, we recognize, is not necessarily bad but may even be necessary to grow and therefore might be a good sign. The point here is that there are innumerable possibilities of how pleasure or utility are valenced. It is not only difficult but may be impossible to find straightforward conditions as to when pain is good or when pleasure is bad without knowing the full context of a moral situation. Looking at particulars instead of only at utility is not only more encompassing of relevant features but is also better able to adjust the moral contribution of utility to an overall judgment.

## §2.9 The Lack of Content in Particularism

Particularism is a way of understanding the nature of reasons but does not necessarily tell us what the content of moral knowledge might be. To address Tännsjö's concern, I do not know if particularism ever set out to answer what the moral landscape might look like apart from how to understand the function of reasons as operating holistically as opposed to atomistically.

To complement our understanding of particularism, I believe there is a clear direction in which to proceed. The relevance of moral reasons lies in contextual situations, not principles. And I believe a large part of our moral beliefs and knowledge would come from these particulars. Bakhurst explains the dearth of substantial knowledge in particularism as such:

Ideally, we want to know not just what a justification would look like, but which basic moral beliefs are justified. That way, moral philosophy can help direct us towards the

good. Yet particularists have nothing interesting to say about justification. McDowell and Dancy portray moral judgment as a matter 'seeing the situation before one aright,' discerning the correct 'shape' of the facts, etc. But they have no account of what makes a certain 'way of seeing' things correct. (165)

In the following chapter, I try to address Bakhurst's legitimate concern. This can be done if we take what particularism tells us with regards to holism about reasons and outline the roles of character and perception.

## Chapter 3: How Holism Informs Perception

### §3.1 Metaphysical Claim about Nature of Reasons

Although principlism helps situate particularism in the debate, the latter has its own claims to posit apart from the unreliability of principles as reason-giving. Given the traditional and intuitive overreliance on principles to inform moral judgments, it stands to reason why the focus has been on a rejection of principles; however, at the heart of the debate is a question regarding the metaphysical status regarding the nature of reasons. The central claim of the axiological flexibility of natural features lends itself to a unique view about the nature of reasons, termed holism about reasons.

Jonathan Dancy's succinct accounts of holism and its counterpart atomism are packaged as such:

*Holism* in the theory of reasons: a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another.

*Atomism* in the theory of reasons: a feature that is a reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity, in an other. (73-74)

Both holism and atomism about reasons make claims about the nature of reasons, specifically about the different ways reasons behave. Holism claims that features may vary in contribution to reason across instances whereas atomism maintains that the way a feature counts toward a reason retains that property everywhere. Specifically, the metaphysical claim holism makes is that

features contribute to reasons in three different ways. Features may contribute differ in contribution in terms of functionality, namely, whether they even count as a reason at all or if they have been silenced and thereby fail to count as a reason altogether. Features may also differ, according to holism, in their directionality, whether a given feature may in one instance count in favor but in another case in disfavor. Finally, the magnitude of a reason is also variable, in that if a feature is to count as a reason, the weightiness it takes on as a reason will also be something that can change from one case to another. These characteristics are not unanchored, but are each context-dependent. Dancy offers an example of what a holistic account of the nature of reasons may look like:

[C]onsider a family game called ‘Contraband’, in which the players are smugglers trying to get contraband material past a customs officer. The game requires them to lie; if one doesn’t do plenty of lying, it spoils the game. That an action is a lie is commonly a reason not to do it; here it is a reason in favor. Less domestically, that we did this last time can be a reason for doing the same this time, but sometimes it will be a reason for doing something different. Whether it is so or not will depend on other features of the case.

(60-61)

In many contexts, lying is understood to be a negatively valenced feature, something that counts in disfavor of an action. Dancy’s example of the game is effective because it is immediately evident that the considerations that typically worry us about lying do not hold here. It occurs within a friendly context of a game, even though it retains certain properties such as intentional deceit. His point here is that lying to be wrong elsewhere is no reason to believe that it must be

wrong in this game. In other words, the way features contribute to a reason do not carry over these properties from case to case. The holist about reasons is able to make this sort of argument because they claim that features' contributions to reasons can vary, what counts in one instance does not need to count in another, whereas the atomist about reasons must hold features' contributions constant across domains.

What Dancy is doing here is more than claiming that circumstances have the ability to make a difference in our understanding of moral reasons, argues Benedict Smith; the claim here is that “*the very nature* of a reason can change with relevant changes elsewhere ... A reason's valence can be altered if that is what the changes in context demand” (21). And the only way to know what the context demands is to be aware of all relevant contexts and how they behave in relation to other considerations, thereby making the holist's conception of moral reasons more complete in certain regards than that of the atomist by permitting some axiological fluctuation where contextually demanded. Dancy goes as far as to say, “I maintain that all reasons are capable of being altered by changes in context – that there are none whose nature as reasons is necessarily immune to change elsewhere” (130). Each reason, argues Dancy, is susceptible to contextual demands. The defense of this particularist view, however, often pivots on the approach of offering exceptions to principles, or counterexamples that play to intuitions.

In this vein, the particularist situates lying in such a context so as to make the judgment clearly mistaken, in which, say, lying could not be a wrong-making feature, such as in a game of Contraband. Is the particularist only able to offer counterexamples to refute principles without offering a positive account of what the view holds? Little explains this problem:



Obviously, to defend particularism, it is not enough to keep offering counterexamples to proposed principles. Even if they are accepted, just what they suffice to show is precisely what is in question—those attuned to the richness of morality but loyal to the existence of principles will see counterexamples as evidence of complexity, not irreducible complexity ... But the particularist's doubt does not stem from philosophical obsession with counterexamples or lazy extrapolation from them; it is not brute pessimism floating free of any other philosophical commitment. The particularist doubt is born of reflection about the nature of the moral domain. (279)

What has been amply demonstrated thus far is how Dancy's examples of Contraband or the perception of red give us reason to suspect moral principles' reliability without necessarily positing an account of the particularist's views independent of principles. Little is correct when she identifies the particularist's concern, a differing view on the metaphysics of the moral domain, specifically, moral reasons. Holism about reasons, I argue, offers a positive account that makes a metaphysical claim about the nature of moral concepts, specifically the function of reasons.

Holism about reasons is a bold claim with a robust emphasis on context. In what follows I examine some aspects of the doctrine. First, I consider whether this close inspection of circumstances might enable particularism to be a naturalistic account of morality as this reliance on specific conditions might seem to suggest. I then turn to two forms of holism, a strong version and a weak version and elucidate the differences between them before considering whether holism about reasons might still be compatible with some version of generalism, such as that of Ross. If so, what aspects of generalism are salvageable and what must be resisted by

particularism? Finally, I consider the role of moral knowledge in a holistic account of reasons and how that may inform the moral agent moving forward.

### §3.2 How Holism Precludes Naturalism

The upshot of holism about reasons is its focus on the context-dependency of reasons. It is not enough, argues the holist, to look at a description of features and make an accurate moral judgment. Theorized principles fail precisely because they make unsubstantiated assumptions about the nature of reasons without fully considering that features are not only embedded in contexts, but that these contexts are necessary to determine the nature of reasons. If we take this meticulous approach of close examination of each feature, it might appear that holism about reasons is a naturalistic account of morality given the heavy reliance on natural particulars. But this need not be the case.

Moral theories often try to ground their principles in naturalist accounts of the world, accounts that map moral properties onto non-moral ones in the world. Utilitarianism, for instance, tracks the moral property of rightness on the natural property of utility, happiness, or pleasure. Kantian ethics relies on rationality and the human will to ground what counts as right. Moral particularism, however, does not make this sort of correspondence between the moral and non-moral, largely because of its anti-atomistic, or holistic, view of moral reasons.

To situate the discussion, Little says that “if reason-giving considerations function holistically in the moral realm then we simply shouldn’t expect to find rules that mark out in nonmoral terms the sufficiency conditions for applying moral concepts” (284). Little’s point, then, is that the moral agent would be mistaken to look for the corresponding non-moral properties associated with moral considerations because reasons function holistically in the moral

realm. To remove reasons from their context, as the atomist about reasons may do in evaluation, the reasons fail to retain their nature, as they are constituted holistically. This does not mean that there is no relation whatsoever between the moral and non-moral. The moral particularist may posit a weak relation of supervenience between the moral and non-moral.

The supervenient relationship between the moral  $M$  and non-moral  $N$  may take this form:  $M$  supervenes on  $N$  iff a change in  $M$  requires a change in  $N$ , but not necessarily vice versa. Moral properties may be constituted of natural features but given the way that these features function, that is, holistically, it would be mistaken to look outside the moral realm at only the non-moral features to make a moral judgment. These features are of the sort that can only be understood contextually by their very nature. An analogy from philosophy of mind may be helpful, in which  $M$  may be mental states and  $N$  may be neural constructs. A change in neural circuitry  $N$  does not necessitate a change in mental states  $M$ —consider activating one specific neuron that does not contribute phenomenologically to a given mental state; however, a change in  $M$  does, in fact, require some underlying change in  $N$ . Furthermore, it would not make sense to speak of changes in mental states only in terms of neural properties. Having a thorough description of the nature of neurons does not guarantee one could conclude the corresponding mental state of an individual, even though there is a weak but necessary relationship between the two.

Similarly, it can be argued that moral properties for the particularist do not track natural properties in any codifiable manner. Moral reasons, like mental states, are to be considered holistically, that is, with their rich embeddedness in contexts. Just as a circuit of neurons in one individual may contribute differently to an individual's mental states given other considerations,

natural features contribute in different ways to moral reasons depending on relevant circumstances. This point is explained by Little when she writes

Natural features do not always ground the same moral import ... the moral contribution they make on each occasion is holistically determined: it is *itself* dependent, in a way that escapes useful or finite articulation, on what other nonmoral features are present or absent. It isn't just that we haven't bothered to fill in the background considerations because they are so complex—holism is not complicated atomism. The claim, rather, is that there is no cashing out in finite or helpful propositional form the context on which the moral meaning depends. (280)

Holism about reasons, if properly understood, precludes strict naturalism. A holist may maintain to be a naturalist insofar as supervenience conveys a weak relationship or the parameters within which morality is operating. Jaegwon Kim makes this point:

The notion of supervenience we introduced simply states a pattern of *covariance* between two families of properties, and such covariance can occur in the absence of a metaphysical dependence or determination relation (11) ... Supervenience therefore is not a metaphysically 'deep' relation; it is only a 'phenomenological' relation about patterns of property covariation, patterns that possibly are manifestations of some deeper dependence relationships. (14)

In a very weak sense, then, supervenience sets the boundaries of the mental, in Kim's case, and of the moral, in our case. It does not describe how it is that the moral supervenes on the natural—and therefore cannot be codified—but simply explains a general sort of covariance between the two. In this sense, and very weakly, a particularist or holist may be considered to be a naturalist, but it would not be in any metaphysically meaningful way, as it still conveys a sort of “nonreductive physicalism,” as even though moral properties supervene on the physical, there is no recipe by which one can reduce all moral properties to physical ones (Kim 8).

As Little explains, if natural features are not atomistic, meaning they do not always contribute to moral reasons in the same way, there is no way to consistently determine the way that any given feature may contribute to a moral reason. The only way to know how a set of natural features constitutes a moral reason is by knowing the full extent of relevant conditions and their interplay, or to be present in the moral problem itself. David Bakhurst explains this:

Moral properties cannot be reduced to, or otherwise linked with, non-moral properties in such a way that a being who did not share the moral point of view could grasp how moral concepts operate by discerning how the use of moral terms is associated with the regular occurrence of certain non-moral properties. One has to be *within* morality to see how natural features of the world are morally significant. (161)

It then does not make sense to speak of how natural features contribute to moral concepts outside of the moral realm. A purely naturalistic account of features could not somehow inform an agent on how to morally behave, but one must, as Bakhurst says “share the moral point of

view.” Although this may appear to designate morality as a wholly unique enterprise, it need not be the case. Other domains share this sort of relationship as well.

Dancy cites aesthetic reasons as operating similarly to moral reasons in this respect (75-76). It is difficult to pin down precisely when a given aesthetic feature, say a stroke of red, contributes to or detracts from a work of art without considering its context. In this regard, aesthetic features, much like moral features, contribute holistically. As such, it does not make sense to speak of aesthetic features in terms of natural features alone or atomistically, outside of the aesthetic realm. Descriptions of pigment composition or wavelength frequencies of a color do little good in informing the aesthetic agent of how a particular stroke of color would affect a painting, even if the aesthetic supervenes on the natural (see Smith’s example in §1.2).

If we are to understand moral features as contributing holistically to reasons, we must specify the sort of holism we are defending. The next section considers differing versions of holism about reasons that differentiate two possible ways of conceiving the doctrine.

### §3.3 Strong Holism Versus Weak Holism

There are generally two ways of conceiving holism about reasons. The weak version posits that a consideration *can* depend on other contextual features, whereas a strong version posits that a consideration’s status *must* depend on relevant contextual features (McKeever and Ridge 6-7). The question is whether certain moral features may in fact be atomistically considered or whether this possibility is ruled out because inherent to a reason’s nature is its contextual embeddedness that determines its function as a reason.

Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge make the case that holism, as defined by Dancy, is perfectly compatible with the idea that “all reasons are invariable so long as in each case the

reason's invariability stems from its specific content and not from the mere fact that it is a reason" (7). On this point, it very well may be the case that some reason turns out to be invariable, in that it always counts as a consideration and does so in a similar way case after case; however, this need not be considered an atomistic reason, as it just so happens to operate in this way, but still accounts for context thereby looking at it holistically. It is not that it was initially demarcated as operating a certain way, but rather, it was serendipitous. The other point to be made is that there is no way that we would be able to know that a reason is invariable. It may certainly be the case that we usually find the feature of torture to hold a strong negative valence in a moral reason case after case, or we find justness as counting in favor time after time, but this cannot preclude these features from counting any other way elsewhere. This is due to the richness of moral cases that escape imagination thereby preventing us from making a priori judgments about the specific nature a moral reason may exhibit in another instance. In this sense, holism's contextual sensitivity prevents any strict codification that holds true across cases, even if we allow for the possibility of rare instances of invariable reasons.

McKeever and Ridge rebut this point. They argue that "codification of the categories of right and wrong in purely descriptive terms [may be] perfectly consistent with the very strong form of holism about reasons according to which all reasons' status as reasons *must* depend on other features of the context" (8). The example they provide is a contextually adept form of utilitarianism that takes the following form:

The fact that an action would promote pleasure is a reason to perform the action if and only if the pleasure is nonsadistic. The fact that an action would promote pain is a reason not to perform the action if and only if the person who will experience the pain has not

autonomously consented to experiencing it. An action is morally right just in case it promotes at least as great a balance of reason-giving pleasure over reason-giving pain as any of the available alternatives; otherwise it is wrong. (8)

This clever rendition of classic utilitarianism appears to reconcile codification with holism. But is it successful? To start, the principle is clearly informed by particular cases, such as understanding that classic forms of utilitarianism often run up against problems regarding personal autonomy, including possible utilitarian acceptance of sadism or slavery for maximum utility. To rectify these and other problems, this form of utilitarianism is contextually savvy. In this case, the relevance of pleasure and pain are conditional upon other features or considerations present, thereby incorporating holism into a principle. Clearly, this is a step in the right direction for the generalist who now acknowledges the importance of moral reasons to be conditional on contextual circumstances. Even though this new version of utility theory was accomplished, it would appear, from cases that classic utilitarianism failed to adequately address by treating pleasure and pain atomistically, this new account fails in that it assumes a sort of a priori moral judgment. The best way to demonstrate this, unfortunately, would be by offering a counterexample.

Even this new form of the consequentialist theory would appear to permit, say, heroin use. The action of taking the drug would produce non-sadistic pleasure, and any pain or suffering associated with the use of the drug was one to which the agent autonomously consented. If questions of addiction preclude true autonomous choice, as they very well might, we can take the counterexample to be an instance of first drug use to ensure the individual was not already addicted and autonomy thereby somewhat compromised beforehand. Given that



there is no immediate alternative available to the agent that would produce such strong pleasure with relatively small pain in the instance, it would appear that there is a good reason to do heroin. A nuanced or particularist approach need not succumb to this conclusion, as it would consider reasons holistically in the presence of contextual circumstances, not beforehand, and would thereby be more adept at sidestepping the trap that any generalist approach could easily fall into, which is not knowing the full extent of possible considerations. Of course, a yet fresher and sharper formulation could emerge that considers the dimensions of temporal suffering that may be relevant in drug use or the social effects on others. The takeaway, however, remains the same, in that it is difficult if not impossible to sketch out all the possible relations that moral reasons may take on that are suitable to every case before arriving at the moral scene.

McKeever, Ridge, and Ross need not feel hopelessly obstructed by particularist counterexamples. Moral particularism has nothing of import to lose by admitting to its own shortcomings, such as a lack of substantive claims about the content of moral knowledge, or even how past experiences or contributive regularities operate within this framework. In the next section, I consider the ways in which particularism and holism in particular may be compatible with certain aspects of principlism.

### §3.4 Compatibility with Generalism

Particularism has a lot to gain from generalism and it would be mistaken to not acknowledge this. To understand holism is to understand the idea that moral evaluations are context dependent. More specifically, there are degrees to how sensitive reasons may be to context. The principle is at a disadvantage precisely because it makes an a priori claim about the way features contribute to reasons. For contextually sensitive principles, like the one McKeever

and Ridge propose, generalism appears to be more compatible with holism than a strictly atomistic principle that does not depend on conditions whatsoever. However, it still falls short of the mark. Dancy's point about holism is that the right-making or wrong-making features can differ based on context, not that a different context always demands a change of moral valence, but that the moral reason is both sensitive and flexible enough to account for the nature and interplay of features and can result in a shift in moral axiology (107). And this aspect of the moral complexity cannot be fully known until one faces the situation at hand or has a comprehensive understanding of all relevant features and their interplay with one another, which may be practically impossible without being morally immersed, present, and sensitive. Even this strong form of holism, however, can be reconciled with some sort of Rossian *pro tanto* particularism and competence of moral knowledge from experience. And this is where particularism has room to grow.

We may, for instance, know that unusual cruelty usually counts in disfavor of an action. There is no reason to believe that regularities do not occur in moral practice; in fact, being a competent moral agent requires we are somewhat, if not extensively, adept at understanding moral concepts. Dancy, too, appears to argue in this vein:

A practical understanding of the concepts of the unusual and the cruel puts one in a position to discern that this action is made wrong by involving unusual cruelty, in a way that does not require one to be following any rule. What you know when you are competent with a thick practical concept such as that of cruelty is not articulable in the sort of way that would be required for it to appear within a rule, whether explicit or implicit. What you are able to do when you are competent with the concept is to tell in

new situations what practical difference it makes that the concept is here instantiated in the way that it is. If you don't know the *sort of difference* that cruelty can make to how one should act, you aren't competent with the concept—for it is a practical concept, and competence with it requires an understanding of the *sorts of ways* it can function as a reason for action, and an ability to tell in new situations how it is actually functioning.

(107)

Such a “thick practical concept” requires one learn from past experiences and maintain some moral knowledge. Again, this need not be in the form of rules. The way that features contribute or fail to contribute to a moral reason need not carry over from one case to another. What it does require, however, is that one can learn the ways that features *may* contribute to reasons to better inform them of that moral concept and to practically apply that when dealing with novel situations. The worry with abandoning principles is the fear that we lose all moral knowledge, but this need not be the case.

A legitimate worry with holism about reasons is that there do not exist any regularities. If features' contribution to moral reasons are entirely context dependent, then we have no good reason to believe that stealing generally is a wrong-making feature whereas generosity is generally a right-making feature. Holism seems to tell us that the nature of moral reasons is only constituted when fully informed by contextual information, and to remove a moral concept from a situation is to lose out on something important, as Cartwright and Dancy have argued. Mark Lance and Margaret Little explain this concern:

{M}oral holism ... seems to imply that lying, killing and the infliction of pain have no more intimate connection to wrongness than do truth-telling, healing and the giving of pleasure. After all, each, in the right context, can have a positive, negative or neutral moral import. But the morally wise person, one might have thought, is someone who understands that there is a deep difference in moral status between infliction of pain and shoelace color, even if both can, against the right narrative, be bad-making. (436)

Lance and Little are right to raise this worry. If we are to understand Dancy's argument from holism to be so context sensitive that we would be forced to claim we know nothing about how moral concepts generally behave—killing, healing, stealing, etc.—then particularism would be forced to embrace a sort of axiological agnosticism about reasons when the moral agent is not directly present in a situation. How might the particularist push back against this clearly mistaken point?

As a way of continuing the idea of a Rossian pro tanto particularism from §2.7, we may be able to incorporate Dancy's idea of a default reason, which explains that "some considerations arrive switched on, though they may be switched off if the circumstances so conspire, while others arrive switched off but are switched on by appropriate contexts" (112-113). These are the sorts of generalities that Ross speaks of with regard to principles, but we can apply them to particularism in that we may have some weak notion of how moral concepts or features generally contribute to a reason. Every consideration still remains ready to change in the face of a context that would demand a change, thereby fulfilling the criterion of holism about reasons while still retaining some general moral knowledge about the behavioral tendencies of certain considerations. Furthermore, this adds a sort of temporal dimension to particularism, in that one

can carry over knowledge from learned experiences in new cases. It need not be as radical as Dancy proposes, that we arrive entirely unaware of how features function and must do all the evaluative construction upon arrival to the site. We can learn from cases, retain a solid grasp as to how features *tend* to function, and retrospectively look back at our decisions to see whether or not they were correct ones and use this knowledge moving forward.

This is notably different from a strict Rossian reading of prima facie principlism, particularly in the sense that in his account, “reasons retain their moral relevance and thus valence can be trumped but never silenced” (Smith 21). In this regard, a particularism that remains faithful to holism can address the shortcomings of Ross’ prima facie principlism by allowing the silencing of reasons while also retaining moral competence in terms of regular behaviors of reasons. This nuanced approach, I believe, bolsters particularism and defends it from rightful criticisms expressed by Little.

The argument outlined above for generalities and experiential moral competence appears to come awfully close to rules or principles. Why not, one may argue, use principles in a weak or pro tanto sense as Ross suggests, or even incorporate conditional principles as McKeever and Ridge recommend? In the next section, I argue there is good reason to resist this codification if we want to remain dedicated to holism about reasons while being able to salvage a sort of holism of similarities.

### §3.5 Holism of Similarities

Particularists, as has been demonstrated above, have a lot to gain by embracing the argument from generalities and moral knowledge. Again, this does not require one to abandon holism, but to embrace it fully. Benedict Smith writes of this saying

Particularists have nevertheless attempted to combine a holistic metaphysics of reasons with an account of how agents can develop a form of 'general' competence from particular circumstances. In *Moral Reasons*, for example, Dancy acknowledges that agents can become equipped to proceed in a relevant domain on the basis of knowledge from particular cases. An emergent principle can serve as a 'reminder' of the sort of importance that a property can have. (2-3)

The way that principles or generalities may fit into the particularist picture, as Dancy says, are as sorts of "reminders." These are the sorts of things that are apt to change in the right context; they may even arrive switched on or off as default reasons, but nevertheless serve to inform the moral agent of a way that features not only can but in fact oftentimes do contribute to a reason.

The particularist approach forms a unique picture of how moral knowledge comes to be known that is distinct from that of the principlist. Instead of having rules that constitute moral knowledge, the particularist uses instances to build up an understanding of how similarities make up this moral knowledge in a way that resists codification. However, it is not enough for the particularist to say that the moral agent need only look at the particulars of a case to know what to do. That may very well be the correct approach but it does not address what the agent must make of or do with the moral contents present. In other words, something must supplement the particularist view of being in the presence of a moral problem to understand the demands of the situation. On this, Smith says, "The idea that one can be impressed by the normative authority of the present case cannot be sustained while denying that agents need prior abilities that equip them with the resources to see a reason as such" (71). There must be some moral discernment

that the particularist can identify, given that we know the same moral particulars of any situation do not strike moral agents in the same way. Identical particulars of a situation may impress one way on one individual and another way on another.

To make sense of this, Smith explains this problem:

[W]hatever kind of discernment is operative according to a particularist epistemology ... does not involve simply being struck by situations which we find ourselves, every so often, confronting. The model of ethical awareness that particularism suggests is a distinctive way of conceiving the 'patterns' that we recognize and institute in our moral lives. Seeing or recognizing that things are similar, for instance, involves the existence of patterns. (77)

Moral particularism still wants to be able to say something about how situations are to be read, so to speak. Identifying patterns, however, appears to be a "concession in favor of generalism" (Smith 77). If we are to admit to the existence of patterns, it would appear that the particularist may be admitting to a metaphysical truth in principlism even if it is needlessly resisting an articulated codification of patterns in the form of moral rules or principles. There is, however, good reason to believe that this is not the case. "[S]eeing similarities does not reflect pre-existing patterns or a pre-existing realm which confers normativity upon a practice" (Smith 78).

Despite not being reduced to rules, similarity judgments, or learning and carrying experiential knowledge from case to case, can serve the moral agent well while still being a uniquely particularist position that focuses on contextual reasons. Smith explains this particular form of moral knowledge as such:

The constraints on what is similar and why are contextually grounded and available to agents who are actually or potentially in command of the rational relations that constitute candidate similarities. A form of conceptual connection between two cases revealed by a similarity can be granted, without this compromising the denial of an atomistic metaphysics. (81)

The ability to make judgments from a holism of similarities that resists principlism must make some use of knowledge. Smith once again is onto this intuition when he says, “Denying a necessary role for principles in moral reasoning can naturally lead to an emphasis upon the perception or the discernment of particulars,” in which the moral perception itself would be doing the job of the principle, that is, being reason-giving (4-5). Moral perception has a crucial role to play in the particularist narrative of morality.

### §3.6 Knowledge as a Perceptual Capacity

The particularist must be able to read situations in a way that incorporates holism of similarities while maintaining a fresh openness to the ways in which features could operate in a given context. Such a moral agent might be said to be sensitive to such relevant changes, sensitive enough to detect what a given situation calls for. Smith on this point says, “If the nature of reasons is such that instantiations of valence are metaphysically dependent on context, then this seems to imply that knowledge of actual valence must be the product of some sensitivity” (4). Specifically, the knowledge would require a sensitivity to contextual particulars and the valences or values they adopt in each case. This, however, still leaves open for question the sort of sensitivity required for that knowledge. John McDowell addresses this point:



A kind person can be relied on to behave kindly when that is what the situation requires ... (that) ... must be something of which, on each of the relevant occasions, [the person] is aware. A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement that situations impose of behavior. The deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge; and there are idioms according to which the sensitivity itself can appropriately be described as knowledge: a kind person knows that its like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness. The sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity. (51)

McDowell in this excerpt highlights a sort of moral awareness. This sort of sensitivity, however, is stronger than just a keen attentiveness. It is not the case that the moral agent attends to the relevant points in a case in a deliberative fashion, *per se*, but that the moral agent is *impressed upon*, even, by the moral situation. This, argues McDowell, is the kind of knowledge that might be of interest to the moral particularist, a sort of sensitivity to the axiology of reasons in the form of a perceptual capacity. And it would be this moral perception that is reason-giving to the agent (Smith 5). Outside of the moral domain, we can imagine other scenarios that make certain demands on our behavior that we come to know through perception. For instance, we know when it is time to water the plants through perception, and moral requirements might be of this sort (McGrath 221). While this is the line of argument I will ultimately defend, it is worth pointing out a glaring question. How can it be that the particularist envisions moral knowledge to be dependent on what O'Neill characterizes as nothing other than "mere, sheer perception" (86)? In other words, it does not necessarily seem to be the case that looking at a wilting plant

tells us it needs water, or that an animal being abused is an instant of wrongdoing. There must be something more to this than sheer perception alone, such as a supplement of knowledge, perhaps a specific sort of perception, that allows us to make this judgments of situational requirements.

Clearly, this perceptual capacity is not universal and it remains unclear from where it originates. Bakhurst tries to explain McDowell's position as

contextualist in that it sees practical wisdom as a capacity acquired in enculturation, a dimension of our 'second nature'. Its acquisition represents our coming to occupy the moral point of view, from within which alone moral demands can be rendered fully perspicuous. The position is also particularist in that practical wisdom is viewed as akin to a perceptual capacity (to discern the good) which is non-codifiable in character: the deliverances of mature moral judgments cannot be captured in a set of moral rules. (161)

This capacity is a learned one, not an innate sensitivity as immediately available like that of touch. Rather, this is a sort of wisdom that one acquires, skills that one develops, or a sensitivity one hones. As before, one must inhabit the moral point of view or be within the realm of moral discourse in order to make sense of it. Again, morality need not be a farfetched enterprise but one akin to art in many ways. The artist cultivates an aesthetic sensitivity to discern the beautiful from the abhorrent. Aesthetic properties need not be codifiable, for surely the mature artist does not have certain instructions on geometric relations or color schema requisite of producing artwork of quality. These rules may be helpful, however, as they were to M.C. Escher, just as rules might be useful to John Stuart Mill. But abiding by a finite list of rules and nothing else

would nevertheless corner them and limit their creativity in approaches if they could not deviate from these standards and appreciate situations for what they demanded. We may go as far as to say that guidelines are a part of aesthetic or moral development. It is helpful, it can be argued to instruct the art student on certain relations of colors or of the golden ratio, just as it might be helpful to advise the young child to offer comfort in times of grief or to ask permission before using belongings of others. These are rules that must be broken if we are to holistically appreciate what context demands of us, yet may be an indispensable aspect of maturation in the cultivation of moral and aesthetic sensitivities.

In the following chapter, I discuss what this view might look like by considering virtue theory as that which is presently best equipped to cultivate the moral person's sensitivity to the good. Specifically, I employ Iris Murdoch's understanding of our egotistical nature and the need to "unself" if we are to cultivate the sort of perceptual capacity holism from particularism requires of us.

## Chapter 4: Sensitivity to the Good

### §4.1 Seeing is Knowing

In this section, I want to argue that clear perception of particulars informs the moral agent in a way that constitutes some sort of knowledge about requirements. It is not enough to reason well, to have seemingly reliable principles, or even possess a motivation to do good if one is unable to see moral situations as the way they are and read their features accurately (Blum 701). Lawrence Blum lays out a compelling story (703) to commence this argument: Consider Joan and John sitting in a full train with many people standing. One such person is a woman holding two large bags. Both John and Joan know she is there. John pays no special attention to the woman. Joan is aware that the woman is in discomfort.

Importantly, Joan is able to read the situation in a way that John does not. In this sense, we can say that Joan knows something that John does not, that the standing woman is in discomfort, that is. It may even be argued that John does not recognize this as a moral situation at all. There is nothing required of him and he has no reason to believe otherwise. Say we were to ask both John and Joan as they disembarked the train, “Did you see the woman in her mid-thirties standing on the train you were just on?” Both would answer that they did. If we asked both to describe her, they might even allude to the large shopping bags she was carrying. In spite of the identical situational ingredients before them, Joan saw something that John did not: that the woman was in discomfort. She was able to read, so to speak, the situation in a very different way. This need not even imply that John is insensitive to discomfort or entirely lacks some fundamental perceptual capacity. As Blum himself points out, if Joan were to ask John if the woman appears uncomfortable while on the train ride, John very well may say something along

the lines of, “Now that you mention it, she did seem uncomfortable.” It would be at this point that the features of the situation become morally salient to John.

What we want to be able to do is explain that a clearer, holist perception of morally salient features informs the moral agent to act. Such a clear moral outlook would make immediately apparent the moral requirements of the situations and would minimize other ways of looking at situations in which concerns rooted in selfishness or some other consideration obscure our outlook (McNaughton 116). The clearer the perceptual sensitivity, the more strongly the moral requirement is felt by the moral agent to act in accordance with the situation. So what would a perfectly clear moral vision look like? This is where we can introduce the concept of the virtuous person.

Before we can discuss what the virtuous person is, we must address what virtue itself is. On this, McDowell says, “On each of the relevant occasions, the requirement imposed by the situation, and detected by the agent’s sensitivity to such requirements must exhaust [their] reasons for acting as [they] do” (143). To possess the virtue of kindness, then, means that the agent is acting out of a pure conception of kindness and there are no other competing reasons that contribute to the manifestation of the action. It is not the case that the moral agent is kind to the child who asks for a dance at a wedding, to borrow from the exhausted cinematic trope, in an effort to impress someone else or demonstrate their kindness. Instead, it must be kindness itself, unobstructed, that is required, recognized, and delivered in the situation. Continuing on this point:

So the deliverances of [the moral agent’s] sensitivity constitute, one by one, complete explanations of the actions which manifest the virtue. Hence, since the sensitivity fully

accounts for its deliverances, the sensitivity fully accounts for the actions. But the concept of the virtue is the concept of a state whose possession accounts for the actions which manifest it. Since that explanatory role is filled by the sensitivity, the sensitivity turns out to be what the virtue is. (McDowell 143)

Here, I make a deliberate effort to use McDowell's conception of virtue as a sensitivity as I believe it will be most useful to my argument. A sharp sensitivity to requirements, argues McDowell, can completely account for and explain the moral agent's actions. In fact, it is this clarity that informs the agent to act in the way that they eventually do. This suggests that if another were to share an identically powerful sensitivity to situations, they too would act virtuously. Is this correct?

There is reason to believe that this is the sort of line of thought McDowell would defend. Rephrased, it would be impossible for someone to share this moral outlook and have no reason to act in any other way (McDowell 26). The person with psychopathy lacks this sensitivity to moral requirements. It is not the case, then, that this person simply does not care about the ends of others or that they lack a desire to be altruistic, even if this may be a consequence of the blurred perceptual capacity. It is, instead, that if they shared the moral vision that the virtuous person enjoys, they too would see the reason to act in accordance with the demands of the moral requirement before them, as would anyone else.

In summary, McDowell claims, "According to this position, then, a failure to see reason to act virtuously stems, not from the lack of a desire on which the rational influence of moral requirements is conditional, but from the lack of a distinctive way of seeing situations" (23). This excerpt is of particular importance because it touches on an implicit claim made throughout the

section thus far. Virtuous action is not the product of a desire, but of seeing something and coming to know it. In other words, beliefs can motivate action, and desires need not play the role Hume has famously attributed to them.

#### §4.2 Moral Motivation

In McDowell's understanding of moral motivation, the moral agent acts because they see something, namely a moral situation, in a particular way. This alone is enough to move the person to act. He goes as far as to explicitly deny that any extra desire is necessary for action: "[The] desire does not function as an independent extra component in a full specification of [the person's] reason, hitherto omitted by an understandable ellipsis of the obvious, but strictly necessary in order to show how it is that the reason can motivate him" (15). In other words, McDowell is identifying the way we traditionally take desires to function as mistaken. In this view, straightforwardly, Hume argued there must be preexisting desires that motivate human behavior, even if they may not be readily apparent. As such, he described what has become known as the is-ought problem, which claims that which *is* something, some objective fact about the world, cannot prescribe to one what one *ought* to do (335). That we know something, even if through clear perception, does not tell us what we must do. John can see the standing woman struggling with her bags but these facts about the state of the world do not reveal anything John must do. Some additional appetitive desire must be present, such as to be kind, to be admired, to be a virtuous person. In his explanation, McDowell is saying that it is not the case that desires themselves are what are driving one to move or act in a particular way, but rather, that desires make intelligible one's reason for action. This stands in clear contrast to Hume. Desires themselves are not necessary to motivate the agent, but that they trace that which we have reason

to follow. Still, this leaves unanswered the question of the origin of the desire, to which we can turn to Thomas Nagel as McDowell does:

That I have the appropriate desire simply *follows* from the fact that these considerations motivate me; if the likelihood that an act will promote my future happiness motivates me to perform it now, then it is appropriate to ascribe to me a desire for my own future happiness. But nothing follows about the role of the desire as a condition contributing to the motivational efficacy of those considerations. (29-30)

The relationship of considerations and desires is reversed in Nagel's account. It is not the case that the considerations motivating someone follow from a desire, but rather, the corresponding desire follows from the motivating facts. "Adverting to [one's] view of the facts may suffice, on its own, to show us the favorable light in which [one's] action appeared to [that person]" (McDowell 15). But for this to happen, McDowell further recommends we abandon thinking of the morality as consisting of "should" thoughts, and shift our focus to being aware of the circumstances of action, namely, how an action appeared in a favorable light to an agent, where a desire need not play a requisite role (14-15). This is because "[the] desire is ascribable to the prudent person simply in recognition of the fact that [their] conception of the likely effects of [their] actions on [their] own future by itself casts a favorable light on [their] acting the way [they do]" (McDowell 17). One's conceptions of facts about the world are sufficient to demonstrate how one may see an action in a favorable light for their own sake and this can suffice to explain action without reference to another psychological state, desires.



Gilbert Harman, for one, alludes to “other concerns over and an agent’s desires, including intentions, plans, policies, and values” (162). These concerns all very well might factor into why one acts the way one does, that is, why one sees an action in a favorable light. Again, this can be done in a cognitive sense divorced from any necessary appetitive drive if we think of virtue as a sensitivity; however, McDowell argues that the world can only move one to act in conjunction with a “state of will” (147). In what follows, I want to push back against this specific point. I think it is dangerous to run down this line of thought, that a strong will is that which can properly motivate one to act, but that a disposition might be better suited to such a pursuit.

#### §4.3 The Continent Will and the Virtuous Person

In her powerful essay “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts,” Iris Murdoch outlines the danger of falling into talk of the will as the necessary force for good. Traditionally, we have been disposed to believe that a will, some will, is what can motivate and move us to do good. Divine will has been abandoned in favor of one’s own good will to do what is right. Murdoch writes, “Kant abolished God and made man God in His stead,” by which she means

[at the] center of this type of post-Kantian moral philosophy is the notion of the will as the creator of value. Values which were previously in some sense inscribed in the heavens and guaranteed by God collapse into the human will. There is no transcendent reality.

The idea of the good remains indefinable and empty so that human choice may fill it.

(80)

The shift from a metaphysical or transcendental good has been reduced to or is being searched for in an empty yet immediately accessible reality. We need not accept any supernatural metaphysics to understand Murdoch's point that we look inside to find good instead of outside ourselves. Utilitarianism tries to find the good in happiness or pleasure or utility. Kantian deontology searches through the rational mind to discover the good in human will. However, there is reason to believe that instead of harnessing our energies on trying to will what is right we ought to instead focus on cultivating a sensitivity to the good. This is largely the case because there is an important difference between being a person of strong will and a virtuous person.

The virtuous person who internalizes and utilizes reasons holism has before them one crisp picture and are clearly able to read the situational requirements in a way that a strong willed person cannot. Susan Stark explains this point clearly:

Virtue demarcates a higher level of moral goodness, not because the virtuous person is always virtuous—though if the doctrine of the unity of the virtues is true, she is—but because the virtuous person is not even tempted by considerations that do tempt the ordinary run of humanity. She does not have any motivating reasons to act against the requirements of virtue. (446)

In this sense, the virtuous person is motivationally unified and has one reason for action (Stark 453). The continent, or strong-willed person, still finds reasons to behave in ways in contrast to moral requirements before them. For the continent, it is still a balancing act of reasons for and against. Whereas for the virtuous, there is one compelling reason to act, determined by holism about reasons, and in that sense is unified. The virtuous moral agent may very well be aware of

how others are often swayed, but these other considerations fail to count as reasons at all when they act. Just as Dancy has referred to features failing to count as a reason at all in certain cases, McDowell argues in a similar vein:

[The] dictates of virtue, if properly appreciated, are not weighed with other reasons at all, not even on a scale which always tips on their side. If a situation in which virtue imposes a requirement is genuinely conceived as such, according to this view, then considerations which, in the absence of the requirement, would have constituted reasons for acting otherwise are silenced altogether—not overridden—by the requirement. (26)

The case before the virtuous person is so crystal clear that reasons that are not a part of the holist conception of what is morally required in a situation fail to be considerations at all for the agent. For instance, it need not be the case that the virtuous person feels no sexual desire; however, the temptation to sleep with a friend or coworker are entirely silenced when a salient part of the person's moral picture is that they are in a committed, exclusive relationship with a partner. In this sense, the moral agent sees the situation so clearly and what it calls for that they do not feel the tug of libido in the way a continent person might.

The continent or strong-willed person may weigh reasons why they should or should not cheat on their partner and very well may still end up deciding that the right thing to do is to remain faithful. On this point, "If someone needs to overcome an inclination to act otherwise, in getting himself to act as, say, temperance or courage demands, then he shows not virtue but (mere) continence" (McDowell 145). However, for the virtuous person, the sexual thrill is no reason at all to cheat on their partner at all. In other words, they have no other inclination to

overcome or suppress. It simply fails to be a consideration at all. This, again, is due to the unified motivation and the sharp moral vision of the moral agent that are able to completely silence otherwise attractive reasons that stand in opposition to virtue. In this regard,

[The virtuous person] does not need to weigh considerations for and against virtue. She need not weigh them because, by reasons holism, she has one and only one fully compelling normative and motivating reason for action, and this reason emerges from her narrative. The reason that emerges from her narrative is so compelling, in fact, that the anti-virtue considerations not only do not win, but they do not carry any motivational weight whatsoever in her view of things. (Stark 444)

It should become evident that this sort of clarity of vision and clear-mindedness in making otherwise difficult moral decisions is desirable. While the continent person balances reasons in accordance with and against virtue, the virtuous person who is sensitive to the good is able to perceive and act without mental obstruction or hesitation. This also comes back to the noteworthy distinction between the 'good' and the 'will,' which is described as such: "*Good, not will, is transcendent*. Will is the natural energy of the psyche which is sometimes employable for a worthy purpose. Good is the focus of attention when an intent to be virtuous co-exists (as perhaps it almost always does) with some unclarity of vision" (Murdoch 69-70). Murdoch argues, and I will argue as well, that "the concept Good resists collapse into the selfish empirical consciousness...the proper and serious use of the term refers us to a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified ('There is no good in us') and which carries with it the ideas of hierarchy and transcendence" (93).

What I have tried to make clear is that the virtuous person with a clear perception is one who is of a particular character. Yet at the same time, one might wonder, how likely is this? Most of us, it would seem, at least try to make the decisions that we believe to be right. However, we are flawed in our perception and in our decision-making. In other words, we know that we are not the virtuous person. And this gives us reason to believe that such a character may not only be an unlikely and lofty ambition, but outright unattainable. Recent experiments from social psychology give us good reason to reconsider whether the notion of character traits, including virtuous ones, are even tenable at all.

#### §4.4 The Situationist Challenge to Character

The good philosopher, like the good scientist, is ready to concede ideas when there is convincing evidence and therefore good reason to do so. The philosophical idea at stake here is not just that of the virtuous person, but of long-term character traits as a whole. There is compelling pushback from social psychology that should make us reconsider whether such characteristics are possible. Harman describes “a person with the relevant character trait [as having] a long-term, stable disposition to use the relevant skills in the relevant way” (166). For instance, the virtuous person knows when it is time for them to be courageous, they know the place where they are required to be modest. As such, much of their behavior is often traceable to or explained by their characteristic traits, something we do all the time. “The honest person tries to return the wallet *because* he or she is honest. The person who pockets the contents of the wallet and throws the rest of the wallet away does so *because* he or she is dishonest” (Harman 167). The challenge, however, is that we are not as definable by character traits as we may imagine ourselves to be. What, if not character, accounts for our behavior? Social psychology

seems to suggest that the situation we find ourselves in plays a significant role in determining our behavior. It is too fast to idealize a character as the virtuous person who stands in defiance of situational pressures on behavior when empirical evidence suggests otherwise.

One of the most deeply unsettling studies to emerge from psychology about human nature was conducted in an experiment, now widely condemned, by Stanley Milgram in 1963. In effect, Milgram recruited participants to come to the laboratory for a faux “learning experiment” in which each participant was asked to administer increasingly intense shocks to a confederate who would act as though being shocked although was not actually being harmed in an effort to determine the length to which an individual would inflict pain upon another when continually asked to do so by the investigator. Disturbingly, 26 out of 40, or 65% of participants delivered the most severe shock to the confederate. We do not need to imagine that they were unaware of just how painful of a treatment they were administering, even if the participants lacked the moral perceptual capacity to pick up on subtle cues that the individual was in pain. This is because the dial they had to manually adjust to deliver shocks read “Danger: Severe Shock,” as well as the fact that the painful groans and pleads to halt the experiment from the actors were audible to the shock controlling participants.

We also need not comfort ourselves with talk of generational immorality and a present-day enlightened sensibility to such tasks, such as inflicting pain upon an innocent stranger because a figure of authority has asked us to. A Polish study from early 2017 by Doliński et al. reflects the original Milgram findings with 90% of participants willing to inflict the utmost pain possible upon another. Such dismal studies demonstrate that not only are there not many virtuous people amongst us, but further, the idea of the virtuous person may be entirely hopeless. These studies are not to be read as to suggest that the majority of people are of ill will and

malice, but rather, that under certain experimental settings, or situations, such as being directed by an authority figure, most people's behavior changes in ways that reflect situations more than character traits. This is the argument from situationism: human dispositions are heavily influenced by specific situations, not maintained as long-lasting characteristic traits (Merritt 366).

Situations do not have to be so extreme as the infamous Milgram experiment to influence human behavior. In 1973, Darley and Batson demonstrated how the "hurriedness" subjects were in determined their likelihood of stopping to help a stranger in need, over and above other factors including religious personality or whether they had just heard a humanitarian parable of the altruistic passerby before encountering the stranger. Those who were in a rush almost always passed the stranger in need by, whereas those with more time often stopped to offer counsel. The year before, Isen and Levin demonstrated how the level of "feeling good" by either being given cookies or finding a dime in a phone booth significantly determined whether one would be willing to volunteer in a study when asked or to spontaneously offer to help someone with dropped papers, respectively. When we observe someone helping another with dropped papers, we are more likely to think "that is a good person," not "that person probably found money earlier," or more generally, "that person is in a good mood." But these examples from social psychology give us reason to believe in the latter than the former.

The moral theorist, especially the virtue ethicist, wants to be able to say that people act the way they do because they are a certain sort of way and their behavior reflects certain character traits, not that seemingly arbitrary factors, such as time restraints, cookies, dimes, or authoritative white lab coats are better indicators of one's altruistic, negligent, or malicious behavior. Although not entirely agreeing with the practice, Maria Merritt acknowledges that in difficult cases, we

imagine what the virtuous person would do by using “the idea of an exemplary figure as an imaginative aid” (370). Admittedly, the allusion to the virtuous person might be helpful in some instances, however, I agree with Merritt that this is not the most fruitful approach. “The ideal life is supposed to be the life of having the virtues, not the life of thinking about other people who have the virtues” (Merritt 371). And this seems to accurately capture the sort of thing virtue theorists are after. The virtuous person is not the one who is best able to envision and emulate the idealized virtuous person necessarily, but the one who has the virtues and knows when, where, and how to exercise them. I think Merritt does manage to escape the situationist challenge to character by arguing that:

Situationist psychology does show that certain kinds of seemingly irrelevant situational factors may derail a person’s usual expressions of ethical concern, resulting in behavior inconsistent with the possession of a given virtue. But that’s less likely to happen if we are aware of such situational factors and their usual influence on behavior. So we must recognize that the possession of virtue requires an understanding of these kinds of factors, an awareness of our susceptibility to them, and the development of capacities to correct for their influence. (372)

If empirical evidence from social psychology tells us that humans are not resilient persons with specific character traits, but whose behavior is influenced by arbitrary factors such as situations, then we must incorporate this finding into our theory. In striving to have the virtues, it is not merely enough to see situations clearly but to also understand *how* the perceptions of most are obstructed by irrelevant factors and take measure to prevent or correct for this defect. The



purpose of this, importantly, is not to take the moral high ground and know one's insight is superior to that of others, as the virtuous person need not even know that they are virtuous (McDowell 142), but rather, to be aware of usual influences over our human nature. Insights into human nature can be as general as those mentioned above, like that humans are often susceptible to moral short-sightedness when they are in a hurry, or that we defer judgment to those who are in positions of authority. But they may also take a more specific form before the individual. If one knows that being cut off on the road by a reckless driver is prone to evoke anger, one can then start taking steps to see these situations differently. Instead of beginning to assign character traits to the individual, it might be more fruitful to see them as being in such a hurry that they are willing to risk life and limb to make it to their destination and that your commute to work is not as dire as their situation. Over time, one can then begin to see situations differently and work to rectify highly malleable internal dispositions. The new vegetarian may still be salivating at Thanksgiving dinner regardless of their ethical convictions. After some time, however, the virtuous vegetarian may stop seeing meat as food at all and conditioned responses may give room to a clear-mindedness required to resist disruptive influences to dispositions that may murk one's moral perception.

The end of this section has been dedicated to explaining how to resist situational factors that influence behavior. In other words, there are ways to work at improving one's behavior and susceptibility to situational risks. And we know this to be not only true but possible with hard work and persistence, just as the individual on a serious diet starts to see the tempting fudge not as a nectar of the gods in which to indulge but as a fattening, sugary, arterial clog that threatens to shorten life. Simply, we want to have an "awareness of our susceptibility" as Merritt

recommends. But is this sort of person desirable? In the next section, I consider whether the virtuous person is even of the sort that we ought to be admiring and striving to become.

#### §4.5 The Undesirable Moral Saint

Gilbert Harman brings up a practical concern regarding the virtuous person that I believe is worth addressing. When we consider the idealized virtuous person, it is one who lives by the virtues and does not do wrong, and in doing so, lives the good life. It is straightforward enough to understand why it makes sense to want to be like this perfect agent. However, Harman points out that when we often need to refer to the behavior of the virtuous person, we are looking for guidance in navigating a situation in which virtuous persons would never find themselves. “For example, one may have done someone a wrong, and the question is what one should do now. It may be that a flourishing person could not have done that sort of wrong to anyone” (158).

Another concern of Harman’s is that one must recognize one’s character as falling short of that of the virtuous person, and this might allow for a discrepancy between what the virtuous person might do and what the individual might do. For example, the virtuous person might vow to stand up for a friend when the friend’s partner says something unreasonable to them because that is the honest, honorable and courageous thing to do. Should the imperfect individual also make this promise, knowing that it is quite likely that when the time comes they would be unable to keep their word? In this case, it would seem that it is best to not make such a promise, even if this is the sort of thing that the virtuous person might do. Although it might be prudent at times to imagine what the virtuous person might do, Harman’s point holds that sometimes this is not the right way to think about what the right course of action is, and furthermore, is also not what it is to be virtuous. The point of virtue ethics, or so it would seem, is to develop a person who has

the virtues, thereby becoming the virtuous person. Susan Wolf, however, thinks that this is an unattractive venture that theorists need to reconsider.

What could be wrong with the virtuous person? Susan Wolf points out that this person might be such that they pay little attention to their own happiness and might even make self-sacrifices for the greater concern of others (420). I think this is a concern, but not necessarily as serious as others, as the virtuous person may truly be happiest by helping others. This may be a stronger source of joy than any other comfort they would be able to provide to their own self. I think a more worrisome concern is that

For the moral virtues, given that they are, by hypothesis, *all* present in the same individual, and to an extreme degree, are apt to crowd out the nonmoral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character. (Wolf 421)

Specifically, if the individual is spending all of their time building houses for the poor and feeding the hungry, they will not be watching plays and films, learning new languages, or spending time with their dog. Of course, none of these things are requisite for a “good life,” and it might be possible that one is perfectly fulfilled spending their time living out a virtuous life, but Wolf’s point must be addressed: it is a life that is lacking some of the finer human experiences that make life worthwhile. It would seem to appear that the virtuous person would feel guilty if they spent hours perfecting a dinner instead of volunteering at a food bank. This might even be the sort of person who cannot enjoy certain sorts of humor (Wolf 422), particularly if it is at the expense of another. This sort of person, understandably, might be the

sort of person you might want as a fellow volunteer, teacher, or perhaps physician, but not the sort of person who would necessarily make a good companion or friend. Although they are honest and trustworthy, they are devoid of nuanced interests and skills thereby making for an impressive yet bland sort of person. “The point is that, for a moral saint, the existence of these interests and skills can be given at best the status of happy accidents—they cannot be encouraged for their own sakes as distinct, independent aspects of the realization of human good” (Wolf 425).

Wolf poses a legitimate threat to the idea of the moral saint. I think the best way to understand this is by considering the *sort* of virtuous character she depicts, which I believe is a sort of virtue utilitarian. The virtue utilitarian is concerned with maximizing the amount of virtue cultivated and exercised at all costs. It would then be a better use of time to tutor children at a local school than to spend time catching up with a sibling. I do not think that the virtuous person needs to sacrifice other social goods as a consequence of being virtuous. It is possible to believe that the virtuous person is both warm and competent and able to enjoy pleasures in life that are virtue-less. The important point remains, however, that when the time comes, the virtuous person knows how to act. In this regard, the virtuous person may be able to indulge in pleasures to an extent, admittedly less liberally than the uninformed individual whose perception might be obstructed. As such, I do not believe that a truly virtuous person could comfortably enjoy foie gras or consume products made by child labor. But this does not mean that the individual might not indulge in healthy doses of hedonism. It may very well be morally better to spend a weekend helping a local clinic, but there is nothing necessarily wrong with reading a novel instead. The virtuous person does not bear all of the world’s responsibilities but is sensitive to situations when action is required. A part of this competence involves knowing the time and

place for indulgences as well as for virtue. It may be appropriate to enjoy a comedian using crass language and discussing problematic topics as long as one is also sensitive to sarcasm, irony, and context. If the act is not one of vicious malice or harmful ignorance, then the virtuous person may be able to enjoy humor like the rest of us. The virtuous person may be able to enjoy a glass of wine at dinner but not at their child's talent show. For the moral agent to be contextually sensitive requires that they are able to detect such nuances in order to live the good life, which does not necessarily require that one maximize good done in the world, even if this sort of effort is admirable.

The purpose of virtue theory is to illustrate what is meant by and how to possibly achieve the good life, not to make individuals miserable by focusing their energies on only doing that which is virtuous. The moral agent should be able to recognize the good in "reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving [one's] backhand" (Wolf 421), even if these are not explicitly moral goods but goods of other sorts that indeed contribute to the good life. Much of this work has been focused on describing what it is the moral agent is trying to achieve: clear perception, cultivated moral sensitivity, a holistic consideration of salient features, attaining the virtues; however, little has been said about the sorts of steps or practices that make this objective attainable.

#### §4.6 Practices of Unselfing

Iris Murdoch believes that humans are naturally selfish (78), and this is not an uncommon view to hold. Even if one maintains a more optimistic view of human nature, it is true that humans are often selfish, and even acts that better others might be performed somewhat out of self-interest, such as for purposes of admiration or reciprocity. While Murdoch

attributes this shift in moral philosophy as the result of an overreliance on empiricism (71), and as such, on the will and self, there must be an effort to shift our attention outward, a thought introduced in §4.3. Describing the sorts of creatures we are, Murdoch writes

We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world. Our states of consciousness differ in quality, our fantasies and reveries are not trivial and unimportant, they are profoundly connected with our energies and our ability to choose and act. And if quality of consciousness matters, then anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue. (84)

We are, in other words, self-centered and self-obsessed. And even if this does not entirely explain our blurred moral vision, it certainly accounts for much of the foginess. Instead of helping someone struggling to load their car with grocery bags, we may tell ourselves that we are running late, and if that were not the case we would be helping them. This line of thought serves us well by reminding us that we are good but that another concern takes priority. We may tell ourselves that giving money to a homeless individual may enable the state of poverty and of taking, or that we do not know how the money will be used when in truth we simply do not want to sacrifice the time and money for another.

Murdoch alludes to Plato in saying that “beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct” (85). It is this sort of love, or looking outward, that albeit temporarily, absolves us of ourselves. The two forms of beauty that Murdoch primarily focuses on are those of nature and

art. By giving attention to nature we can clear our self-conscious minds of our own thoughts and desires and concerns and focus on a beauty is transcendental in its effortless perfection and the mental serenity it temporarily provides us, the sort that we fail to engage in more often when considering the good.

Good art, too, Murdoch argues, “transcends selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility of its consumer” (87) and it “affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is our best faculties and, to use Platonic language, inspires love in the highest part of the soul” (85). I believe Murdoch focuses on beauty because it is so immediately accessible to readers. Nature, in whatever form one imagines, strikes the human mind as awe-inspiring and forces us by its sheer magnificence to pull us out of ourselves, or what Murdoch calls the practice of “unselfing” (84). Whether we are on a hike in a forest, sitting by a babbling brook, or admiring the constellations on a clear night, we experience a paradigmatic shift from an inward focus to an outward one. This need not be taken as some romantic metaphor but does appear to be supported by recent studies<sup>5</sup> on the brain in nature, to take one example, in which these environments help to sharpen senses and improve one’s quality of life, possibly by shifting our attention in a unique way out of the self. Similarly, one can imagine how attention on and investment in cultivating linguistic or musical skills may operate in a similar fashion by redirecting one’s focus from the self to a concentrated effort of something outside of their self that demands complete attention and clear perception for achieving success.

---

<sup>5</sup> “This is Your Brain on Nature,” *National Geographic*.

Engaging in these practices of unselfing can hone one's sensitivity to that external to the egotistical self. If art, nature, children, languages, poetry, music, animals, fiction, and other human experiences can shift "consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism," then they are tearing at and lifting the veil of ego that normally prevents us from seeing situations and others as they exist. Engaging in practices of unselfing often enough can make this sort of attentional shift habitual so that we become more adept at shifting our focuses to perceive reality as it exists before us. This is the way that Murdoch also reads Plato: "When [he] made mathematics the king *τέχνη* (techne) he was regarding mathematical thought as leading the mind away from the material world and enabling it to perceive a reality of a new kind, very unlike ordinary appearances" (90). In this reading, we do not literally need to take mathematics or art as the highest of goods, but as vehicles that redirect the conscious mind to a higher plane of existence, a metaphysical good whose recognition is required of the virtuous person. In this conception, we can also understand that to perceive clearly is not the sort of thing that one is born with, if we are indeed naturally selfish and born with egos, but rather, it is arduous work that requires dedication and practice. "It is a *task* to come to see the world as it is" (Murdoch 91). Practices of unselfing, then, help us perceive reality holistically and honestly, that is, unobstructed by the self; however, we have yet to say what the 'Good' is and why defining it is a difficult task.

#### §4.7 Experiencing the Good

It is difficult to characterize the good. Why pursue something if we cannot know in its entirety what it is? We know, for instance, what it is to be healthy, and that conception gives us



some reason to pursue it. Socrates' dialogues from *The Republic* provide us with an ever useful analogy to understand the good:

'Whose is the light which best enables our faculty of sight to see, and the things which are seen to be seen?' ... 'The one you're asking about is obviously the sun' ... 'In the world of thought the good stands in just the same relation to thinking and the things which can be thought as the sun, in the world of sight, stands to seeing and the things which can be seen.' (508a-c)

Just as the sun provides us a light in which we can see, the good sheds light on the world by which we can know. This, however, is not to conflate knowledge and truth with the good:

'You can say that this thing which gives the things which are known their truth, and from which the knower draws his ability to know, is the form or character of the good. Because it is the cause of knowledge and truth, think of it by all means as something known. But you will be right to regard it as different from, and still more beautiful than, knowledge and truth, beautiful though both of these are. Just as in our example it is correct to think of light and vision as sun-*like*, but incorrect to think that they *are* the sun, in the same way here it is correct to think of knowledge and truth as good-*like*, but incorrect to think that either of them *is* the good. The good is something to be prized even more highly.'

(509a)

The moral agent who is able to unself is someone who can perceive the truth by the light of the good, just as the person with sight is one who can see objects by the light of the sun. To see clearly is to see entirely, or holistically, and to do so requires one be of a certain disposition, that is, a virtuous one. Writing on the analogy, Murdoch says,

The Good itself is not visible ... We can certainly know more or less where the sun is; it is not so easy to imagine what it would be like to look at it ... What does seem to make perfect sense in the Platonic myth is the idea of the Good as the source of light which reveals to us all things as they really are. (70)

This may be a disappointing response to those in search of a good that comes equipped with a specific definition or description, but this helps to explain the difficult task of trying to codify the good into moral principles. It is not a matter of knowing the good and reducing it to rules to use, but a matter of being sensitive to instances of the good, which are far easier to see than the good itself, just as it is easier to see instances of sunlight than the sun itself. The aspiration of moral theory then should not be to describe the good but to enable an awareness or sensitivity to the good. This involves recognizing that the good is not like other things that we can know and articulate, but the sort of thing by which we can see and that which we can experience. An explanation for difficulty in defining and achieving the good is a result of our nature:

We are largely mechanical creatures, the slaves of relentlessly strong selfish forces the nature of which we scarcely comprehend ... There are perhaps in the case of every human being insuperable psychological barriers to goodness ... And if we look outside the self

what we see are scattered intimations of Good. There are few places where virtue plainly shines: great art, humble people who serve others. And can we, without improving ourselves, really see these things clearly? (Murdoch 99)

This is a difficult but important realization: none of us will likely know the good by seeing things as clearly as we can. What we can do, however, is sharpen our moral vision in hopes of knowing that which is true and real by the light of the good and recognize manifestations of it where we can. What we can do is appreciate the good outside of ourselves: “Love ... is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good ... Its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good. It is a reflection of the warmth and light of the sun” (Murdoch 103).

## Conclusion

A major goal of this work is to shift the focus away from the pursuit of formulating principles and reliance on them to appreciating the contextually dependent function of features in moral reasons. Better than overriding principles, I argue, is to consider that reasons might take on different properties depending on the circumstance. In this sense, action-guiding reasons are holistically construed, not atomistically. There are instances in which a feature counts in favor of an action, and others in which it counts in disfavor, and yet others where it does not count at all. We need not concede to Dancy's extreme particularism that says we arrive without any understanding of how features may behave, as we can retain this sort of knowledge over time. We can carry with us knowledge as to how features have interplayed in the past, or even how they often do behave. What we cannot know, however, is how features *may* function in a given context until we are present in the situation.

I agree that Ross' prima facie principles are of the sort that do a better job than most traditional approaches, in that principles are now conditional on contextual considerations; however, Ross still maintains that reasons act atomistically, which we have reason to reject. However, we may have a weaker notion in particularism of default reasons, a rudimentary understanding of how it is that reasons usually function, and may even arrive switched on or off given their nature, as even Dancy recognizes; that said, even these reasons are susceptible to axiological shifts if the context demands it.

Reasons are informed holistically and therefore one must have all of the relevant information necessary, including how features interact with one another, before realizing the right course of action. This requires a particular way of seeing situations, what McDowell has referred to as a perceptual capacity. Seeing correctly is enough to motivate the moral agent. We

do not need desires above and beyond the favorable light in which the person sees the situation, even if desires help to make intelligible actions. Having virtue is to be thought of as an ability, specifically, a sensitivity to moral requirements as they arise.

Virtue is distinct from continence in that it does not require a balancing act of possible inclinations to act in any other way. The virtuous person is unified in their motivation because of their holistic perception of the situation that silences all else that is not contextually relevant. The pushback against such a long-term disposition or character traits more generally does not defeat the ambition of virtue theory, but importantly points out the pervasive influence of situational pressures on the individual. As such, the virtuous person must also be aware of such pressures and finds ways to rectify this fallibility.

There is reason to believe that one might not want to be virtuous if it is at the expense of life-enhancing non-moral virtues. This may hold true if the primary concern of the virtuous person is to maximize how virtuous they can possibly be, but this need not be the case. The moral agent may very well enjoy social goods, albeit with a careful consideration that may preclude certain activities in which others may indulge if they are truly seen as contrary to the good. To recognize the good requires one to overcome selfish inward thinking through practices that Murdoch calls unselfing. This paradigmatic shift toward the good in others allows one to perceive more clearly situational requirements and the whole picture, thereby crafting a clear and compelling narrative of how to act. The good is elusive, thereby making morality difficult to codify, but a virtuous particularist approach may be a means by which we can begin to clear our moral vision and cultivate the sort of sensitivity required to experience the good and live the good life.

## Works Cited

- Bakhurst, David. "Ethical Particularism in Context." *Moral Particularism*. Ed. Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little. Oxford: Clarendon, 2000. 157-77. Print.
- Blum, Lawrence. "Moral perception and particularity." *Ethics* 101.4 (1991): 701-725.
- Cartwright, Nancy. *How the Laws of Physics Lie*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1983. Print.
- Dancy, Jonathan. *Ethics Without Principles*. Oxford: Clarendon, 2004. Print.
- Dancy, Jonathan. *Moral Reasons*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993. Print.
- Dancy, Jonathan. "The Particularist's Progress." *Recent work on intrinsic value*. Springer Netherlands, 2005. 325-347.
- Darley, John M., and C. Daniel Batson. "'From Jerusalem to Jericho': A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 27.1 (1973): 100.
- Doliński, Dariusz, Tomasz Grzyb, Michał Folwarczny, Patrycja Grzybała, Karolina Krzyszycha, Karolina Martynowska, Jakub Trojanowski. **Would You Deliver an Electric Shock in 2015? Obedience in the Experimental Paradigm Developed by Stanley Milgram in the 50 Years Following the Original Studies.** *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2017
- Harman, Gilbert. *Explaining Value*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.
- Harris, Sam. *Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. New York: Free, 2011. Print.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Lexington, KY: CreateSpace, 2014. Print.
- Isen, Alice M., and Paula F. Levin. "Effect of feeling good on helping: cookies and kindness." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 21.3 (1972): 384.
- Kim, Jaegwon. *Mind in a Physical World: An Essay on the Mind-Body Problem and Mental*

- Causation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1998. Print.
- Lance, Mark, and Margaret Little. "Defeasibility and the normative grasp of context."  
*Erkenntnis* 61.2-3 (2004): 435-455.
- Little, Maggie. "Moral Generalities Revisited." *Moral Particularism*. Ed. Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little. Oxford: Clarendon, 2000. 276-304. Print.
- Little, Maggie. *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*. Ed. Carl Elliott. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001. Print.
- McDowell, John Henry. *Mind, value, and reality*. Harvard University Press, 1998.
- McDowell, John, and I. G. McFetridge. "Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 52 (1978): 13-42.
- McDowell, John. "Virtue and Reason." Ed. Michael Slote. *Virtue Ethics*. Ed. Roger Crisp. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. 141-62. Print
- McGrath, Sarah. "Moral Knowledge by Perception." *Philosophical Perspectives* 18.1 (2004): 209-228.
- McKeever, Sean, and Michael Ridge. *Principled ethics: Generalism as a regulative ideal*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- McNaughton, David. *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics*. Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1988. Print.
- Merritt, Maria. "Virtue ethics and situationist personality psychology." *Ethical theory and moral practice* 3.4 (2000): 365-383.
- Milgram, Stanley. "Behavioral Study of obedience." *The Journal of abnormal and social psychology* 67.4 (1963): 371.

- Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Rotledge Kegan Paul, 1980. Print.
- Nagel, Tomas. *The Possibility of Altruism*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1970. Print.
- O'Neill, Onora. "Practical Principles and Practical Judgment." *Hastings Center Report* 31.4 (2001): 15-23.
- O'Neill, Onora. *Towards justice and virtue: A constructive account of practical reasoning*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Plato. *The Republic*. Ed. Giovanni R. F. Ferrari. Trans. Tom Griffith. Cambridge: Cambridge U, 2013. Print.
- Smith, Benedict. *Particularism and the Space of Moral Reasons*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.
- Smith, Benedict. "Particularism, perception and judgement." *Acta Analytica* 21.2 (2006): 12-29.
- Smith, Michael. *The Moral Problem*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995. Print.
- Stark, Susan. "Virtue and emotion." *Noûs* 35.3 (2001): 440-455.
- Stroud, Barry. "Sense-Experience and the Grounding of Thought." *Philosophers Past and Present* (2011): 273-89. Web.
- Williams, Florence. "This is Your Brain on Nature." *National Geographic*, Jan. 2016. Web. 19 Mar. 2017.
- Wolf, Susan. "Moral saints." *The Journal of Philosophy* 79.8 (1982): 419-439.