UNDERSTANDING MORAL PRINCIPLES:
JONATHAN DANCY, IRIS MURDOCH, AND PARTICULARISM

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There is a paradox about moral principles like 'You ought to keep your promises.' They seem to express universal truths that tell us what to do, but exceptional situations arise in which it seems we should *not* do what they tell us. Generalists like R. M. Hare resolve this paradox by arguing that accurately specified moral principles do not have exceptions, and we can use them to syllogistically derive correct judgments about actions. Particularists like Jonathan Dancy resolve the paradox by arguing that, because there can be exceptions to *any* moral principle, moral principles actually are false. At best they are "reminders" or "dispensable crutches."

I argue that although Dancy's particularism undermines generalism, it fails to capture the true normative status of moral principles. Consequently, there is a lacuna in particularism: it does not provide an adequate understanding of how moral values are related or how moral principles are action-guiding. I trace the failures of particularism, as well as generalism, to an assumption both share about generality—an assumption that tethers them to an unduly narrow conception of moral principles.

After rejecting this assumption, I draw on Iris Murdoch's notion of vision and its perfection to develop an ideal-based account of generality. According to this account, moral thought includes reflection on substantive *ideals*, the content of which is partly expressed in

ordinary moral principles. I argue there are two forms of generality moral principles can exhibit, which generalists and particularists alike should embrace. The first is characteristic of fundamental principles like those in Murdoch's and Aristotle's views. The second is exhibited in principles that help give content to moral ideals. My account (unlike particularism) allows that principles have a normative, action-guiding role, but (unlike generalism) it does not construe principles as bases for syllogistic derivations about what to do. I discuss examples of both moral exemplars and rehabilitated criminal offenders to demonstrate that principled reflection is crucial to perfecting agency. In doing this, I show how the paradox about moral principles can give way to an understanding of moral principles that captures the role they play in ordinary moral reflection.

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PREFACE

There are so many people whose help and encouragement have sustained me in my life and in the writing of this dissertation. I am immensely grateful to my committee members. First among them is my director Stephen Engstrom, whose philosophical generosity and intelligence are seemingly boundless. Over the years, he has given me feedback on countless drafts, and without his patience, incisiveness, and unwavering support I would not have been able to bring this project to completion. John McDowell's work drew me to philosophy in the first place and continues to inspire me; his comments on my work at crucial junctures strengthened it immensely. Jennifer Whiting's seminar on ethical reflection launched me on this dissertation project, and our conversations over the years of writing it encouraged me to keep with it. David Gauthier and Michael Thompson served on an earlier instantiation of my committee, and both provided invaluable guidance. John Lyne, who joined my committee at the final stage, brought a welcome, fresh perspective. I must also thank my philosopher friend Róbert H. Haraldsson, who at a critical moment stepped in with his keen philosophical and editorial eye to urge me over the finish line. There are many others whose friendship and support I treasure, including Donald Ainslie, Bridget Clarke, Georgia Frank, Becky Gough, Jennifer Markley, Stephanie McClintick, Jackie Michel, Karin Nisenbaum, Kolbrún Pálsdóttir, Lisa Shapiro, Alice Virden-Speer, and Maura Tumulty. I am also deeply grateful for my family, including my Aunt Brooke and Uncle Bill Pendleton, who have kept me buoyed; my in-laws Newell and Mary Witherspoon, who

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation arises from curiosity about a routine bit of reasoning. We believe certain behaviors are wrong, like breaking promises or telling lies, and yet there are occasions when we conclude that it is perfectly okay to break our word or fudge the truth. In fact, there are enough of these occasions to make our appeal to moral principles like 'do not break a promise' or 'do not tell a lie' look puzzling. Why do we continue to affirm familiar moral principles, even when we find that often they do not actually tell us what we should do?

Philosophers, too, have asked what moral principles mean and how they should figure in our moral reasoning. Traditional responses to these questions revolve around the distinction between deontological and consequentialist moral theories and place Kant in opposition to Mill; but in recent debates about how to answer these questions, philosophers have focused attention on a distinction that can be traced to the ancients and which presents possibilities for thinking about moral theory in a quite different way. These philosophers, often under the influence of Aristotle, have introduced two broad positions that supersede the conventional divide between deontology and consequentialism.[1]

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[1] For examples of particularist views influenced by Aristotle, see John McDowell's "Deliberation and Moral Development," "Virtue and Reason," and "Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology" and Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge*. For an example of particularism not directly reliant on Aristotle, see Jonathan Dancy's work, especially *Moral Reasons* and *Ethics without Principles*.

The first is generalism, which maintains that moral principles play a necessary role in arriving at correct moral judgments. The strongest form of generalism maintains that all correct moral judgment can be derived from an adequate system of moral principles. From the generalist perspective, Kant and Mill do not represent two extremes for moral theory. On the contrary, they simply offer two different ways to elaborate a generalist position. Aristotle, on the other hand, points the way to a true alternative: the second position, known as particularism, which maintains that generalism's moral principles are not necessary for arriving at correct moral judgments. Indeed, particularism in its strongest form maintains that moral principles are false.[2]

Particularism, which originates in a critique of generalism, is convincing in its argument that because situations are infinitely variable, it is impossible to codify correct moral judgments in a set of principles. Sometimes there are complicated cases, to which the rigid application of principles yields morally unacceptable judgments; sometimes there are novel cases for which there is no obviously applicable principle. Generalists respond to the particularists' point about the infinite variability of situations by seeking ways to retain the definitive normativity of principles and guarantee that they yield absolute moral verdicts. They fine-tune principles so that exceptions are "built-in" or they limit the number of principles that count as truly definitive or they treat principles as definitive propositions about normative *presumptions*.

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[2] See, for example, Margaret Little's essay, "Moral Generalities Revisited" in *Moral Particularism*, in which she argues that moral particularism "is a more radical doctrine than many give it credit for" because its lesson is that we should doubt the existence of *any* codifiable generalities linking moral and nonmoral properties, including "less ambitious" generalities, such as those accompanied by *ceteris paribus* or *pro tanto* clauses and not just generalities that would function algorithmically, say, as part of a codifiable system (292).

I agree with the particularists' basic critique of generalism. It wrongly portrays moral reasoning as a matter of identifying moral principles and then applying them in an algorithmic manner, a portrayal which our experience of moral reflection belies. It is obvious that good moral judges must be sensitive to the particulars of situations and that turning our power of moral judging over to a body of rigid rules would make us obtuse moralists. However, the particularists' contention that moral principles are false is not so convincing. Such a view goes against the way we think of moral principles in our work-a-day thoughts and reflections about what we should do, or should have done, and why. In fact, when we act against the grain of a typical moral principle our practice often is not to reject or revise the principle; rather, we use expressions that *reaffirm* our commitment ("it's wrong to break a promise"), while noting the exception ("but I had an emergency"). Our practice tends to pronounce, rather than renounce, the truth of the principle.

The debate about the status of moral principles proceeds with each party seesawing between two theoretical tasks: generalists work to craft a conception of principles according to which they yield definitive verdicts, and particularists respond with examples that show how the generalists' principles have fallen short. My main focus in this dissertation, however, is on particularists' efforts to get off the seesaw. Their fundamental suggestion is that we abandon the generalists' idea that there is anything definitively normative in moral principles and reconceptualize them as "reminders,"[3] "rules of thumb,"[4] or "summaries"[5] of past correct

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[3] Dancy develops this idea in *Moral Reasons* (67).

[4] This is Nussbaum's characterization in *Love's Knowledge* (68).

[5] This is Nussbaum's characterization in *Love's Knowledge* (73).

decisions. Principles are "dispensable crutches."[6] They are for hobbling along and can be discarded if our moral faculties are able.

I argue that none of the particularists' suggestions truly capture the normative status of moral principles. Particularists are mistaken about the role of moral principles—and more broadly the role of generality—in our moral reasoning, and consequently they are often led to view our moral knowledge as inadequate, tentative, and forever needing to be revised, supplemented, or even discarded in light of moral determinations made in particular cases. Sometimes such modifications are called for, but this portrayal is so unacceptably broad that it opens particularism to charges of collapsing into an "empty situation ethics"[7] that leaves no place for genuine moral commitment. I seek to harmonize the particularists' insight about the variability of situations with the generalists' belief that principles express general moral truths. I do so by carving out an alternate conception of generality, which I call the ideal-based account of generality. This account suggests a different way of understanding moral principles that is compatible with and in fact embraces much of the particularist critique of generalism, but it retains a sense of the definitive normativity of principles on which critics of particularism insist.

I develop my account of the role of moral principles in large part through a critique of Jonathan Dancy's version of particularism in *Moral Reasons* and *Ethics without Principles*. I focus on Dancy as the spokesperson for particularism because he makes an especially clear and direct case for it, and his books and articles serve as a primary reference point for defenders and opponents of particularism alike. Because Dancy's defense of particularism is intimately tied to his critique of generalism, I embark in chapter one on a critical examination of his account of

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[6] This is Dancy's characterization in *Ethics without Principles* (142).

[7] This is Hilary Putnam's characterization in *Taking Rules Seriously* (193).

generalism and the arguments he gives against it. For Dancy, generalism is the view that a general moral principle is a statement that a given property will have the same role in moral judgment on each and every occasion on which it is present. It is the view that "what matters somewhere must matter in the same way on every occurrence" (*Ethics* 93). Dancy argues that *no* property can invariably matter in the same way on every occurrence and concludes that true general moral principles are impossible. He develops this argument through a sustained attack against what he regards as the two basic types of generalism: absolutist or subsumptive generalism in the manner of R. M. Hare and what I will call 'presumptive generalism' in the manner of W. D. Ross.

While I agree with the essence of Dancy's critique, I argue in chapter two that it does not imply (as he thinks it does) that there are no general moral principles. Dancy believes that generalism comes in precisely two distinct versions and that principles, if they function in our moral reasoning at all, can do so only as envisioned by these two versions. His attempt to reformulate principles as reminders leads to what I call Dancy's lacuna. In its practical aspect, Dancy's view cannot account for our appeal to moral principles in ordinary moral discourse and reflection; in its theoretical, aspect it leaves our ability for moral judgment mysterious, for Dancy believes that what we know that equips us to make moral judgments is inarticulable. I argue that what is lacking in Dancy's view is an account of our moral outlook or general values. The moral agents of Dancy's particularism are perfectly sensitive moral judges, and yet they have no *general* understanding of how their moral values are related. There is no place for an understanding of how our values hang together.

In chapter three, I turn to the work of Iris Murdoch, especially *The Sovereignty of Good*, to show there is a need to fill the lacuna in particularism. I put special focus on Murdoch's

notion of *vision* and its perfection to develop a way of talking about the moral data that is left out of the particularists' account of moral judgment. The gist of Murdoch's idea of vision, which roughly refers to something like character, is that to be good moral judges, we must not only have clear perception of the relevant features of situations, but we must also clear away distortions in our vision. To achieve clarity, we must follow what I refer to as 'Murdoch's injunction,' her command that we look with "a just and loving gaze" (33). We can take up this stance of love and justice and direct it outwardly toward particular people and situations, or we can through *reflection* direct it inwardly on what I call 'total vision.' Murdoch characterizes this process of *perfecting vision* in various ways, including as focusing on or aiming at the Good or looking in the light of love and justice. For Murdoch, it is through this process that we come to see things aright. After the discussion of vision, I draw a contrast between the Murdochian picture of moral judgment and Dancy's picture, which brings out the limitations of Dancy's view. Dancy's limited view of the range of possibilities for understanding moral principles cuts off an opportunity to find a place for general moral relations of the sort we can locate in vision; he cuts off an opportunity for an alternate conception of generality in moral thought.

My point of departure from Murdoch is that I do not think we get a full picture of the actual moral work involved in reflection if we limit our account of it to an appeal to love and justice and their neutralizing effects on the ego. I agree with Murdoch that reflection on total vision is a process of clearing away distortions and looking in the light of the Good, but reflection will also involve reflection on substantive *ideals* as they bear on specific situations. In chapter four, I offer an example of moral reflection that demonstrates the connection between ideals and principles and the role that both play in moral reflection. I also consider examples of reflection in the criminal rehabilitation process, which lend credibility to my idea that reflection

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is a vital part of moral judgment making, and not an out-of-touch philosophical construct. I argue that, when understood in terms of ideals, principles are not universal rules for action, but are nevertheless action-guiding. They are propositions that express general moral relations, but as I demonstrate in sections 4.7 and 4.8, they are not susceptible to the particularists' critique that they are false. As part of this demonstration I show that particularists and generalists share a common assumption about moral principles that tethers them to an unduly narrow conception of generality. Once we see how ideals and principles play an indelible role in our moral reflections, as objects, spurs, and on-going ends for reflection—once we see how reflection on ideals and principles can play a vital role in cultivating our moral commitments—we can see how principles play a role in guiding our actions.

In chapter four, I also examine an Aristotelian conception of generality, found in Aristotelian categoricals, and offer an analysis of how it has been misunderstood by Dancy-style particularists. Once we clear up the misunderstanding of the sort of generality these categoricals articulate, we see the plausibility of alternate conceptions of generality, including the type of generality the ideal-based account identifies in ideals and principles. According to the ideal-based account, principles possess an unvarying connection or relation to ideals. As such, they have a definitive normativity: they are unvarying and definitive articulations of (at least part of) the substantive content of ideals.

The dissertation concludes with an argument that there are at least two kinds of generality, which both particularists and generalists can accept. The first kind is characteristic of fundamental principles of the sort that form the foundation of the Murdochian and Aristotelian views: 'look with a just and loving gaze' and 'do as the *phronimos* does.' These have the unconditional, universal characteristics that particularists require to establish the truth of a

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general principle. The second sort of generality they should accept is the alternative interpretation of principles like 'adultery is wrong' developed by the ideal-based account of generality, according to which principles express general truths about the ideals to which we are committed. According to this account, Murdoch's injunction to look with a just and loving gaze is inextricably tied to reflection on ideals and their attendant principles, which give content to the overarching ideal of the Good. As such, they play a necessary role in the perfection of vision. And so, just like vision itself, they have a guiding role in preparing us for right action when the time comes. The lesson learned is that *principled reflection* is crucial to the on-going effort of perfection in vision and to the process of perfecting agency. It is through this reflection that principles guide actions. They guide us in the cultivation of our commitment to the Good, so that we act *well* when the moment for action comes.

1.0   GENERALISM AND DANCY'S CRITIQUE

In this dissertation we will investigate the kinds of reasons we have for moral judgments, and how we use those reasons in particular cases to arrive at moral judgments. The debate we will enter is centered on the question 'What is the logical relation between moral reasons and moral judgments?' The moral reasons we are asked to consider in this question are drawn from features of actions and their circumstances. The moral judgments we will begin reflecting on are assessments of particular (actual or possible) actions done (or capable of being done) by particular agents in particular circumstances; these assessments may invoke either thin moral concepts (e.g., 'right,' 'wrong,' 'virtuous,' 'vicious') or thick moral concepts (e.g., 'generous,' 'stingy,' 'kind,' 'cruel'). But as the scope of our investigation grows to encompass the ideas of Iris Murdoch, we will find it necessary to broaden the range of moral judgments under consideration to include the moral evaluation of character and of what Murdoch calls 'vision.'

Our investigation presupposes that moral judgments rest on reasons. Many philosophers have thought that this presupposition is false, that at bottom moral judgments are not the sort of things that can be reasonable or unreasonable. This view, often called 'non-cognitivism,' holds that moral judgments are something like an expression of a groundless preference or an emotion. We will assume that moral judgments *can* be justified or unjustified by reasons. Although we will not tackle the non-cognitivist position directly in this work—doing so would distract from my main line of argument—the conception of moral reasoning we will develop should diminish the appeal of non-cognitivism.

Accounts of the relation between moral reasons and moral judgments may be divided into two broad categories. One kind of account holds that a feature (or set of features) that counts as a reason for a moral judgment in one case must count in the same way in any other case in which it appears; we will call this view 'generalism.' The other sort of account holds that the fact that a feature (or set of features) counts as a reason for a moral judgment in one case is no guarantee that it will count the same way (or at all) in a different case; we will call this view 'particularism.'[1] Particularism's most thorough-going advocate is arguably Jonathan Dancy, and it is on his work, especially *Moral Reasons* and the later *Ethics without Principles*, that we will rely in our examination of the particularists' position.[2]

To introduce the debate between generalism and particularism, we will begin with Dancy's portrayal of generalism in *Moral Reasons*. He finds that generalism comes in two varieties. The first is discussed in a chapter called "Against Generalism (1)." We will refer to this variety as 'subsumptivism.' The second variety, which is discussed in a subsequent chapter called "Against Generalism (2)," we will refer to as 'presumptivism.' The next two sections will examine Dancy's account of each of these varieties of generalism.

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[1] This characterization of particularism is my gloss on Dancy's statement in *Moral Reasons*, that "[t]he leading thought behind particularism is the thought that the behaviour of a reason (or of a consideration that serves as a reason) in a new case cannot be predicted from its behaviour elsewhere" (60). I find it odd to speak of a reason *behaving* in one way rather than another, and it does not seem that our task is exactly that of coming up with *predictions*, and so I have reformulated his leading thought in terms he uses elsewhere about there being no guarantee that a reason will have the same significance wherever it appears.

[2] For background I also draw on Dancy's "Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties."

1.1   SUBSUMPTIVE GENERALISM

To fully grasp the first sort of generalism identified by Dancy—subsumptive generalism—we have to distinguish it from another position, which we might call the 'universalizability principle' or 'universalism.' A classic expression of the universalizability principle can be found in R. M. Hare's *Freedom and Reason*. Hare claims that the universalizability principle applies to any judgment that uses terms that have descriptive meaning. He explains that:

> any singular descriptive judgement is universalizable … in the sense that it commits the speaker to the further proposition that anything exactly like the subject of the first judgement, or like it in the relevant respects, possesses the property attributed to it in the first judgment. (12)

When we turn our attention from singular descriptive judgements to moral judgments (the focus of particularism), we can reformulate the universalizability principle as follows: anyone who makes a moral judgment regarding one action is committed to making the same judgment of any relevantly similar action. This thesis, it is important to note, says nothing about *how* we arrive at a judgment; it takes no stance on what can provide a reason for a moral (or any other) judgment, nor on the relationship between reasons and judgments.

Subsumptive generalism, by contrast, is precisely a thesis about what is required in order for a feature of an action to provide a reason for a moral judgment about the action. Subsumptivism holds that a feature of an action is a reason for a moral judgment of the action just in case that feature falls under a universal moral rule. To arrive at a judgment about a particular action is to subsume features of that action under a rule of the following form: all

actions with features F have moral property M. According to subsumptivism, for our judgments to be rational and consistent they must be based on an underlying set of unchanging rules. Hence, whenever we make a moral judgment we are committed to a universal generalization of the form '$\forall x \ (Fx \rightarrow Mx)$,' where x ranges over actions, F is the name of a set of grounding properties, and M is a moral property, and to be consistent, we must reach the same conclusion about any other action that exhibits the set of properties F.[3]

The universalizability principle seems to me simply to express a minimal condition of rational consistency.[4] It says that if we give different judgments regarding similar cases, we should be able to point to some relevant difference between them. Indeed, it is more truism than thesis.[5] Hare carefully refrains from tying the universalizability principle to any particular

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[3] In "Moral Rules" Russ Shafer-Landau writes, in an exposition that closely follows Dancy's, that the subsumptivist (or absolutist) view can be more or less comprehensive depending on the domain of ethical verdicts to which it purports to apply. According to Shafer-Landau, the strongest form of subsumptivism claims that "every determinate ethical verdict can be deduced from an absolute rule. Weaker theories would allow for a range of conclusory ethical judgments that are not deducible from absolute rules" (586-8). I do not see how subsumptivism could be weakened in this way and still count as subsumptivism given what the view requires for rationality and consistency.

[4] Other philosophers share my interpretation of what is expressed by universalizability principle. For example, in *Ethics* J. L. Mackie argues that a version of universalism is in some sense "beyond dispute" (83). Even Peter Winch, in "Universalizability of Moral Judgment," who challenges another form of the principle of universalizability, believes that "if a man were to make different spectator's judgments of his own about the moral conduct of agents in situations which he agreed contained no relevant moral differences, there would, I think be serious difficulty in understanding what he was saying" (154). (See also the next footnote.)

[5] Perhaps the most influential challenge to the claim that universalizability is a criterion of rationality comes from Peter Winch. Although his formulation is essentially equivalent to Hare's, namely, 'if I judge that an action is right for A1, then I must also judge that action to be right for A2, as long as there are no relevant moral differences in their natures and circumstances,' what he actually rejects is a closely allied formulation, namely, 'if we judge that an action is right for agent A_1 in circumstances C_1, then if agent A_2 is in circumstances C_2, and if C_1 and C_2 are relevantly similar, then we must judge that the same action is right for A_2, so long

account of what 'relevant similarity' comes to. Moreover, the principle says nothing about *how*

we arrive at moral judgments, or about *what* justifies a moral judgment.

Subsumptivism, as we have seen, is precisely a theory about how we justify moral

judgments, and it holds that two cases are relevantly similar when there is a universal rule under

which both fall. This is enough to show that subsumptivism and the universalizability thesis are

quite distinct.[6] Subsumptivism, in fact, goes beyond the universalizability principle because, as

Dancy tells us, it requires "us to be *driven* from case to case on pain of contradiction. Only hard-

edged, codified principles with no fudge clauses or room for manoeuvre in them could drive us

in that way" (*Moral Reasons* 82). As we will see in more detail in section five, there are good

reasons to reject subsumptivism because any universal rule of the sort the theory posits is either

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as there is no good reason for judging A_2 differently from A_1.' (Compare Sidgwick 384-5.) As far as I can see now, Winch's acceptance of the former principle is incompatible with Winch's claim that there are some cases in which I can correctly say 'I ought to do *x*, but another person in relevantly similar circumstances ought to do *y* instead.' Winch seems to think that the shift from a third-person perspective (I judge what other agents ought to do) to a first-person perspective (I judge what I ought to do) changes the applicability of the universalizability principle. I do not see this, for if I judge A_1 and A_2 and their circumstances as relevantly similar and at the same time recognize Winch's point that A_1 can rightly judge that *x* is the right thing to do, while A_2 can rightly judge that *y* is the right thing to do, then I should recognize this possibility when I judge their actions. If I do recognize it, then I must reject the minimal principle of universalizability that I formulate in the text. But Winch is quite emphatic that individual agents should conform their judgments to that principle. (See previous footnote.)

[6] In *Moral Reasons*, Dancy runs the two theses together when he characterizes Hare's position as saying that:

> Rationality requires consistency in judgement and practice; this we can all agree [sic]. But what is contentious is the specific form that Hare imposes on the abstract requirement of consistency. For him, to be consistent just is to subsume particular cases under general principles in the same way. (82)

Here Dancy recognizes that requiring consistency is different from requiring that we subsume cases under rules; his mistake is thinking that all a philosopher can mean by 'moral judgments are universalizable' is 'moral judgments require subsuming cases under rules.'

(i) too rigid to yield correct judgments in many possible scenarios, or (ii) so heavily qualified that it has no applicability to scenarios beyond the initial case that generated it. The rejection of subsumptivism, however, leaves the universalizability principle intact.

1.2 PRESUMPTIVE GENERALISM

Dancy identifies a second version of generalism, which he claims to find in W. D. Ross's account of prima facie duties, especially as Ross presents it in chapter two of *The Right and the Good*. I set aside the interpretative question of whether this second version of generalism actually should be attributed to Ross. Instead, I use the term 'presumptive generalism' or 'presumptivism' to refer only to *Dancy's reading of Ross* and to distinguish it from subsumptive generalism.

Presumptivist generalism shares with subsumptivism the idea that our moral judgments must be derived from general moral truths, but it softens the subsumptivist's demand for hard-edged rules that determine a moral judgment for every action. The presumptivist identifies features of actions that make an *invariable contribution* to an action's moral rightness or wrongness. Moral judgment therefore is a matter of registering how the various features of an act contribute to its rightness or wrongness, and then of determining which way the scale tips. A moral principle is not a universal rule the application of which yields a determinate judgment about which particular action is right, as subsumptivism would have it; instead, construed along these softer lines, principles do no more than specify a property as being one which counts in

favor of (or against) any action that has it.[7] According to the presumptivist, prima facie duties

can be cast as universal moral principles of the form $\forall x$ (Fx $\rightarrow$ Mx), but they mean something

different from subsumptive universals. *Contra* the subsumptivist reading, according to which

universals tell us that a property (or set of properties) F is determinately M, presumptivist moral

principles tell us that 'for all actions x, if x has property F, then x is *presumptively* M.[8] In

Dancy's words, prima facie duties articulated in presumptivist moral principles tell us that "the

property which [makes an] action prima facie right must have the same effect wherever it

occurs" (*Moral Reasons* 94). Thus, for example, 'stealing is wrong', amounts to the claim that

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[7] Dancy writes in *Moral Reasons* that "principles do no more than specify a property as being one which counts generally in favour of (or against) any action that has it" (95). By reading further, we learn that by 'generally' Dancy doesn't mean 'usually' or 'for the most part.' He means a moral principle makes the *general* claim that "the property which made this action prima facie right must have the *same* effect *wherever* it occurs" (94, emphasis added).

[8] Shafer-Landau offers a reading of Ross in "Moral Rules" that is similar to Dancy's. In the following passage (in which 'G' is equivalent to **'F'** as I use **'F'** in the main text), we have Shafer-Landau's formulation:

> The prima facie nature of a moral rule does not undermine its universality. Rather, we should read such rules as follows: for every *x*, if *Gx*, then presumptively *Mx*. This is surely true to the spirit of Ross's work, since he thought that, for example, every promise carried with it some to-be-doneness; every act of maleficence generated some presumption against its performance. (585)

For a grounding property G to be presumptively M means, for Shafer-Landau, that G is "invariably morally relevant" (586). He, like Dancy, holds that a property is invariably morally relevant "if and only if its instantiation always makes the same kind of concrete contribution toward the instantiation of some moral property" (586). It is this inference that I disagree with. To be a morally relevant property need not entail that the kind of contribution the property makes is invariable. I believe this is too narrow a conception of moral relevance. A property can be morally relevant without, as Dancy claims, its having "the same effect wherever it occurs" (*Moral Reasons* 94). I see no reason why Ross cannot maintain that the morally relevant property expressed in a prima facie duty can retain its *presumption* of, e.g., "to-be-doneness," even if in a particular case, the morally relevant property does not bring with it any "to-be-doneness."

when an action is (or involves) stealing, it is to that extent wrong, even though on balance it may be the right action to perform in virtue of some other features it has. The fact that an action can be described as stealing is a vector pointing in the direction of judging the action wrong; if the action can also be described as obtaining medicine for a seriously ill neighbor it is a vector pointing in the direction of judging the action right. When we take the sum of these vectors, we might conclude that the action is on balance right—although, because it is theft, it necessarily is worse than it would have been had it not been theft.[9]

For Dancy, the essence of presumptivism is the idea that the property (or set of properties) F, when understood as a prima facie duty, makes the same contribution to the rightness or wrongness of the act on every occasion in which F appears, although its contribution can be overridden or outweighed by other features of the action.[10] While in many respects the

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[9] In *Moral Reasons*, Dancy offers an alternative interpretation of how a property could "have the same effect wherever it occurs" or (to borrow Schafer-Landau's words) make "the same kind of concrete contribution toward" the rightness or wrongness of an action (*Moral Reasons* 94; "Moral Rules" 586). Dancy suggests understanding the contribution a property can make on analogy with the propensity theory of probability. On this view a property has the same propensity in all cases wherever it appears. Dancy rejects the analogy because he believes that, unlike in the physical world, (1) properties can lack propensities that they acquire only in conjunction with the presence of other properties in a concrete situation, and (2) cases can occur in which "the eventual overall property (rightness, say) is identical with the property which the strongest party [sic] *tends* to give the action" (101). I agree with Dancy that the analogy is unpromising.

[10] Shafer-Landau says that a generalist theory involving prima facie duties can be more or less comprehensive depending on the domain of prima facie duties or grounding properties it purports to identify. "One prima facie theory covers more than another just in case it identifies a greater number of grounding properties . . . Weaker theories allow for the possibility of grounding properties that cannot be captured by prima facie rules. These are properties that sometimes, but not always, create some particular moral presumption" (587). What Shafer-Landau regards as a weaker theory of prima facie duties seems no longer to accord with Dancy's understanding of the term. See also footnote three for a similar problem with Shafer-Landau's version of weak subsumptivism.

presumptivist description of moral judgment-making is consonant with Dancy's own theory, it nevertheless is unacceptable to Dancy—for it is committed to the essential proposition that underlies any form of generalism, *viz.*, "the view that a reason functions everywhere as it functions anywhere" (62).

1.3   DANCY'S ACCOUNT OF GENERALISM

In *Moral* Reasons Dancy gives an overarching definition of generalism, which is meant to encompass both subsumptivism and presumptivism; generalism is the view that "what matters somewhere must matter in the same way on every recurrence" (93). By 'mattering somewhere' Dancy means 'providing a reason for (or against) an action or a moral judgment about an action.'[11] His notion of 'a reason' is that of a property (or set of properties) of an action whose presence entails the presence of a moral property. Hence we may recast Dancy's formulation of generalism as follows: if a property (or set of properties) F is a reason for (or against) an action or judgment in one case, then the property (or set of properties) F must be a reason for (or against) an action or judgment wherever it occurs, or in logical notation $\forall x\ (Fx \rightarrow Mx)$, where *x* ranges over actions calling for moral deliberation. Sample F-properties will include that the action is a lie, or that it is aiding the poor, or that it is killing; sample M-properties will be that the action is wrong, or that it is praiseworthy, or that it is vicious. These universally quantified

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[11] Dancy's primary focus is on judgments about *actions*. (In chapter three, I will discuss the possibility of whether Dancy's view could be extended to cover evaluations of what Murdoch calls 'vision.'

propositions are *moral principles*,[12] as the generalist construes them: they capture what it means to say that reasons (F-properties) justify the judgment that an action has certain moral properties.

According to Dancy both varieties of generalism are committed to this thesis about moral principles, but they differ in precisely how they construe the F- and M-properties that moral principles employ. Subsumptivism holds that for any action we might deliberate about there are rules with the form $\forall x \, (Fx \rightarrow Mx)$ that prescribe which action we ought to perform or which judgment we ought to reach. The situation or action will have some array of F-properties. That array of properties will be subsumed under a universal moral principle, which will entail a conclusion of the form 'the action is wrong' or 'judge the action blameworthy.' The conclusion will be the M-property of that action or judgment. Subsumptivism is thus committed to the truth of moral principles that definitively determine what our moral judgments should be.

Presumptivism, on the other hand, rejects the possibility of moral principles that *fully* determine our moral judgments. Instead, the presumptivist believes that for any action we might deliberate about there is a set of prima facie duties (such as the duty of non-maleficence, the duty of beneficence, etc.) that bears on the determination of which action or judgment is correct. For presumptivism, the F-properties of an action x will be features that invoke prima facie duties (such as that x is stealing, or that x is providing help to the needy), and the M-properties will be of the form 'x is wrong to the extent that it is F' or 'x is presumptively wrong' (although x may be right overall). Each of the morally relevant features of an action (i.e., the F-properties that invoke the prima facie duties which are in play) makes an invariable contribution to the rightness

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[12] Moral principles, as we typically think of them, take the form of commands like 'do not lie.' Propositions of the form $\forall x \, (Fx \rightarrow Mx)$ can be reformulated to exhibit the familiar imperative form of moral principles. For example, if M is 'wrong' or 'vicious' or 'blameworthy,' then $\forall x \, (Fx \rightarrow Mx)$ is equivalent to 'do not F.' If M is, e.g., 'right' or 'virtuous' or 'praiseworthy,' then it is equivalent to 'do F' or 'it is permissible to F.'

or wrongness of the action. Stealing food to give to the needy is good to the extent that it fulfills the duty of beneficence, but wrong to the extent that the aid was stolen in violation of the duty of non-maleficence. When conflicting prima facie duties are in play, the final moral judgment is a matter of "considered opinion."[13] But whatever the final judgment, the action is invariably (i.e., necessarily) the worse for being maleficent. Thus, unlike subsumptivism, presumptivism is not committed to the truth of principles that fully determine moral judgment in the particular case at hand; what a presumptivist moral principle tells us is that, if the action is F, then it is definitively made right (or wrong) to some indefinite extent. The final outcome of moral deliberation is not fully determined by (even a complete set of) moral principles.

With this overview of both varieties of generalism in place, we can make explicit a commonality between subsumptivism and presumptivism. Both forms of generalism are committed to the view that moral principles are expressed in propositions of the form $\forall x$ (Fx $\rightarrow$ Mx), and both portray our moral reasoning as in large measure a matter of appealing to such claims and applying them to the cases we deliberate about.

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[13] This is Ross's term (19). I believe that Ross's notion of considered opinion need not be understood in a way that commits him to the view that for all *x*, if *x* is lying, then *x* invariably is wrong to the extent it is lying. See footnote eight in this chapter and footnote six in chapter two.

1.4   DANCY'S CRITIQUE OF GENERALISM

Now that we have given Dancy's account of how each variety of generalism understands moral

principles and the way principles figure in our moral reasoning, we can turn to his argument that

neither version is acceptable. Dancy tackles generalism from many difference vantage points,

but I will focus here on what I think is Dancy's strongest and most interesting argument. No

matter from which vantage point Dancy strikes, he find the same underlying weakness in both

varieties of generalism: the general moral principles they appeal to are either false or incapable

of guiding our deliberation.

1.4.1   Dancy's argument against subsumptivism

Dancy's argument against subsumptive generalism proceeds according to the following

schematic form.[14] Dancy starts from the observation that generalism is committed to the truth of

universal propositions of the form $\forall x$ (Fx $\rightarrow$ Mx), where x ranges over actions, F is a set of one

or more grounding properties, and M represents a moral property. Next he considers a

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[14] Here is an especially helpful passage for understanding Dancy's argumentative strategy:

> Instead of telling one that all actions of a certain sort are wrong, as Hare's [subsumptivist] principles do, lending themselves to refutation by complex cases which despite being of that sort are not wrong, Ross's [presumptivist] principles do no more than specify a property as being one which counts generally in favour of (or against) any action that has it.… [Presumptivism] gives a quite different picture of what a counter-example to a moral principle would look like. Instead of being an example where the principle tells us to do one thing and we think we ought to do the opposite ('Do not steal'), it would be an example where, though the principle tells us that some feature counts in favour of any action that has it, we think it either makes no difference at all here or else that it does make a difference, but counts in the opposite direction. (95-6)

representative moral principle expressed in that form (e.g., 'if an action is theft, I should not do it,' 'if an action causes pain, then it is to that extent bad'). Finally, he produces an example in which the principle yields a result clearly contrary to our best judgment. When generalists respond by adjusting their principle to accommodate the counterexample, Dancy finds another counterexample.

Dancy deploys several rounds of this strategy to convince us that for any principle of the form $\forall x\ (Fx \rightarrow Mx)$ we can imagine a counterexample for it. In response, generalists can then either admit that the principle is false, or they can continue modifying it, until they wind up adding so many qualifiers and conditions that the principle, though logically a universal proposition, actually applies to just one action. Such a principle, Dancy argues, is clearly far removed from anything we take ourselves to appeal to in actual moral reasoning and is useless for the kinds of justifications of moral judgments that generalists initially sought. Particularists therefore conclude that generalism is either false (because it is committed to universals that are false) or useless (because to salvage the truth of their universals generalists have to construe them so narrowly that they cannot do the job of providing justifications for the judgments they entail).

This is a valid argument scheme. But for it to persuade us that generalism is false, particularists would have to flesh it out by starting with a concrete principle that generalists are truly committed to and then produce convincing counterexamples to *that*. Dancy's more detailed examples do not, I think, satisfy these further requirements.

Let us consider one of Dancy's main examples targeting the subsumptive form of generalism. He ask us to:

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suppose a man knocks a woman down with his car and puts her into hospital. When he

pays for special care for her, visits her and so on, we approve of his (subsequent) actions.

They are expressions of regret and an attempt to make amends so far as possible, and

these facts are our reasons for approval. (80-1)

Dancy then sets out to show us that, contrary to what subsumptivism supposes, even though

these facts are reasons for us to approve of the man's actions, we:

are not therefore committed to approving of another person who behaves in exactly the

same way, but whose ultimate purpose is to seduce the woman away from her husband.

(81)

To develop this argument against subsumptivism, Dancy attributes to generalists a commitment

to the following principle: 'If an action is the provision of special care, in the form of visits and

financial assistance, to a person the agent has injured, then it is morally praiseworthy.' Dancy

explains that the principle applies to both the first and second scenarios insofar as the antecedent

conditions are satisfied, and, yet, in the second scenario the principle clearly yields the wrong

judgment because the actions of the man who intends seduction are *not* praiseworthy. Dancy

argues that this sort of problem is recurrent and intractable for the subsumptivist. He further

argues that the only way out is to expand the universalizability base (i.e., the set of antecedent

conditions or F-properties), but that that project is ultimately fruitless because the

universalizability base would have to expand to include "not only all respects that were either in

favour of or against the original judgement, but also all respects whose presence or absence would have affected that judgement to any degree" (81).

Dancy rightly points out the impossibility of crafting principles that anticipate all the features whose presence or absence is necessary to make them subsumptively true. He also rightly points out that even if we were able to forge principles with the requisite level of detail, the resulting universals would be so detailed they essentially would be indexed only to particular cases—in which case they no longer look like or function like the general moral principles both particularists and generalists are trying to understand.

However, if Dancy's example is to count against subsumptivism, Dancy must first show that subsumptivists are committed to a principle (of the sort he proposes) whose F-properties cannot distinguish the two cases. But surely there are more plausibly applicable principles available to generalists, which are not susceptible to the counterexample. Principles like, 'expressing remorse and making amends for an injury you have caused are morally praiseworthy' and 'attempting to seduce a married person—who is moreover physically vulnerable—is morally wrong' are able to differentiate between the two scenarios and yield correct moral judgments. Dancy's example plainly poses no challenge to *these* principles, and he has not shown that the subsumptivist is not entitled to them. Moreover, the two principles just mentioned seem not especially recondite or tailored to block counterexamples and so are not susceptible to Dancy's charge that they are artificially indexed to particular cases or so detailed as to be useless. As a result, it is not damaging to our commitment to moral principles that the principle Dancy attributes to subsumptivists is susceptible to counterexample.

1.4.2 Dancy's argument against presumptivism

Let us consider Dancy's variation on the previous argument, which this time is tailored to serve as a challenge to presumptivism.[15] He writes that:

> the fact that an action will give pleasure can be a reason for doing it or for approving of it when done. But it can also be a reason for disapproving of it. If I tread on a worm by mistake, my action is perhaps morally indifferent. But if I tread on it with pleasure or to give you pleasure, my action is the worse for it. (56)

To see how Dancy intends this as an argument against presumptivists, we must first make explicit that in the passage above Dancy implicitly attributes to them a principle to this effect: 'if an act produces pleasure it is presumptively right (i.e., that the act produces pleasure always counts in favor of doing it). But, in Dancy's opinion, if we imagine someone who takes a perverse delight in treading on earthworms, we find that the person's pleasure counts *against* doing the action.[16] Dancy is right about our considered judgment in this case, but for it to work

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[15] It should be noted that Dancy thinks presumptivism suffers from a special weakness, in addition to the problems inherent in any form of generalism. The weakness is that it provides no method of resolving the different and perhaps conflicting right- and wrong-making properties that an action might have. In a case where we have a prima facie duty to do *x* and a prima facie duty to refrain from doing *x*, presumptivism provides us no resources for weighing the various considerations pro and con, so we can come to a determination about what we should do, all things considered. According to Ross, in *The Right and the Good*, the determination is a matter of "considered opinion" (19).

[16] Dancy also offers a variation on this example to undermine presumptivism. He supposes the following principle: 'that an action causes pain gives us a reason (perhaps overridden) for not doing it.' His counterexample, meant to falsify the principle, asks us to suppose Satan is pained by every virtuous action. Dancy argues that this fact gives us no reason

against the presumptivist we would have to establish that the proposed principle 'that an act produces pleasure is always right-making' is actually a plausible presumptive principle.

Dancy has not done this. Indeed, the principle Dancy attributes to presumptivists actually contradicts the philosopher Dancy takes to best exemplify presumptivism, namely Ross. In *The Right and the Good*, Ross devotes the first chapter to debunking both the egoist's and the utilitarian's idea that 'right' means productive of pleasure.[17] Pleasure, along with virtue and knowledge, is *a* good, Ross explains, but only "with certain limitations," and only when it is "neither the actualization of a bad disposition nor undeserved" (24-5).[18] For Dancy's proposed principle to be one that the presumptivist would plausibly accept it would have to be amended to accommodate these limitations. Once properly amended, the candidate presumptivist principle would be 'if an act produces pleasure, so long as the pleasure is not undeserved or the result of a

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not to perform such actions and that therefore, as with the example discussed in the main text, the lesson to draw is that the putative principle (e.g., 'do not cause pain') is a poor candidate for a prima facie duty (*Moral Reasons* 61-2). This would come as no surprise to (non-hedonistic) generalists. Moreover, this particular example is further weakened by its degree of artificiality, indexed as it is to Satan. It is not clear how we are supposed to determine the moral status of Satan or generalize from Satan's case.

[17] Ross sums up his findings at the beginning of chapter two, when he says "it cannot with any plausibility be maintained" that 'right' means 'productive of pleasure' (or of *any* good for that matter) (16).

[18] See this passage where Ross writes:

a state of pleasure has the property, not necessarily of being good, but of being something that is good if the state has no other characteristic that prevents it from being good. The two characteristics that may interfere with its being good are (*a*) that of being contrary to desert, and (*b*) that of being a state which is the realization of a bad disposition. (138)

See also the passage where Ross says that once suitably qualified it is right to produce pleasure for ourselves and others, but only "when this does not involve the failure to discharge some more stringent prima facie duty" (25).

vicious disposition, then the act is presumptively right.'   But this amended principle is not

vulnerable to Dancy's counterexample. Pleasure derived from an act of wanton violence springs

from vice and therefore the act that produces it carries with it no prima facie rightness. So the

presumptivist is *not* committed to saying treading on the worm is right to the extent that it

produces pleasure. Indeed, Dancy's example may be interpreted as registering the implausibility

of a principle to the effect that pleasure, *in and of itself*, produces moral goodness.[19] This truth is

one generalists can accommodate as easily as theorists of any other stripe.[20]

I think the same kind of weakness can be found throughout Dancy's examples. Does this

mean that there are no persuasive anti-generalist arguments employing the above schema? I

think good arguments employing it can be constructed, but that it will be trickier to generate

counterexamples than Dancy thinks. Consider a candidate presumptivist principle: 'an act of

lying is the worse for being a lie.' Particularists look for a counterexample intended to show that

sometimes a lie can be morally neutral or even make an act morally better than telling the truth

would. Here we can invoke James Rachels' classic example of the complications of linking an

act of lying to moral censure. In this example, Nazi patrollers stop Dutch boatmen and demand

to know if they have Jews aboard. If the boatmen admit they are harboring refugees on their

boat, then they will be taken prisoner and probably killed. If the boatmen's lying can confuse the

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[19] This is a lesson we could draw from Socrates's refutation of Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* (494c-499b).

[20] I am aware that hedonistic utilitarians—those whose fundamental moral principle is to produce the greatest overall good, and who further equate the good with the pleasant—will feel that this gives short shrift to their fundamental criterion of goodness. I will not try to engage them in debate, except to note that Mill himself, in distinguishing a hierarchy of better and worse pleasures, moves away from the hedonistic utilitarianism that would seem to be entailed by his designation of pleasure as the *summum bonum*.

Nazis and so save the refugees' lives, then the considered judgment of anyone except a thorough-going Kantian would be that the boatmen are right to lie.

But does this show that the presumptivist principle 'lying is always worse-making' is false? It would *if* the lie counted in favor of the lying. But there is nothing positive in itself about the lying. The reason to tell the lie is not that there is something good (something favorable) about telling a falsehood; the reason to lie is that doing so is an attempt to protect innocent, highly vulnerable lives. If, however, it were feasible to divert the Nazis without lying, then surely this course of action would be better. Because it would always be better for the boatmen in these circumstances to achieve their end without telling a lie, the particularists' conclusion that lying can be morally good or even morally neutral is unwarranted. Suppose the presumptivists' principle were this: 'lying in response to a question from a person who has a moral right to the information she is requesting is the worse for being a lie.' Can we find a case in which such a lie is morally neutral or morally praiseworthy? Or is this principle so recondite as to be unworkable? It may be that we could find an example that would lead us to answer 'yes' to one or the other of these questions, but I cannot now generate one.

To turn Dancy's argument scheme into a compelling argument against generalism (either subsumptive or presumptive) would require pursuing this dialectic of principle and counterexample. While it would be interesting to enter into the casuistry that this dialectic entails, I think it is ultimately distracts us from a deeper understanding of how to characterize the role principles play in our moral thought.

1.4.3   Insights in particularism and generalism

Even if Dancy has not taken his counterexample-generating dialectic far enough, I can appreciate his resistance to generalism, especially in its subsumptive form. The idea that moral reasoning is a matter of identifying true general principles and then applying them in a mechanical matter (e.g., 'this action exhibits property F, therefore it is M') portrays moral judgment as algorithmic, a portrayal which our experience of moral reflection belies. We see the importance of sensitivity to the particulars of a situation; we realize there are often morally crucial factors that can easily escape our notice; and we recognize that turning our power of moral judging over to a body of rigid rules will make us obtuse moralists, just as a rigid application of legal rules can often lead to unjust verdicts.

However, I also find that even if particularists did generate a plausible counterexample to a general moral principle, I still would want to make general statements like 'lying is wrong,' and I would still want to teach my children precepts like 'do not steal.' My imagining (or even experiencing) cases in which I judge that, all things considered, lying is not wrong (or not worse-making) does not make me believe that I am rationally obliged to revise the principle that we ought not to lie; nor do I feel bound to retract or hedge my commitment to it. For particularists—and for generalists—what I am saying is incoherent. But I think my remarks begin to capture a need to find an alternative characterization of the role principles play in our actual moral reasoning. My remarks do entail that my commitment to the truth of 'lying is wrong' cannot be construed as a universally quantified proposition of the form $\forall x \, (Fx \rightarrow Mx)$. (For if that is what 'lying is wrong' means, then it would be incoherent of me to affirm that principle in the face of a case where I judge that lying is *not* wrong or worse-making.) In chapter

four, I will propose a way of thinking about the content and logic of moral principles that makes sense of my retaining my attachment to them even in the face of counterexamples.

1.5   A COMMON ASSUMPTION

We are now in a position to lay out a taxonomy of the positions we have been discussing. Generalists hold that there are true moral principles that we must appeal to in giving the reasons for our moral judgments of particular actions. Those principles take the form of universally quantified propositions with the form: for all actions x, if x has feature(s) F, then it has moral property M. Generalists think that there must be such principles and that every true moral judgment must appeal to at least one of them. The two varieties of generalism differ regarding the nature of the M-properties of their principles: subsumptivists hold that each principle fully determines the moral evaluation of the actions to which it applies; the presumptivist holds that each principle only partially determines the moral evaluation of the actions to which it applies.

Particularism is the denial of generalism. The particularist reaches this conclusion by arguing that a counterexample can be generated that will falsify any principle the generalist proposes. Consequently, for particularists there are no true moral principles, and principles necessarily should not play a role in our moral reasoning.

It should now be clear that particularism shares a common assumption with the generalism it criticizes. Both particularists and generalists have the same conception of the logical form of moral principles. For both of them, a moral principle is a universally quantified proposition linking properties of actions with moral evaluations. It is this underlying assumption, common to both particularists and generalists, which I will ultimately reject in

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chapter four. Doing so will make possible an appeal to an alternative conception of generality in

moral thought that is truer to our ordinary moral reasoning and richer than either generalists or

particularists account for.

2.0   DANCY'S PARTICULARISM AND A CRITIQUE

In the previous chapter I sketched two versions of a view known as 'generalism.' Subsumptive generalism maintains that making moral judgments about what to do is a matter of subsuming the action in question under general moral principles. Competent moral judges are equipped with an array of such principles, which have the form $(\forall x)$ $(Fx \rightarrow Mx)$, where the Fs are grounding properties (e.g., action x is the telling of a falsehood with the intent to deceive) and the Ms are moral properties (e.g., action x is dishonest, blameworthy, vicious). The job of the moral judge is to identify the F-properties of the action in question, apply the relevant principle, and draw the appropriate conclusion regarding its M-properties. Presumptive generalism likewise maintains that a competent moral judge is equipped with general moral principles. These connect properties of actions with moral "vectors" that count a certain weight toward the assignment of a given moral property to the action. The judge's job in a particular context is to identify the F-properties of the action in question, use general moral principles to determine all the moral vectors that apply to the action, tally the weight of these vectors, determine which moral property the action has on balance, and then act accordingly.

Dancy, as we have seen, rejects both these accounts of moral deliberation and judgment. They are, he thinks, overly rigid, and he argues that they are vulnerable to counterexamples. He concludes that moral principles are either false (as suggested by the possibility of counterexamples) or useless (as occurs when generalists, to ward off counterexamples, tailor their principles so narrowly that they fit essentially just one case).

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2.1 DANCY'S REMINDERS AND SHAPE

Given what we have so far discussed of his views, Dancy would appear to regard appeals to moral principles as misguided. Yet no one can deny the centrality of principles to our *sense* of ourselves as moral judges and agents. In *Moral Reasons*, we find that Dancy agrees. He tells us that particularism must:

> provide some account, within the constraints which it accepts, of what is a very common practice of somehow appealing to general truths and previous cases in the course of reaching a moral judgement, and in the justification of one when reached. (67)

Dancy recognizes the need to provide an alternative account of what we are doing when we (think we) appeal to principles. He says:

> It seems wise for particularism to allow *some* role to moral principles, somehow conceived, rather than simply announce that everyone is completely mistaken about them and their importance in ethical thought and education. It is the job of a philosopher, so far as possible, to give an account of our practice rather than to tell us that we all ought to be doing something else. (67)

Dancy does not suggest that we purge principles from our reasoning. Instead, his proposal is that we *reconceive* a moral principle as "a reminder of the sort of importance that a property *can* have in suitable circumstances" (67). This is compatible with the particularist tenet that "no notion is

available of a sort of circumstance in which [a given property] *must* have [a specific *sort* of] importance" (70).

Once we reconceive principles and think of them as reminders of the sort of importance a property can have, we can see how reminders function in Dancy's account of moral judgment-making. For Dancy, arriving at a moral judgment about what to do takes place in two stages. In the first stage, we examine a situation to determine, of all the circumstances, which features are and are not relevant and, of these, which are *salient* (these are the features that have the *greatest* relevance).[1] According to Dancy, reminders help us discern the salient (and less salient but nevertheless relevant) features. In the second stage, Dancy tells us that "from saliencies we move to [what he calls] *shape*" (112, emphasis added). To see a situation's shape is to grasp the full picture of the interrelations between saliencies. Shape is essentially a manifestation of the relation between the salient (and to a lesser extent the relevant) features, and it gives us the "ought" judgment about what should be done or should have been done in the situation. Indeed, having a proper grasp of the shape simply *is* the ought judgment. In other words, for Dancy, to see the shape just is to see what judgment the situation calls for.[2]

Some pertinent questions that arise from this account of moral judgment-making are: How do reminders enable us to arrive at the appropriate cluster and arrangement of salient

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[1] I will leave it implicit that when we register salient features we also register those features that are relevant, but less than salient. I will not make any explicit distinction between the two in in my discussion.

[2] It seems that what happens in the second stage is similar to what is captured by Aristotle's practical syllogism, according to which we look at a situation and the feature(s) that emerge as truly salient (which seem to be similar to McDowell's "standing concern[s]") entails a particular action ("Some Issues" 30). In chapter four, I argue that Dancy cannot give an adequate account of standing concerns. This is important because, as I also argue in chapter four, the process of identifying saliencies relies to some extent on standing concerns, of which I believe general moral principles are an expression.

features in the first stage? How do reminders help us move from the identification of those features to our discernment of the shape of the situation in the second stage? In short, how do reminders underwrite the making of moral judgments?

2.2   A CRITIQUE OF REMINDERS

In this section I will elaborate on Dancy's remarks about reminders and discuss the possibility of their role in moral judgment-making. I argue that reminders, however we construe them, cannot play the role in moral reasoning that we normally assign to principles. Indeed, as I will argue here, to the extent that Dancy's reminders can appear to play that role, they presuppose general relations which (as I will argue in chapters three and four) are expressible in general moral principles.

We can begin our elaboration of Dancy's remarks by asking: what form do reminders take? When Dancy writes that a reminder reminds of the "*sort* of importance a property *can* have in suitable circumstances" he seems to have in mind the idea that the reminder links a specific F-property with a specific M-property, such as 'right,' 'wrong,' 'permissible,' 'impermissible,' 'morally neutral,' 'praiseworthy,' 'blameworthy,' and so on (67, initial emphasis added). Although each reminder links an F-property with a specific M-property, Dancy warns us against assuming any general link (any invariable connection) between an F-property and an M-property. Any connection between an F and an M is contingent and situation-dependent. A reminder tells us only that being F *might* be linked to being M. Whether it is or not will depend on the circumstances in which F appears.

To illustrate this, consider an ordinary principle like 'lying is wrong.' If we put this into the language of Fs and Ms, then F stands for 'deliberately telling a falsehood' and M for 'wrong.' To make explicit the fact that Fs are properties of acts we can translate the ordinary principle 'deliberately telling a falsehood is wrong' into a reminder that reads something like this: 'if an action can be described as deliberately telling a falsehood, then that *might* make the act wrong.'

One of the first things to note here is that Dancy thinks that the number of true reminders is unlimited, and that the more reminders we possess, the better moral judges we will be. In *Moral Reasons*, he tells us that:

> those in possession of a large list of principles [understood as reminders], so long as they do not misunderstand their proper role, are at an advantage when coming to a decision in a particular case. They want to be sure that they do not miss the importance or relevance of any relevant property. A panoply of moral principles, understood in the way I suggest [*viz.*, as reminders], can function as a sort of checklist for this purpose. It will not be a complete list, of course, for we can give no sense to the idea that we might now have finished the list of moral principles or properties that can make a difference sometimes . . . There is no limit to the number of properties which can on occasion be important. (67)

How, then, do reminders contribute to our ability to make correct moral judgments? Reminders are an aid to good moral judgment, Dancy tells us, because they help us identify and keep from overlooking F-properties that have been relevant to assessing (or assigning an M-property to) an action; they remind us of properties that might be relevant. The list of reminders is, therefore,

limitless because the number of properties that can be relevant is limitless. This is why Dancy believes "we can give no sense to the idea that we might have finished the list of moral principles or properties that can make a difference sometimes" (67). At one point he describes the list as (in the absence of some means of organization) a "bewilderingly random list of properties which can matter in suitable circumstances" (68).

Dancy's emphasis on there being "no limit to the number of properties which can on occasion be important" could be interpreted to mean that the list is limitless because any property or combination of properties has the potential to be morally significant in some situation or other and as such deserves a place somewhere on the list (67). This interpretation fits with one of the central tenets of Dancy's particularism: for any property, we cannot tell in advance of its appearance in a particular situation its relevance (or lack thereof) because we need to know how it stands in relation to other properties of the situation in which it is instantiated. Its relation to other properties is what determines its significance, so most any property could be relevant depending on the other properties of the situation—which suggests most any property could be recast in terms of a reminder that that property might make a difference.

To illustrate this, let us look again at Dancy's example of a man who crashes into and injures a woman pedestrian with his car. When he pays for her care and visits her in the hospital to make amends, Dancy judges the act praiseworthy. When he pays for her care and visits her in an attempt to seduce her, Dancy judges the act blameworthy. A corresponding reminder for the first scenario is: if an agent who causes an automobile accident that injures a pedestrian visits her in the hospital and pays her medical bills with the aim of making amends, then the agent's act might be praiseworthy. For the second scenario, a corresponding reminder is: if an agent who causes an automobile accident that injures a pedestrian visits her in the hospital and pays her

medical bills with the aim of seducing her, then the agent's act might be blameworthy. As we saw in chapter one, Dancy comes up with examples like these to illustrate how there might be no end to the properties an action might possess that could be relevant to the moral property ascribed to the action. These examples give us a clue about why Dancy believes there is no end to the number of reminders. Since the properties that might be relevant are limitless in number, the reminders that correspond to these properties are limitless in number, too.

But the unlimited character of the list of reminders poses a problem for Dancy's avowed project of explaining in particularist terms what we are doing when we appeal to moral principles. For there will be many reminders on the list whose content does not correspond to anything resembling our ordinary moral principles. The above reminders generated by the examples of the amends-making driver and the seducing driver are so far from anything like the familiar moral principle 'lying is wrong' that it is doubtful they could play a similar role in our thinking. [3] A view that assimilates the proposition 'lying is wrong' to the proposition 'if an agent who causes an automobile accident that injures a pedestrian visits her in the hospital and pays her medical bills with the aim of seducing her, then the agent's act might be blameworthy' launches itself on problematic footing, for it begins with a grievous mischaracterization of the very principles it seeks to explain. Moreover, reminders as detailed as these are susceptible to the charge particularists level against generalists: whether we are speaking of reminders or principles, principles so narrowly tailored will be useless, for there will be few to no cases to which they are actually germane.

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[3] We could, of course, recast the foregoing reminders in less detailed terms. The first could be 'making amends might be praiseworthy;' the second could be 'seduction might be blameworthy.' But doing so undercuts Dancy's characterization of reminders as a "bewilderingly random list of properties which can matter in suitable circumstances" (68). Nevertheless, I will consider this alternative subsequently.

There is, however, an alternative way to interpret Dancy's emphasis on the unlimited character of our list of reminders, so long as we soften his claim that there is "no limit to the number of properties which can on occasion be important" (67). This alternate interpretation promises to better accomplish Dancy's avowed aim of showing how particularism makes sense of the role ordinary moral principles actually play in our moral thinking. On this interpretation, we discount Dancy's emphasis on the dizzying array of properties that might find their way onto the list of reminders, and assume that by "limitless" Dancy merely means to leave open the possibility that we might sometime in the future identify new properties, like truth-telling or amends-making, that possess such a degree of moral significance that they too become enshrined in the form of principles (*qua* reminders). Dancy's roster of reminders therefore would include all those general universal propositions that we typically regard as moral principles, except they would be rephrased so as to express their contingency. Thus, 'telling a falsehood is wrong' would be recast as 'telling a falsehood might be wrong,' 'making amends is praiseworthy' would be recast as 'making amends might be praiseworthy,' and so on. On this interpretation, the relation between specific F- and M-properties expressed by reminders basically corresponds to those we find in our ordinary moral principles (which is not so according to the former interpretation). The particularists' only modification to those ordinary moral principles is to replace 'is' with 'might be'

Although there is room on this roster for adding future moral principles, this alternative interpretation would require Dancy to soften his emphasis on the limitlessness of reminders; doing so insures reminders more closely resemble our ordinary understanding that we express core moral commitments in terms of moral principles, rather than in terms of a "panoply" for which "[t]here is no limit to the number of properties which can on occasion be important" (67).

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However, because Dancy believes possessing a vast array of reminders makes for better moral judges, it is not clear he would accept this modification. Nevertheless, this interpretation does harmonize with what Dancy goes on to say about the relative centrality of some principles as against the relative marginality of others. Dancy develops the idea of centrality in order to explain how the unlimited, and therefore unwieldy, list of reminders can serve (as principles are supposed to) as a guide for moral judgment. Dancy explains the idea of centrality in this passage:

> some [properties] are more commonly important than others, and some are commonly more important than others; and therefore some properties should be viewed as more 'central' than others, i.e., as having a natural right to figure early on in one's list of principles. This centrality does not entail that the properties mentioned in the leading principles [*qua* reminders] are always more important than those mentioned elsewhere. But it does create some order in what would otherwise be a bewilderingly random list of properties which can matter in suitable circumstances. (67-8, footnote omitted)

What does Dancy mean by identifying some properties (and some of the reminders associated with these properties) as central? As far as I can tell there are two different ways to understand Dancy's remarks about the centrality of reminders. I will call them the 'connectedness view of centrality' and the 'statistical view of centrality.'

The connectedness view, which is suggested by that part of the above passage in which Dancy observes that "some properties are more commonly important than others," is the view that a reminder reminds us of the specific sort of *moral importance* a property can have (67).

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The centrality of the reminder would be due to the gravity or weightiness of its M-property. Less central reminders would presumably be those that associate F-properties with less grave or weighty M-properties. Consider the reminder 'it might be thoughtful to reach out to newcomers.' Neglecting to reach out to newcomers would likely be thoughtless, but not outright wrong, as intentionally telling a lie almost always is. Therefore, the reminder 'reaching out to newcomers might be right' would be less central on the list than 'telling the truth might be right.' Another way to put this is, a reminder about telling the truth would be more central, and its centrality would stem from the fact that truth-telling is a weightier moral requirement.

On this view, F-properties of actions, such as 'being an act of welcome' or 'being truthful,' acquire their centrality because of the role they play in the greater nexus of moral value. Welcoming newcomers does not have the same importance as telling the truth does within that nexus. The value of welcoming newcomers lies in our concern to treat others civilly, put people at ease, be considerate, make way for the possibility of friendship, and so on. The deeper value of truthfulness in part has to do with the nature of the harm caused by lying. Lying can inhibit the autonomy of the people lied to, it can subordinate them to those in the know, and it can interfere with self-determination. The example underscores this fact: the good advanced by being welcoming to newcomers to some degree presupposes and depends on the truthfulness of those doing the welcoming.

This account of the varying centrality of different reminders in terms of the moral gravity or weightiness of connection between F- and M-properties would explain the "natural right" some properties have to be more central than others (67). But it is an account I think Dancy would have to reject, for in his critique of Ross's generalism he rejects the possibility that any F-property has any general connection to any M-property. Dancy identifies as a deficiency in

Ross's definition of prima facie duty that it tells us only what moral effect a property F might have when it is "the only morally relevant property," and it "has nothing to say at all" about the moral significance of F in particular situations (97). Moreover, a general statement about the tendency of F to be morally connected to M is of little use, Dancy says, *because* the moral connection between the two will vary depending on the circumstances in which it appears; when instantiated, F might *not* be linked with M, as in a case in which the morally correct thing to do is to tell a lie. Dancy is explicit that unless instantiations of F are invariably coupled with instantiations of M, then a general universal proposition linking F with M tells us nothing about the sort of moral relevance F might have when instantiated in a concrete situation. Dancy concludes that such general universal propositions are of little worth, for it is precisely F's effect when instantiated that we need to know. Hence, a general universal proposition that F *might* be M would seem to suffer from the same sort of defect Dancy finds in Ross's notion of a prima facie duty; it tells us nothing about the moral significance of F in a particular situation. In other words, it cannot be the case that, for Dancy, a given reminder acquires its centrality from the fact that an F has a general connection of gravity or weightiness with a specific M. The upshot is that making sense of the centrality of some reminders on the basis of their general moral importance is off limits to Dancy.

Perhaps we can make better sense of Dancy's notion of centrality by treating the connection not as a general claim about the moral relationship (of gravity or weightiness) between Fs and Ms, but instead as a claim about the statistical frequency of their connection. This statistical view of centrality, which is suggested by that part of the above passage in which Dancy observes that "some [properties] are commonly more important than others," suggests another possibility for explaining what Dancy might mean when he talks about the centrality of a

reminder (67). On this view, centrality is a function of the statistical frequency with which F is linked to M. The centrality of a reminder is a function of the relative frequency with which, when instantiated, F is found to be linked with M. According to the statistical view of centrality, one reminder is more central than another just in case the instantiation of the F-property of the first reminder provides a reason for assigning its M-property more frequently than the instantiation of the F-property of the second reminder provides a reason for assigning *its* M-property.

One major weakness of this account of centrality is that it construes the role of reminders in moral reasoning in terms that are vastly different from the ordinary moral reasoning with principles that Dancy is attempting to capture. On the statistical view of centrality, all we can say about the centrality of 'lying is wrong' is that cases where lying provides a reason for judging an action wrong are more frequent than cases in which it does not. We have to regard the connections between lying and wrongness, between marital unfaithfulness and wrongness, between theft and wrongness, as merely statistical correlations. Thus, it must be regarded as an entirely contingent matter that there are these correlations. (If we start talking about a conceptual connection between being F and being M, then we are back to the connectedness view that, as we have just seen, Dancy is committed to rejecting.) It seems, however, in our ordinary moral reasoning that the character of lying, and why we care about it, are what make it wrong. Our thinking that it is wrong is not merely an expression of a statistical connection between my noticing lying and my judging it wrong.

There are other reasons to be dubious about the statistical view of reminders. The statistical view also raises a question that points to a fundamental gap in Dancy's account of moral judgment. Statistical statements must be grounded in sets of instances. Just as the

statement 'winter snowfall in Hamilton, New York is usually eighty inches or more' is grounded in observed correlations between the calendar and the amount of snow that falls, so the statement 'lying is usually wrong' (on the statistical view) must be grounded in observed correlations of acts of lying and determinations of the wrongness of those acts. So before particularist moral judges can propound a reminder, they must first have made many particular moral judgments—enough for a responsible statistical generalization. At some point, there must be past judgments that did not involve reminders.

This need for particular judgments to precede principles (construed as reminders) is not just a consequence of the statistical interpretation of reminders. It is related to the Dancy's specific understanding of a reminder itself. For reminding is bringing to the fore something we already knew or had in mind. For Dancy, when we invoke a reminder that lying might be wrong we are bringing to mind the fact that on past occasions particular acts of lying have been judged wrong.[4] At some point, those past judgments themselves cannot have involved reminders.

Since reminders are logically and temporally posterior to particular judgments, they can play no essential role in arriving at them. It must be possible to arrive at sound moral judgments without ever knowing of or considering reminders. Experienced moral agents, as Dancy portrays them, use reminders as a sort of labor-saving device, or rule of thumb, to help them efficiently home in on the central features of the particular situation before them. But, on Dancy's view, it must always be possible to dispense with reminders so as to determine the salient properties and the shape of the situation *directly*.

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[4] Although it seems to be Dancy's view, not all reminders are records of past insights. Consider insights gleaned through meditation or Platonic attention. We might remind ourselves of these insights, but they are not insights that record results of past experience.

This presents us with a significant difference between principles as we normally think of them and reminders. For we invoke principles as providing a ground for our moral judgments; reminders cannot be so invoked, since they rest entirely on previously determined moral judgments. Moreover, on the usual, prephilosophical conception of principles, the very making of a moral judgment has a conceptual link to principles (at the very least, to the principle that a judge is committed to making the correlative judgments in all cases that are relevantly similar to the current one).

In promising an alternative, particularist understanding of our ordinary appeals to principles in moral reasoning, Dancy set out to explain how we move from perception of a situation to identifying its salient features to grasping its shape. In this way, he set out to provide an account of moral judgment. Now we see that his recasting of principles as reminders cannot explain how we make or ground moral judgments. The discernment of the shape of a situation from the contemplation of its F-type features is a mystery.

There is one other weakness of Dancy's attempt to re-cast principles as reminders. The moral principles whose role Dancy is trying to describe have the form of imperatives or assertions in the indicative mood, rather than the indefinite, hedged form that Dancy's reminders take. At the same time, experience of judgment and action teaches that there are occasions in which moral considerations point to our going against the prescriptions our principles express so definitely, as when it is permissible or even morally required to break a promise. Exceptions are part of moral life. For Dancy, our tolerance for exceptions is inconsistent with the content of our principles; hence principles need to be redescribed (e.g., as reminders) in a way that eliminates that tension.

But this means, for Dancy, that our ordinary way of talking about judgments is systematically misleading. When we say things such as, "in general one should keep one's promises, but that rule does not apply in this case," Dancy thinks we contradict ourselves. He aims to resolve the contradiction by construing 'one should tell the truth' as really meaning 'that an action is an instance of truth-telling may be a reason for doing it.' But if that is what the principle really means, why do we come out with a formulation that is, by Dancy's lights, literally false?

I will argue that when we say 'lying is wrong,' what we say is true. The principle plays a role in our general moral outlook and our deliberations that cannot be replaced by a reminder telling us about the possible blameworthiness of lying or that lying *might* be wrong. What we bring to bear (i.e., what we understand) when we understand the proposition 'lying is wrong' is a normative commitment. That commitment represents an ongoing dimension of our moral outlook; it is not *tentative* or *speculative*, nor is it *statistical*. Because it represents a commitment, it is not best thought of as something to be reminded of. A principle is not a "Note-to-Self." Lying *is* wrong. And though we might need to be reminded of that, if we for example fall into a habit of fibbing, *that* sort of reminder is a reaffirmation of our commitment to the principle 'lying is wrong.'

2.3   AN ANALYSIS OF THE RATIONALITY OF REGRET

So far in this chapter I have presented and critiqued Dancy's account of our moral reasoning. In this section I will offer a criticism of a slightly different aspect of Dancy's view. The problem I identify concerns how we deal with conflicts of moral principles. In *Moral Reasons*, Dancy

considers his treatment of moral conflict to be an advantage of his view over generalism, but I will argue that he actually fails to account for the phenomenon he identifies.

Dancy thinks that when there is a conflict of moral principles, agents can rationally come to regret a choice that they nevertheless regard as correct. He argues that generalism cannot make sense of the rationality of regret in such cases, but that his particularism can. I argue that Dancy actually fails to explain why it is rational to have regret in these cases, and I sketch my own alternative explanation for it. My explanation employs a notion of moral reasons that is different from the view of moral reason connected with generalism and particularism. The explanatory success of this notion is one reason to adopt it.

The phenomenon of regret that Dancy identifies must be distinguished from a more common feeling of regret. This common feeling of regret is generated by having done something that I (now) regard as bad or defective. Regret does not have to have a moral dimension: I may regret not studying for a big exam or not selling my stocks when the market was high. But when I decide that I have done something morally wrong, I will feel an especially painful form of regret, one inflected by guilt or shame.[5] It is morally required in such a case that I regret my action, and the regret is (for cognitivists) rational.

According to Dancy, the problem of the rationality of regret arises not when I judge that I have done something *wrong*, but when I judge that I have made the *right* choice in a situation in which there was a conflict of moral principles. For example, I might have an obligation to keep a promise to take a friend to her physical therapy appointment. But if I see my elderly neighbor collapse in his yard as I am pulling out of the driveway to collect my friend I would also believe

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[5] When I say 'I will feel regret,' I mean this as a normative statement rather than a prediction about my emotional state.

I am obligated to help him. If the stars are aligned I might find a way to fulfill both obligations. If not, I have to choose. The dilemma posed by such cases may be described as a conflict of principles: we ought to keep our promises; we ought to assist a person in distress. When we choose one of these actions, it is rational to feel regret, as Dancy explains, because "we feel there is something of value that [our] choice lacks" (109).

Dancy believes regret stems from our tendency to feel that "[m]oral principles are able, even when defeated in a particular case by countervailing considerations, to linger or have residual effects" (99). Dancy believes any plausible reconstruction of our moral practice must allow room for these residual or lingering effects which issue in regret, and he argues that generalism cannot do so.

Why does Dancy think generalism cannot account for regret? To answer this we can start with his treatment of subsumptivism. Assume that for the subsumptivist the right thing for the agent to do in the case described above is break the promise and help the neighbor. According to subsumptivism, the agent's decision to help the neighbor should be the product of a universal moral principle that, by bringing the description of the circumstances under it, issues the verdict that the morally correct response is to *break the promise and help the neighbor.* If the agent does indeed perform the act prescribed by the principle, then he has discharged his duty; he has done what he ought to do. It would therefore be irrational for the agent to feel regret at having broken the promise because there is no sense in which he *should* have kept it. This result is unsatisfactory, because as Dancy rightly points out, we commonly do feel regret in such situations, and our feelings seem quite reasonable, not irrational.

Is presumptivism better able to account for the rationality of regret in such a case? To understand Dancy's answer to this question, we must turn to Ross, Dancy's paradigmatic

presumptivist. In *The Right and the* Good, Ross says that a prima facie duty, the notion at the core of presumptivism, is:

> the characteristic (quite distinct from that of being a duty proper) which an act has, in virtue of being of a certain kind (e.g. the keeping of a promise), of being an act which would be a duty proper if it were not at the same time of another kind which is morally significant. (19)

Keeping my promise to my friend is a prima facie duty, but it is *not* a duty proper because it is also of another kind that is morally significant, i.e., it is also an act that ignores the distress of my neighbor (in violation of the prima facie duty of beneficence or non-malfeasance), and my considered opinion (we are assuming) is that beneficence (or non-malfeasance) is incumbent on me in this situation.

In his discussion of the presumptivist notion of prima facie duty in *Moral Reasons* Dancy, gives two different explanations for why he finds presumptivism's account of regret "not at all satisfying" (98). Dancy initially states that the problem with presumptivism is not that it treats regret as irrational, but that it has no treatment of it whatsoever. Presumptivism tells us what to do when there is only one morally relevant property (i.e., when only one prima facie duty is involved), but "nothing [is] said about conflict" between prima facie duties (98). According to Dancy, presumptivism says nothing about how a range of morally relevant properties (expressed in terms of prima facie duties) would contribute to the final decision about what to do. Because there is no analysis of a defeated or contributory reason, presumptivism is necessarily utterly silent about the attitude an agent should take toward an act that is a prima facie duty, but which

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the agent determines is not a duty proper. Dancy concludes that presumptivism fails to tell us anything about what attitude the agent should have toward an act that he has only a prima facie, not an actual, duty to perform.[6]

In a somewhat later discussion of Ross's view, Dancy claims to find a different problem with presumptivism's account of conflicts between prima facie duties. Suppose that an agent is under two prima facie duties A and B, but that it is impossible for the agent to fulfill both. Presumptivism tells us that the reason for doing A is that there is a prima facie duty to do A; it tells us the same for B. If the agent decides he ought to do B (e.g., help the neighbor), then the reason to do A (e.g., keep the promise) is what Dancy refers to as a 'defeated reason.' A defeated reason is associated with an 'ought' statement, i.e., I ought to do A (because there is a prima facie duty to do A). Dancy calls the statement that the agent 'ought to do A' a 'defeated ought.'

Dancy argues that presumptivism is unable to explain regret because it mischaracterizes the status of the defeated ought. In presumptivism as Dancy understands it, the defeated ought makes "its contribution by diminishing the overall rightness of the action" that the agent in fact chooses (111). For example, when the agent helps the neighbor he at the same time breaks his promise; this diminishes the rightness of relieving the neighbor. The moral significance of the defeated ought (i.e., that he ought to keep the promise) is exhausted through its diminishment of

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[6] One may reasonably doubt whether Dancy has given a fair reading of Ross when we encounter a passage by Ross such as this:

> When we think ourselves justified in breaking, and indeed morally obliged to break, a promise in order to relieve someone's distress, we do not for a moment cease to recognize a *prima facie* duty to keep our promise, and this leads us to feel, not indeed shame or repentance, but certainly compunction, for behaving as we do; we recognize, further, that it is our duty to make up somehow to the promisee for the breaking of the promise. (28)

the rightness of the act the agent chooses (i.e., helping the neighbor). This diminishment leads Dancy to criticize the presumptivist's account for its failure to retain the defeated ought in its "full vigour" (111).

If it is to make sense of regret, Dancy believes presumptivism must retain the defeated ought in its "full vigour," a quality Dancy explicates by means of an example from Philippa Foot (111). Here is Dancy's rendering of her example:

It is dangerous to pick up a snake, but it may be more dangerous not to pick up this one. The dangerousness of not picking up this one is not reduced by the dangerousness of picking it up (as Ross's account would have it), and to pick it up remains [just as] dangerous though not so dangerous as not picking it up. Here the opposing reason retains its full force, even though overwhelmed in the particular case. (111)

The example tells us that the dangerousness of picking up the snake in question retains its full force or vigor because even though the circumstances are such that it would be more dangerous not to pick up the snake, the danger from picking it up remains undiminished. What it means to retain vigor is summarized in the second and third sentences of the quoted passage. By substituting into these sentences 'wrongness' for 'dangerousness,' 'breaking' for 'picking up,' and 'promise' for 'snake' we can formulate what it would mean for the defeated ought (about keeping the promise) to retain its full vigor in terms of Foot's example. After making the substitutions we get:

It is wrong to break a promise, but it may be more wrong not to break this promise (so I can help my neighbor). The wrongness of not breaking this promise (and thereby failing to help my neighbor) is not reduced by the wrongness of breaking it (as Ross's account would have it), and to break the promise remains [just as] wrong, though not so wrong as not breaking it.[7]

Here the opposing reason to keep the promise because promise-breaking is wrong retains its full force (it is just as wrong), even though overwhelmed in the particular case. In other words, if the defeated reason (i.e., it is wrong to break this promise) is to keep its full vigor the following must be true: the wrongness of keeping this promise must not be diminished by the fact that it is wrong to break it, and breaking this promise must remain wrong even when it is more wrong to keep the promise. In Dancy's view, presumptivism would have an acceptable account of regret only if it were somehow to treat the agent's decision not to keep the promise as fully wrong.[8] But it does not.

At this point we can get a clearer idea of why this is so and what Dancy believes presumptivism is committed to. First, Dancy believes presumptivism is committed to the idea

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[7] In other words, the fact that 'it is wrong to keep my promise' is true does not mean that 'it is wrong to break my promise' is not true.

[8] If this is the upshot of the snake analogy, then I do not think it is a promising way to think of the reason to keep a promise. Is it really *wrong* for the agent in his particular circumstances to break his promise to take his friend to physical therapy? It certainly is not wrong in the way it would be if the agent, say, broke the promise out of laziness. In order to rationalize regret do we have to say that the agent's promise-breaking *remains* wrong even though it would be worse to keep it and not help the neighbor? An affirmative answer is what Dancy requires of presumptivism. He requires the same of his own account, but he puts it in different terms: he requires that the defeated reason remain undefeated in a "reasonably persuasive" alternative view of the total situation (119).

that the wrongness of not performing a prima facie duty is diminished by the fact that if performed it would conflict with the performance of another prima facie duty. Second, Dancy believes presumptivism is committed to the idea that the rightness of performing the chosen act is diminished by the wrongness of not performing the conflicting act. In terms of my example, presumptivism would be committed to saying that the wrongness of breaking the promise to my friend is diminished by the rightness of relieving the neighbor's distress, and the rightness of relieving the neighbor's distress is diminished by the wrongness of breaking the promise. In other words, the inability to act on an incompatible prima facie duty taints the rightness of the chosen act (the act denoted by 'duty proper'), and the rightness of the chosen act (i.e., duty proper) diminishes the wrongness of violating the incompatible prima facie duty. Dancy finds unacceptable presumptivism's intermingling of the moral valence of the chosen and defeated acts. And it is because Dancy believes presumptivism is committed to such a position that he thinks it cannot make sense of regret.

We can clarify the view Dancy ascribes to the presumptivist by assuming that, for presumptivism, acts may be assessed on a scale of moral rightness and wrongness (e.g., from -5 to 5, where 5 is most right and -5 is most wrong and 0 is neutral). The faculty of judgment may then be modeled on a meter that sums the values of the various prima facie duties that are in play. Using such a scale Dancy's presumptivist would say that the agent's act *qua* helping the neighbor is, say, a 5, and *qua* breaking a promise a -2. If we follow presumptivism as Dancy presents it, then the wrongness of breaking the promise diminishes the rightness of helping the neighbor. So the act possesses an overall rightness metric of 3. There is an ambiguity here since the act can be described as an act of helping the neighbor or of breaking a promise. Dancy's thought must be that the act is a 3 under either description, and this is why the wrongness of

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breaking the promise loses its vigor. The wrongness of the promise-breaking in this case has been absorbed into the overall value of the action; there is no longer a negative pull on my judgment-meter that could make me think that something is still wrong with my action of helping my neighbor. Thus, Dancy concludes that the presumptivist cannot make sense of regret in such a case; it is irrational.[9] Consequently, Dancy concludes that presumptivism is unacceptable.

I believe that there is a logical problem with presumptivism as Dancy portrays it. For when we consider the above example, it appears that we have to judge one and the same action as having valence -2 (because it is breaking a promise, albeit not a crucial one) but also having valence 3 (because it is helping my neighbor, in conjunction with breaking the promise). I see two complications that emerge from the idea that this particular instance of promise-breaking would be a -2, but in fact is a 3. First, Dancy's presumptivist wants to argue that regret about an act is rational only if the act (e.g., promise-keeping) retains its full vigor, that is, only if it in some picture remains at -2. But if I am right that there is no coherent way to measure the wrongness of breaking this particular promise without taking into account the fact that breaking it is part of helping my neighbor, then there is no coherent way for Dancy's presumptivist to measure what the full vigor of this particular promise *would have been*. In other words, the requirement that full vigor be retained if regret is to be rational is not satisfiable.

How then does Dancy explain the phenomenon of rational regret when a right action violates a prima facie duty? He first aims to show that there is no logical inconsistency in

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[9] It seems to me that Dancy's presumptivist could make sense of the rationality of regret in terms of the diminishment of the rightness of the action performed: I could, for example, regret that helping my neighbor is 'less right' than it would have been had it not forced me to break a promise. However, I agree with Dancy that the summative aspect of this model of presumptivism renders it very implausible.

believing that an act (e.g., breaking my promise) retains the full vigor of its wrongness while also believing that the act should be done (i.e., the promise should be broken). Once he establishes this he develops the idea of what he calls "a reasonably persuasive picture" to illustrate when it is rational to feel regret and why (119).

Dancy begins with the idea that regret is "the sense that though one indeed made the right choice, still there was something of value which this choice lacked and another alternative did not lack, or there was something of disvalue which this choice had and another choice lacked" (120). An agent's regret over an act is rational insofar as the act has diminished some value or created some disvalue. (These would seem to be opposite sides of the same coin; if the chosen act causes some value to be diminished, then the chosen act creates some disvalue.) For Dancy whether value is lost (and disvalue created) depends on whether "there is a reasonably persuasive picture of the situation in which [the defeated reason, e.g., that I made a promise] is a prominent feature, and in which it is functioning as a reason not to [do the chosen act in the prevailing picture of the situation, e.g., not to help my neighbor]" (119). (This last qualification is necessary because we must distinguish (i) cases like the one we are considering, where the defeated reason is a reason not to do the chosen action, from (ii) cases where the defeated reason just gives the agent a reason to perform the chosen action in one way rather than another. Dancy's example of the latter case is shaving: I choose to shave, even though doing so is painful; the painfulness is *not* a reason not to shave, but it is a reason to shave carefully.)

In other words, the explanation of the rationality of regret is that there exists some reasonably persuasive alternative picture in which the defeated reason is prominent as a reason to perform the act it is a reason in favor of, rather than the act the agent actually chooses to do. There are two different ways to understand this alternative (non-prevailing) picture. Dancy

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might mean that in the alternative picture the fact that I made a promise somehow has greater force or weight than it does in the prevailing picture, but it does not provide a definitive reason to keep my promise and ignore my neighbor. The idea here would be that when viewed from the alternative perspective the promise is more significant—more prominent—than in the prevailing picture. Perhaps I dwell on the disappointment that my friend will feel when I fail to pick her up for her appointment, and on how reliable she is in keeping her promises to others. These reasons, which recede to the background in the prevailing perspective, come to the foreground when viewed from the alternative perspective. As such they would provide strong, yet not decisive, reasons to keep my promise and support the idea that it would be wrong to break it— even here (let us assume) I ultimately decide that the right thing to do is to help my neighbor.

If this is the way we should understand the test for whether an agent's regret is rational, then Dancy's claim would be that if there is a reasonably persuasive alternative picture in which the defeated reason *has more force* than it does in the prevailing picture, then it is rational for the agent to feel regret about not performing the act underwritten by the defeated reason. If this indeed is what Dancy means when he proposes the idea of the reasonably persuasive alternative, then I do not believe it provides a promising account of what makes regret rational, because in the non-prevailing picture the defeated reason to pick up my friend functions along the same lines as it functions in the prevailing picture. In both pictures it is morally significant that I made a promise, but it does not change my decision that my neighbor's emergency takes priority. There seems to be no need for Dancy to posit the existence of a persuasive alternative to explain regret, because whatever explanatory or rationalizing resources Dancy finds in the alternative picture he could find in the chosen picture. In both, the promise is morally significant, though not decisive.

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There is a second way to understand Dancy's explanation of the rationality of regret. He might mean that there must be some alternative total view of the situation in which my promise is undefeated; it is a decisive reason *not* to help my neighbor. The trouble I see for this way of rationalizing regret concerns the possibility of finding any other plausible *total* view of the situation in which the promise demands ignoring the fallen neighbor. In order to generate this different conclusion, we would have to add further information about the situation: it occurs to me that my friend has recently had surgery and urgently needs physical therapy, and that my neighborhood has streams of pedestrian traffic so someone else will surely see and help my neighbor soon. When we bring in such further assumed facts, then we might arrive at an alternative view of the situation in which the promise dictates not helping the neighbor. But now the alternative picture differs in a salient respect from the prevailing picture—in which case the alternative does not qualify as a plausible alternative *total* picture of the situation in question. It is a picture of a different situation.[10] And so the existence of this *alternative* picture of the

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[10] Dancy himself seems to be aware of this complication when he is thinking about alternative pictures. He writes:

> In a way, one can consider variations of the present situation in which these features occur, with others, as part of a picture which reveals the [chosen] action as wrong. Or one can suppose that if this feature were present to a greater degree, it would be enough to persuade one not to do the [chosen] action at all. The danger is to avoid saying *merely* that the feature would make a difference in different circumstances, because this is close to an admission that it does not in fact make a difference here (where it is defeated). (117)

Here Dancy seems to acknowledge that a picture of a different situation cannot explain the regret I feel about *this* situation.

situation will not explain my regret at the choice I made in the *actual* situation to help my neighbor.[11]

Neither of these accounts of regret in terms of alternative pictures explains the rationality of regret. The unhelpfulness of Dancy's approach is also evident in his account of tragic dilemmas. A tragic dilemma is a special case of a conflict of principles in which an agent confronts a choice such that she does something wrong no matter what she does. Dancy writes, "So for there to be tragic dilemmas, it must be possible for the various features of the situation to have more than one shape at once" (125). Since the shape of a situation is what we arrive at through moral reflection, and since the shape yields a conclusion about what to do, we could paraphrase this as saying that this is a case in which the agent can reach no conclusion about what she should do. (This case is thus quite different from the examples we have been discussing.) We may assume that whatever the agent does, she will regret her choice. Dancy wraps up his discussion of tragic dilemmas by saying that "[i]n tragic cases the situation speaks with two voices. And in these cases we have the strongest sense in which reasons on the other side do not go away. They stay there, shouting loudly" (125). These passages may describe the phenomenon of a tragic choice from which regret will issue, but they do not satisfyingly explain that regret.

On either understanding of Dancy's view, the fact that there is a reasonably persuasive alternative picture in which the defeated reason (in the actual situation) is either of greater prominence or is decisive provides the basis for his claim that the wrongness of (e.g., breaking

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[11] I do not wish to deny there are situations that when viewed from different perspectives call for different responses. But these are situations in which it is unclear what I should do. Dancy's focus is on situations in which I know what I should do, and I do it. My criticism is that in the *alternative* total picture of the actual situation there is no room for the reason that was conflicting but weaker (in the actual situation) to become the decisive one.

the promise) retains its full vigor and creates the lingering or residual effects that make regret rational. As I have argued, I do not think the alternative "persuasive picture" way of rationalizing regret is successful (119). Even if it were, it is not necessary to posit anything like an alternative persuasive picture in order to make sense of our feelings of regret.

I think there is a more straightforward account of the rationality of regret that does not depend on Dancy's idea of an alternative picture that is different—but not too different—from the prevailing picture. My proposal involves rethinking the object of regret. Dancy frames the problem as explaining the rationality of regret for having performed an *action* that I judge to be right. This explanation would seem to require that the defeated reason (that I have made a promise) remain *live* even after it has been subsumed under a universal principle (as subsumptivism would have it) or after its wrong-making influence has been absorbed and overpowered by the right-making influence of the prevailing reason (as Dancy's account of presumptivism would have it). So understood, neither form of generalism offers us a way to see the reason as still live; and Dancy's preferred explanation in terms of competing total pictures is also unsatisfactory. In all these accounts, it is thinking that regret must be about what the agent has done that generates the puzzle—because it appears irrational to regret having done what *ex hypothesi* is (in those circumstances) right.

I suggest that these approaches misidentify the target of the agent's regret. I believe the agent's regret is better understood as being *not* about what she has *done*, but rather about the *circumstances* in which she finds herself. Viewed this way, the puzzle about regret disappears. In the kinds of case in question (where the agent *ex hypothesi* has done the right thing) we need not see the agent as regretting her act, but instead as regretting that circumstances prevented her from fulfilling all her obligations. In our example, the agent could rationally have regret not just

about the immediate circumstances of her neighbor's collapse—that it happened at all, that it interfered with keeping her promise—but also about any further consequences of breaking her promise. She might regret that her friend did not get the treatment she needed, or that her friend was left stranded, puzzled, worried, perhaps angry. In short, she can rationally regret that circumstances unfolded as they did, and yet quite reasonably not regret what she did.

More could be said about the conditions for regretting the circumstances in which one finds oneself. For one, such regret must be grounded in something more than the agent's recognition that a given action failed to realize something valuable that could have been realized had circumstances been different; after all, circumstances can always be more favorable to virtue. It would not be rational for me to regret that circumstances were such that when I spent an afternoon volunteering to teach literacy classes I could not also pack supplies for disaster relief. It is a fact of life that one choice precludes another: you can't do everything.

It would be an interesting project to try to articulate necessary and sufficient conditions for regret about my circumstances to be rational. But we do not need such an account to say something about the structure of such regret. Rational regret of my circumstances is more than a vague wish that the world had been different; it involves envisioning a specific good that my action fails to achieve, one that would have been achievable if the world had been different in some readily identifiable ways. This recognition presupposes that we have values that provide reasons for us across various actual and possible situations. Faithfulness to promises is a value that gives me a reason both when circumstances are propitious and when I am faced with a reason that eclipses it. When the reason to pick up my friend is not decisive, and I instead help my fallen neighbor, the influence of the reason on my decision does not dissipate; it remains in

the form of a sort of tension (or in Ross's words, a "compunction"[12]). It remains as the recognition that my action fails to exemplify something I value. It is in this sense that what Dancy calls a defeated reason is always live.

This account, sketchy as it is, avoids the contortions of Dancy's talk of various competing pictures of the situation. For reasons I will discuss further in chapters three and four, I believe Dancy is driven to his view because he denies that a reason can have general moral relevance. For Dancy, the reason I have to keep my promise in propitious circumstances has no general relation to a reason (perhaps defeated) for me to keep my promise in different circumstances. Because of this, Dancy has to generate an alternate picture with a shadow-reason to explain my regret when I cannot keep my promise because I need to help my neighbor.

The way of thinking about reasons which I employ above – and which will be more fully developed in subsequent chapters—can also help us think about tragic dilemmas. We can follow Dancy's suggestion and define a tragic dilemma as a situation in which an agent does something wrong no matter what she does. We find an especially wrenching example in William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice*. Sophie, a Polish Jew, is saved from the Nazi death camps, when she is chosen to work in the household of a Nazi official. Both her children, however, are on the verge of being sent to die, when she is told she may choose one to be spared. If she does not choose one, then both will die. Sophie chooses one of her children over the other, then suffers years of anguish that finally lead her to suicide. Although regret is too weak a word to describe her feelings, regret is the initial seed of what grows into full-blown remorse and eventual self-loathing.

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[12]See discussion of Ross in footnote six of this chapter.

In Sophie's case it might be natural to say that she regrets what she did, and not (or not just) that circumstances prevented her from saving both her children. What makes her choice tragic is that any choice she makes violates a deeply held commitment. Her parental obligation to care for and to protect her children extends to both of them impartially, even if (as the novel suggests) she has a favorite. No matter which child she chooses, she fails to honor that commitment. And if she makes no choice she still fails because she has saved neither child. And whichever option she takes—choosing one child or neither—the choice is hers alone.

Sophie's situation is tragic in ways that other situations in which a parent might have to choose between her children are not. One can imagine a parent being able to save only one of two drowning children—because the current is too strong, or one child is easier to reach, or is smaller and therefore hoist-able. Here the parent could point to external circumstances that justify her choice. Although Sophie did not create the circumstances, she does not seem to have any basis other than her own preference on which to base her choice. It is natural to want to say that she should not blame herself, that she is rational to regret that circumstances locked her into a no-win situation, but that she should not blame herself for her choice. Sophie, however, does not see her choice that way. For her (and for us insofar as we see things through her eyes) 'doing the least-bad thing' is not equivalent to 'doing the right thing in the circumstances.'

Is Sophie's regret rational? I have suggested that it is *understandable*. And whether it is rational or not, we should note that what Sophie suffers is not the sort of regret that Dancy seeks to explain. For that sort of regret is elicited when an agent has done the right thing, but has thereby also failed to exemplify something of value. In Sophie's tragic dilemma, she believes she has done something wrong—even though, I would argue, she is not to blame, since her

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action is wrung from her by the cruelty of her tormentors.[13] Her inability to fulfill her duty to

care for her children impartially torments her, I suggest, because of the ongoing value she places

on such care.   This is a value that provides reasons across circumstances and across time.

Dancy's theory does not recognize such overarching values and their resultant reasons.

2.4   GENERALITY IN MORAL REASONING

I have argued that Dancy's particularist account of making a moral judgment is mysterious. He

does not explain how we are to sift through features, identify saliencies, and settle on the shape

of a situation. There is no place for our moral outlook or values; there is no place for our

understanding of how our values hang together. The ideal moral agents of Dancy's particularism

are supposed to be perfectly sensitive moral judges, and yet they have no general understanding

of how their moral values are related. I think such agents would strike us not as especially

morally gifted; instead they would seem alien to us, morally defective, or at least morally

immature. One mark of moral astuteness is the capacity to make finer and finer discriminations

about how things in general fit or work together. Truncated as she is, Dancy's moral agent, even

if she had a knack for getting things right, would not know what it was all about.

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[13] It is doubtful that she would be able to, but Sophie's could find solace in the legal
defense called 'excuse,' which recognizes that an agent's action can be wrong, but that the agent
nevertheless might not be blameworthy. For example, if I were coerced with a gun to my head
into stealing a car, the theft would be wrong, but excused. The idea is that I am not to blame
because my responsibility is diminished by the circumstances in which I committed the theft.
Analogously, even if Sophie's choice *is* wrong, her responsibility is diminished by the
circumstances, and she is not to blame (and should not blame herself).   See discussion of
justification and excuse defenses in the context of what is called 'battered woman's syndrome'
(Pendleton).

Dancy resists the idea that moral judgment-making involves systematic thought about the principles that underlie those judgments (and the values they express), because he thinks that such principles are either false or useless. The view I will develop in chapters three and four is that some understanding of general moral connections between principles and values is necessary for making moral judgments. We have to have some general understanding of how our values are related in order to make moral judgments. Principles express a part of this understanding, and often make it more perspicuous to us. In the next chapter, I draw on Iris Murdoch's work to delve more deeply into Dancy's conception of a moral agent. I begin to develop an account of moral reasoning which in chapter four culminates in an understanding of moral principles, and their role in moral reflection and judgment-making, that is truer to our ordinary practice than either the particularists' or the generalists' account.

3.0   MURDOCH, DANCY, AND VISION

Chapters one and two demonstrate the shortcomings of both generalism and particularism: generalism's principles cannot capture our ability to make correct moral judgments and particularism leaves it mysterious, alien, and truncated. Although particularists are correct about the impossibility of codifying moral judgment in an exhaustive set of principles—there will always be cases that fall outside the scope of the principle, there will always be cases for which there is no principle—they are wrong to conclude that we must therefore reject the possibility of genuine moral principles and reformulate them as reminders, rules of thumb, or summaries. The particularists' attempt to reformulate principles in these terms leads to what I will refer to in this chapter as Dancy's lacuna: in its practical aspect Dancy's view cannot account for our appeal to moral principles in ordinary moral discourse and reflection; in its theoretical aspect it renders our ability for moral judgment mysteriously inarticulable.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of Iris Murdoch's notion of 'vision' and its perfection. Building on her presentation of these ideas in "Vision and Choice in Morality" and *The Sovereignty of Good,* I develop some distinctions that will be helpful to understanding the lacuna in particularism. I then use these distinctions to develop an important contrast between Murdoch and Dancy, a contrast which shows the limitations of Dancy's view and the need to develop and carve out place for an alternate conception of generality in moral thought. I conclude this chapter with an indication of how we can go beyond Murdoch's own view to develop an alternative conception of generality that is unlike what we find in subsumptivist and presumptivist conceptions.

3.1   VISION: AN EXAMPLE

Murdoch deploys the idea of vision in the service of several points, but she is perhaps best known for developing it in support of her argument against what she calls the 'universal rules model of ethics.' According to this model, the proper topic of ethics is the study of "choices" and the universalizable reasons that justify them. The choices that matter in the universal rules model concern choices of actions, and the domain of moral judgment is limited exclusively to the assessment of those actions.

In "Vision and Choice in Morality," Murdoch uses the idea of vision against the universal rules model to show that choices, and the universalizable reasons that justify them, are not the only "data" relevant to moral study. There is other relevant data, Murdoch argues, i.e., the data which form the background to those choices and include an array of "inner" (or mental) activities that fall under the heading of what she variously calls "personal vision" or "total vision of life" or the "texture of man's being." (80-1). A person's vision shows itself in both inner and outer behavior. In the following passage describing one of the ways in which we form opinions of others, Murdoch indicates the breadth of what the term 'vision' encompasses:

> When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their
> solutions to specifiable problems, we consider something more elusive which may
> be called their total vision of life, as shown in people's mode of speech or silence,
> their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own
> lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short
> the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and

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conversation. These things . . . may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or

inwardly elaborated and guessed at . . . (80-81)

That we make judgments about a person's vision is, for Murdoch, good evidence that such a

thing exists, but she has even more convincing evidence that vision must be acknowledged. In

The Sovereignty of Good Murdoch offers a (now famous) example of a mother-in-law's evolving

attitudes toward her daughter-in-law to show that vision affects what we regard as relevant moral

data, and it is therefore relevant data itself. In the example, a mother, whom Murdoch calls M,

"feels hostility" toward D, her daughter-in-law (17). M finds D:

quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and

lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently

ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does

not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him.

(17)

Murdoch tells us that M, who is very "correct," behaves "beautifully" towards D, and,

despite her hostility, never lets her true opinion show (17). Such is the state of things until there

comes a turning point in Murdoch's example: M determines to take another look at D, and

ultimately transforms her opinion of D. D herself alters not at all. To underscore the crucial fact

that D remains the same, Murdoch hypothesizes that M's opinion of D changes after the couple

have emigrated or after D has died. The emphasis of the example is that the change in M's

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opinion of D "*happens entirely in M's mind*" (17, emphasis added). What brings on the change, and how does it occur? Murdoch tells us that M:

> is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.' (17)

When M looks at D again she "reflects deliberately about D" until her impression of D alters (17). She finds D to be:

> not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. (17-8)

Murdoch stresses that the change in M's impression of D emerges from what she describes as "just" and "intelligent" reflection on D (18). M's fresh impression does not arise, for example, from some possibly distorting motive, such as a reluctance to think of her son as unfortunate. Murdoch acknowledges, however, that in real life it might be difficult to determine whether M indeed was properly motivated in her re-directed attention toward D or had achieved a fairer impression of D. In the example, however, M is explicitly presented as someone who, through laudable motives and efforts, is not deluded, but rather has indeed achieved a truer view of D. It

is important to Murdoch's view that M's new impression of D arises out of "love" and "justice," because for Murdoch it is through love and justice that we can come to see things aright (23).[1]

3.2   VISION: AN ANALYSIS

The discussion of M and D in the section above puts in place enough of Murdoch's view for me to begin to develop two different, yet closely related, distinctions that are implicit in Murdoch's notion of vision.

3.2.1   Vision and perception

The first distinction implicit in Murdoch's example is the distinction between what I call 'total vision' and 'perception.' Total vision, to put it merely suggestively, involves peoples' general habits of mind, their overarching sensibility or orientation that they bring to situations. Some of these we might call "mere" habits, but other characteristics we might call habits of character. These reflect people's general normative understanding, for example, their habits of fidelity, honesty, compassion, generosity. There is overlap between the two, but all these are part of "the texture of man's being" or "total vision" ("Vision" 80-1). Total vision is *total* because it shapes people's outlook or approach, including their assessments of others, of situations, and things in

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[1] The demands of love are usually considered to be at odds with those of justice, but Murdoch does not intend the usual contrast. I will not here work out the relation between the two for Murdoch, but the idea of justice is meant to suggest fairness of vision. Being fair to others in our impressions of them is a matter of being truthful about them, which for Murdoch is part of loving them. Ultimately, we will treat love and justice as expressions of Murdoch's overarching conception of the Good.

general. Total vision is distinct from another idea that is implicit in Murdoch's example of vision at work: this is perception. Perception involves grasping the object or objects at hand, discerning which features are relevant, how they are related to one other, and what their ultimate significance is.[2]

Although Murdoch herself does not explicitly carve out this distinction, it nevertheless is a central point in her example. M's *total vision* plays a definite role in shaping her *perception* of D. Because Murdoch herself does not explicitly differentiate between the two she uses the same term 'vision' to refer to both aspects of M's redirected attention to D, but it is necessary for my purposes to mark the difference. To put the distinction in terms of the example, we can say that when M notices she feels jealous[3] toward D she determines not only to take another look at D, but also to take a look at herself, at her general perspective, at what I am calling 'total vision.' When she reflects on her total vision she identifies distinct aspects of her own character, e.g., that

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[2] My distinction between vision and perception borrows from a closely related distinction made by Bridget Clarke in chapter three of her dissertation *The Lens of Character: Aristotle, Murdoch, and the Idea of Moral Perception*. In an interesting analysis of the evolution of the idea of vision in Murdoch's work, Clarke finds two notions of vision that work in harmony with one another. These are what Clarke calls "total vision" and "vision of individuals."

[3] There are different ways to construe the role of M's jealousy in her reflections. I will suppose that there are several causes of distortion in M's vision and that a tendency toward (or habit of) jealousy is among them. However, as Murdoch uses 'jealousy' in the example, it does not *necessarily* refer to an aspect of M's vision that she *brings* to the situation before viewing D. It is consistent with Murdoch's characterization of the example that M's feeling of jealousy is triggered by D, but that M's jealousy is not a characteristic of her total vision. On this scenario, noticing that she feels jealous induces M to look for possibly distorting influences that are characteristic of her total vision (e.g., being overly critical of non-family members or overly protective of her son). Murdoch does not need to distinguish which kind of case she has in mind. It is sufficient for her position that the jealousy in M, triggered by D, points to there being some underlying aspect of total vision that M brings to the situation. In any case, the point I want to bring out here is that when M reflects on her total vision she is reflecting on aspects of it that may interfere with clarity in her perception of D.

she is "old-fashioned and conventional," which could distort her view of D (*Sovereignty* 17). Furthermore, she inspects herself for other possibly distorting influences of character, e.g., that she "may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. . . [that she] may be snobbish" (17). As Murdoch presents the example, M's total vision at the outset is *distorted* by influences such as these, and so she incorrectly perceives D as, among other things, "juvenile" and "vulgar," but when M corrects the distortion in her total vision she rightly perceives D as "delightfully youthful" and "not undignified but spontaneous" (17-8).

3.2.2   Attention and reflection

While M's case shows how total vision affects perception, it also demonstrates the *different sorts of object* we can take up for consideration. This possibility necessitates a second distinction, which will be importantly related to the first distinction between total vision and perception. This is the distinction between attention (or attending) and reflection (or reflecting).

We can direct ourselves toward, or *attend to*, particulars, as M does when she tries to make sense of the manifold of D's behavior. But we can also direct our focus toward something more general: total vision itself. Total vision not only serves as the backdrop against which perception (and ensuing judgments and actions) occur; it can be itself the object of our focus. We can attend to particulars, as M does when she seeks an accurate perception of D, or we can *reflect on* our own total vision and take a critical look at it, as M does when she checks herself against possible distortions. In the latter case, the object of reflection often will be (though not always) something quite general, as when M notes that she is certainly jealous and reflects on

how her jealousy[4] might be linked to some characteristic of her total vision that distorts her perceptions of D.

The distinction I am making between attention and reflection is not one made by Murdoch. She uses 'reflection' to refer to the entirety of M's task: what M sets out to do is reflect deliberately on D. This way of putting it could make us think that what M does when she reflects is focus exclusively on (*attend* only to) D. But we would be wrong to think this. Murdoch is clear that M's moral task includes movement between times when M looks again at (i.e., attends to) D *and* times when M looks at (i.e., reflects on) herself (i.e., her total vision). Even though it is helpful to distinguish these two different turns of mind, they are interrelated and cannot be completely separated. Murdoch rightly sees both as part of the same task of getting straight about D. We see the confluence in descriptions such as:

> M *looks* at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention. M is engaged in an
> internal struggle. She may for instance be tempted to enjoy caricatures of D in
> her imagination. (22)

On the one hand, M is looking at D, but she is also involved in an *internal* struggle; she is struggling with herself to keep her imaginings of D in check, so that when she looks at D she will see her as she actually is.[5] The part of M's task that Murdoch characterizes as M's internal

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[4] See previous footnote, for the various roles jealousy could play in M's reflections.

[5] We see evidence of the confluence also in accounts of the skills M has that enable her to engage in this task. She is "an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her" (17). We see that for Murdoch, M needs to be able to attend to the object which confronts her, but she also must be

struggle involves an examination of how she, M, is seeing things; her focus turns inward as part of her attempt to see things straight outwardly. When I speak of 'reflection' I will restrict its reference to just that part of M's task in which she turns inward and reflects on herself, that is, on her total vision.

Attention and reflection are intertwined in Murdoch's discussion, but now that they are teased apart, we can sketch in the role of the idea of the Good in Murdoch's account of efforts like M's. Although it is beyond the present scope to investigate Murdoch's full position, we can for our present purposes treat love, justice, and the Good as playing the same basic role in Murdoch's position about the process of seeing things aright. To understand their role and their importance to efforts like M's, it is important to mark that such efforts to see things aright require the virtues of love and justice, or as Murdoch often puts it, such efforts require us to adopt the "just and loving gaze" and look in the light of love and justice (34). For Murdoch, when we look in the light of love and justice, we are looking in the light of the Good. The Good is the "starting-point" of any effort to see things aright (71). Not only is the Good the starting-point, but for Murdoch it is also the focus. She writes, "Good is the focus" when "an intent to be virtuous co-exists (as perhaps it almost always does) with some unclarity of vision[,]" which we are seeking to correct (70).[6] Thus, M's starting point is the Good, and goodness, or the Good, is her focus. Moreover, "goodness" is "what should be aimed at . . ." (70). So, for Murdoch, when

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able to turn her focus inward (i.e., reflect), so she can engage in "self-criticism" or self-assessment.

[6] I am not sure how successful we must be before it is correct to say that the Good is the object of our attention. Having the proper intention is presumably not sufficient in itself to make the Good the object of our attention; presumably we must have some degree of clarity of vision for this to be so.

M tries to see D as she really is, the Good is M's starting-point, focus, and aim in the effort to see things aright.

However, as we have noted, for M to see things aright requires not only *attending* to D, but also, *reflecting* on herself, specifically on her total vision. Although Murdoch does not distinguish between attending and reflecting, it is fair to think that the Good figures the same way in both, for they play such intertwined roles in achieving clarity of vision that Murdoch herself does not explicitly distinguish them. This fits with the Murdochian idea that the full process by which we work toward clarity is through the Good. "[T]he idea of the Good [i]s the source of light which reveals to us *all* things as they really are," she writes, drawing approvingly on the Platonic myth (70, emphasis added). Accordingly, the Good is the starting-point, focus, and aim in exercises of both reflection and attention.

Murdoch's directive to look with a just and loving gaze (in both attending and reflecting), which we will call 'Murdoch's injunction,' is not a command that applies only when it is people we are trying to see aright. Murdoch tells us that these "same virtues [love and justice, or the Good] . . . are required throughout . . . [F]antasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person" (70). Moreover, this effort to ward off the self and see things aright (in the light of love and justice, or the Good) is "a progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly" (23). M's activity, for example, is "something infinitely perfectible," for, as Murdoch tells us, as soon as we introduce the ideas of love and justice, we have introduced "the idea of progress, that is the idea of perfection" (23). The implementation of Murdoch's injunction to look with a just and loving gaze (in both attending and reflecting) is, therefore, progressive and infinitely perfectible.

With this overview of Murdoch's position in place, we can lay out the relation between these two distinctions (between perception and total vision and attention and reflection) that I find in Murdoch and their relation to the Good:

- *Total vision* refers to those general characteristics that form the backdrop to perception of particulars. When we turn ourselves toward our total vision, we have total vision as our object, and we examine it, as M does, with the intention to improve and ultimately perfect it. We will refer to this turn of mind as *reflection.*

- *Perception* refers to the grasp of particulars, including persons, *in situ*. When we turn ourselves to particulars and examine them as M does, we do so with the explicit intention to see them as they really are and to improve and ultimately perfect our perception of them. We will refer to this turn of mind as *attention*.

- *Vision*, though I rarely use the term, refers to the complex effort, such as M's, to see things aright through both attention and reflection, which (as we will see) is an on-going, infinitely perfectible effort to put ourselves in a just and loving relation to others.

We can see that total vision forms the backdrop to perception of particulars, but we can adopt a more critically engaged stance toward both total vision and particulars: we can reflect on total vision, and we can attend to particulars—and in both we are guided by and focusing on the Good. It is a complex question how exactly the Good guides on Murdoch's view. It is sufficient for our purposes, however, to examine Murdoch's presentation of M's transformation in vision. Her transformation is an example of 'seeing in the light of the Good,' and it gives us adequate

indication of how the Good guides. We turn now to a discussion of M's changing perception of D.

When M thinks deliberately about D until her impression of D alters there are a number of different things that might be going on that involve changes in both her total vision and her perception of D, but these changes are difficult to pin down. The line between total vision and perception is not bright; their relation is in some ways dialectical, but not always. An alteration of total vision may effect an alteration in perception, but not every alteration in total vision will cause perceptual changes. Similarly, an improved perceptual capacity may effect a change in total vision, but not all changes in perception will lead to changes in total vision. Wine-tasting provides a ready (non-moral) example of perceptual change without change in total vision: the more primitivo I taste the better I become (theoretically anyway) at discriminating between primitivos of different regions, producers, vintages, etc. But my improved perception need not involve anything like an alteration of total vision. We can think of an analogous case in the moral sphere. The more I work with second-graders, the better I (in theory) become at distinguishing genuine behavior problems from the common self-assertiveness of seven year-olds, but I may not experience an alteration of total vision. I might simply put the details of my new understanding toward what I learned while getting my masters degree in classroom management about how to handle this age group. But there is no bar to my undergoing some change in total vision: I might, for example, discover I am overly impatient with completely typical second-grade behavior and alter my set point, so I am more tolerant and no longer see certain displays of assertiveness as contrarian, but rather as appropriately confident and self-possessed.

The basic point of the foregoing examples is that we cannot identify a predictable connection between changes in perception and changes in total vision. In what follows, I present additional examples that illustrate some of the different ways change in perception can be related to change in total vision. At times, in these examples, the effort to identify the relation between change in perception and change in total vision risks making them look more distinct than they are. Nevertheless, the following examples help eke out the precise relation Murdoch has in mind in her discussion of M and D.

3.2.3   Change in perception without change in total vision

We can begin with an examination of a scenario slightly altered from Murdoch's in which M's change in perception does not involve any change in her total vision. If we focus on just a single aspect of the example, say M's being old-fashioned, we can craft an account of her change in perception according to which her altered perception of D is basically the result only of improvements in M's powers of attending (like the wine-tasting example). We can imagine that M is out of the loop and unfamiliar with the ways of the younger generation; certain of D's behaviors, ways of talking or interacting, though really just "of the moment," are alien and offensive to M and put her off D. In such circumstances, M may not need to make any substantive changes in her total vision in order to see D better. What M really needs to improve her perceptual capacities is more experience of the world around her and greater familiarity with how younger people behave in it. More experience of particulars will give her a truer

understanding of D.[7] In this sort of case, M's more accurate perception of D is not really due to a change in vision, but comes about through attending and acquiring improved powers of perception.

3.2.4   Change in perception with three types of change in total vision

Recasting Murdoch's example in the foregoing manner shows how perceptual change can occur without change in total vision. This is not the sort of case Murdoch is interested in. Murdoch's example is intended to highlight the way in which *change in total vision* can improve perception. However, the relationship between change in total vision and change in perception has many variations. I want to discuss three possible relationships in order to pinpoint exactly the sort of change Murdoch has in mind in her discussion of M and D.

3.2.4.1 Temporary change in total vision

One possible source of change in total vision is what we might call a 'short term' cause. For example, suppose M struggles to see D, sometimes finds her gay, not noisy, but then lapses back into what for her is a typical stance toward those close to her son, a stance of jealousy and hostility that clouds her vision. The change in total vision is unstable and temporary. To take another example, suppose M is not an especially possessive or hostile person when it comes to sharing her son's affection, but M's encounter with D, a woman apparently so different from M, has thrown M (and her total vision) off kilter. The trauma brought on by D, and the full

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[7] We can see here how the distinction between total vision and perception might blur: M's new familiarity with the ways of the younger generation might bring about a change in her total vision, for example, if she were to incorporate some aspect of the youthful sensibility into her own.

realization that both she and her son are forever linked with D, has stirred up possessiveness and hostility that interfere with M's typically generous nature and occlude her perception of D. Suppose, however, that M gets a grip on herself, and after giving attention to D and reflecting on her own distortions of vision, M restores her typical generous nature. In each scenario, M's total vision is thrown off balance and then restored. (It is not hard to imagine the scenarios in both examples in terms of an on-going cycle of short-term changes in total vision—in which case we would say that M is struggling to see D aright.) The point of these examples is that neither involves the sort of *genuine* change in total vision that M experiences in Murdoch's example.

3.2.4.2 Improperly motivated change in total vision

Another possible scenario, slightly modified from Murdoch's, is one in which M's altered perception of D results from a change in total vision that is triggered, so to speak, from the outside. Suppose M remarks to her husband and friends on D's impertinence and childishness. They might challenge her interpretation of D's behavior and point out how she seems jealous of D and therefore might be judging D unfairly. These external proddings might induce M to think that she has been wrong about D, and M might, e.g., successfully repress her jealously, and regard D as fine and worthy of her son. We can imagine there might be a kind of mediated quality to M's impression of D: M comes to a more truthful view of D because she has been *told* by people, whose opinions she respects, that D is not really rude and unworthy of her son. She alters her general standards for acceptable behavior,[8] but she does it in an attempt to conform her

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[8] We can see how it is difficult to identify a genuine change in total vision. If M merely changes her view of D in response to the goading of others, it may be that her total vision cannot really be said to have changed. She might be going along with those whose opinion she values in order to please them or to avoid their goading. It may be that she makes herself take up the general attitude that D is fine, in such a way that when she sees D otherwise, she has to tell

view of D with the views of people she respects and to stanch their unpleasant criticism her. In this case, M is not motivated by love and justice (or the Good) to genuinely alter her own total vision to see D aright. For Murdoch, this is not a properly motivated change. For M to undergo a *genuine* change in total vision—the sort of change Murdoch means to describe in her example—she must be motivated from within by love and justice.[9]

3.2.4.3 Properly motivated change in total vision

In the example actually described by Murdoch, M is capable of self-criticism and of giving careful and just attention to an object before her. Along with these capacities, M is concerned or motivated to undergo self-criticism and give *just and loving* attention to D. She is driven to reflect on her own total vision from *within* by the value she places on the Good, on being loving and just. Because M recognizes the importance of looking with a just and loving gaze, she moves herself to take another look at her own attitudes and overall approach to D. Granted M, in her reflections, contemplates the specifics of D's behavior, but in attending deliberately to D, she reflects also on aspects of her own vision, and considers possible distorting influences like whether she is old-fashioned, snobbish, jealous, or hostile. The critical point is that the alteration in M's vision is driven by her own concern for love and justice; the value she puts on a just and

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herself she is wrong and make herself regard D as a fine girl, suitable for her son, and so on. We can imagine M having to *remind* herself that D is not what she reflexively thinks, that actually D is all right.

[9] It is possible that M, in this scenario, could be motivated from the outside by concerns of love and justice, say, if her family encouraged her to think she needed to be more concerned with love and justice. This is not the case Murdoch describes, but we can see how it might be a step in an evolution of thinking that eventually would lead to someone's being motivated by love and justice from within, which *is* the case Murdoch describes. We might think for the family's encouragement to get any traction at all, M must have some pre-existing (or at least proto-) concern for love and justice, even if it is not well developed.

loving gaze propels her examination of whether her own gaze is actually just and loving when she looks at D.

This is the reading of the case of M and D, which I believe is actually intended by Murdoch. It presents the change in M's total vision as not temporary, not motivated from the outside, and not driven by self-interest. A genuine alteration of total vision, as I understand Murdoch, is stable and motivated from within by a concern for love and justice, a concern for the Good. What is truly distinctive, for our purposes, is that the concerns of love and justice—from within M's own total vision—motivate her to critically reflect on it and bring it more in line with those concerns.

3.3   DANCY AND MURDOCH: A CONTRAST

With these distinctions in place, and the precise point of Murdoch's example established, we are situated to develop a contrast between Murdoch's and Dancy's positions. In order to develop this contrast, I will first have to translate Murdoch's position into terms closer to Dancy's.[10] Once we see how their positions line up, we will discover that Dancy does not have in view the possibility, or the necessity, of Murdochian reflection. Without it, Dancy is hindered from recognizing the full scope of our ability for moral judgment-making, as well as the full extent to which generality figures in it.

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[10] I hope to be following Kieran Setiya's directive that in order to help Murdoch "speak more audibly to contemporary philosophers, so that she cannot be ignored, her ideas must be reframed as interventions in existing disputes, her arguments must be recovered, and her conclusions made clear" (1-2).

Murdoch's example focuses on forming correct perceptions of persons, and she shows how a person's vision affects the accuracy of her perceptions. She does not speak per se of judging individuals' actions, but there is nevertheless a distinct sense in which perception of individuals involves judging their actions. For example, when M makes judgments about D's character (initially, that she is crass, juvenile, rude, not good enough for her son) she has judged D's overt behavior along the way. When, after reflection, M thinks D is spontaneous, gay, delightful, certainly worthy of her son, she has, among other things, revised her view of D's overt behavior and has accordingly altered her opinion of D's character. Because Murdoch wants to show, as against the prevailing behaviorism of her time, that action is not the *only* topic of moral evaluation, her example is constructed to exclude overt behavior from the data immediately relevant to M's transformation. In the example, as I noted earlier, Murdoch supposes that D is dead or expatriated or otherwise absent from M's life, which eliminates the possibility that M has changed her behavior toward D or that D herself has changed her behavior. D's absence is meant to bring into relief the fact that the *only* change lies with M and, more importantly, that the change is entirely *internal* to M. However, there is no doubt that the example should *not* be grounds for supposing that Murdoch lacks awareness of, or concern for, the importance of correct action. First, for Murdoch, correct perception of others will involve making judgments about their actions.[11] Second, part of the reason perfection of vision is important is that it is meant to prepare us for, and to issue in, morally correct action. Murdoch herself warns against interpreting her focus on vision as a lack of interest in action:

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[11] Murdoch's focus, however, is not on making moral judgments. One of the reasons for this is that 'judgment' suggests a finality of opinion that Murdoch warns against. Any impression of a person, like D, should never be treated as the final word; the process of seeing someone *as she is* is on-going, always needing refinement and adjustment, infinitely perfectible.

I would not be understood, either, as suggesting that insight or pureness of heart are more important than action . . . Overt actions are perfectly obviously important in themselves, and important too because they are the indispensable pivot and spur of the inner sense. (43)

It is perfectly correct to say of Murdoch that her focus is on improving vision, i.e., improving total vision in order to achieve improved perception of persons. However, she well recognizes the importance of action—not only because it is the "pivot and spur" of the inner sense, but also because action is "obviously" important in its own right.[12]

I stress the manner in which Murdoch's view involves moral judgment about action in order to bring out points of contact between her position and Dancy's. Dancy's explicit focus is on moral judgment as applied to action—on judging whether an action is good or bad, on determining which action an agent should perform. The task of moral judgment, as Dancy describes it in *Moral Reasons*, is to take into account all the relevant features of a situation, organize them into a coherent narrative structure (or shape), and on that basis form a judgment about what ought to be done (or ought to have been done) in that situation.[13] Dancy's idea is that, in the competent ethical agent, action accompanies judgment when the situation demands it. So with respect to moral judgments—whether they are primarily about individuals or actions—

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[12] Nussbaum, in an article in *The New Republic*, charges Murdoch with ignoring the importance of action in favor of efforts at perfecting vision. It is certainly true that Murdoch's emphasis is not on action, but this appears to be a response to her view that many philosophers of her time denied, or at least ignored, any role for the inner and not an indication that Murdoch gives the inner *greater* importance than overt action. It is interesting to note that part of the reason for Nussbaum's charge is her personal experience of Murdoch.

[13] See the discussion of Dancy's notion of shape in section 2.1 of chapter two.

we might think the difference between Murdoch and Dancy is merely a matter of emphasis. Determining whether this is so depends to some extent on understanding how each conceives of our basic ability for moral judgment.

In several chapters of *Ethics without Principles*, Dancy offers helpful insight into his basic conception of that ability. In discussing how we are able to make moral judgments in new cases, he explicitly discusses what we bring to a new situation that enables us to make judgments when confronted with a new case, i.e., what enables us "to establish what reasons are present in the case" at hand (142). He writes that what we bring is sophisticated and requires training and experience, but the question he wants to explore is *how* competent judges bring their training and experience to bear in new cases. According to Dancy,

> The particularist will say here that our skills in reason-discernment are not rule-based, meaning by this that we do not extract rules for the operation of reason-giving features from the cases we have come across and then try to subsume new cases under those rules. Reasons do not behave in the sort of invariant way that would be necessary if we were to place such rules at the centre of our epistemology of reasons. Rules of this sort, even if they could be found, would be at best a dispensable crutch for judgment. (142)

Dancy notes that even if we know that the ability is not rule-based, this tells us "nothing about how we should *conceive* of our ability to determine reasons in new cases" (142, emphasis added). Thus, the question remains: how do we bring our training and experience to bear when we make a new judgment? Dancy explains that:

Particularists conceive of the knowledge brought to a new case as much more like knowledge-how than like knowledge-that. That is, it is a skill of discernment, not knowledge of a set of true general propositions discovered by thinking about previous cases and applied somehow to new ones . . . [T]o know the practical import of a concept is to know the sorts of difference that its applicability can make to how one should respond. But knowing this is just being able to tell the difference made case by case, in a way that is informed by one's past experience but not articulable in propositional terms. The competent judge is not the person in command of general truths about the behaviour of reasons, all extracted from experience. She is a person who can tell the difference when she comes across it. (142-3)

Dancy characterizes the knowledge we bring to a new case, the knowledge that enables us to "move to a new judgment" as "a skill of discernment." He asks what this skill of discernment is, if it cannot be thought of in terms of a mastery of general truths.

What, after all, is it that we know when we are competent to judge, in a particular case, the contribution made by a given feature in the light of the entire context? What is the nature of the knowledge that we bring to the new case? (191)

His answer is:

the most explicit way of expressing what we know is that we know the *sorts* of difference that the presence of this feature can make in different sorts of situation. What we need to know is the rough limits of a certain range within which the differences actually made from case to case are to fall. *But this sort of knowledge seems to me to be essentially inarticulable, since it is not propositional.* (191, emphasis added to last sentence)

From these passages we can see that for Dancy competent moral judges develop through experience a certain skill of discernment, or know-how, that enables them to make accurate judgments in new cases. What competent judges need to know is the sorts of difference features can make in different situations and the rough limits of the range in which those differences are to fall. But this know-how, argues Dancy, should not be thought of as a mastery of general truths; on the contrary, the skill is essentially nonpropositional and inarticulable.

I would like to look more closely at Dancy's claim about the inarticulability of discernment because it might appear to be at odds with what he has said elsewhere about the (in principle) ability of competent moral judges to articulate the grounds for their moral judgments. In chapter seven of *Moral Reasons*, Dancy gives a detailed description of discernment as a process of constructing a *narrative* account of a situation: in discernment (that is, in coming to a moral judgment) competent ethical agents can identify which features are relevant, determine how they are related to one another, and settle on their ultimate significance as they appear in actual situations. For Dancy, all of this is (in theory) articulable by the agent: she can tell you which features are relevant; she can tell you why she finds them so; she can tell you how they are related to one another and what, taken as a whole, they amount to. Given his narrative account of discernment, it is clear that when Dancy speaks of inarticulability he does not mean

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someone who discerns that an action is wrong is not capable (in theory) of giving reasons why. As should be clear from the passages above from *Ethics without Principles*, what is inarticulable is our "know-how," i.e., the ability by which we come to settle on these reasons and formulate judgments. In other words, what is inarticulable is *what we know that equips us to be competent judges*. On Dancy's view, we cannot say more about this knowledge than that it is knowing the "sorts of difference that the presence of [a] feature can make in different sorts of situations" (191). But *what we know* when we know the difference, Dancy tells us, is "essentially inarticulable, since it is not propositional" (191). Therefore, what is inarticulable, according to Dancy, is the knowledge that makes accurate discernment possible.

If the above reading is correct, then there are two different ways Dancy uses the term 'discernment.' Discernment can refer to a moral judgment,[14] whose grounds are in principle perfectly articulable, or it can refer to the inarticulable know-how (i.e., the inarticulable "what we know") that equips us to arrive at a judgment. Discernment in the first sense is perfectly articulable: I can perfectly well (in theory) articulate the reasons or cite the features that undergird my judgments. Discernment in the second sense is not: I cannot tell you *what I know* that enables me to identify the relevant features, *what I know* that enables me to relate them to one another, or *what I know* that enables me to settle on their ultimate significance. Of discernment in the second sense, there simply is no account to be had. Discernment in the first sense, which I will just refer to as 'discernment,' resembles what I, on Murdoch's behalf, labeled

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[14] Recall that for Dancy discernment is equivalent to finding a situation's shape, which in turn is equivalent to arriving at a moral judgment about which action is appropriate in the situation. See discussion in section 2.1 of chapter two.

'perception.'[15]   Both involve getting a read on particulars *in situ*. Discernment in the second

sense I will refer to as the 'skill of discernment.'   It is the know-how or ability that enables

discernment.   Though perhaps superficially similar to total vision in that, like total vision, it

provides the backdrop to reading particulars, Dancy's discernment in the second sense—I will

argue—turns out to be quite different from the Murdochian idea of total vision.   This is

important because, as will become apparent, without total vision it is not possible to give an

adequate account of our ability to make moral judgments.   However, before we can see how this

is so, we need to set Dancy's 'skill of discernment' alongside Murdoch's 'total vision' to identify

how they differ.

Murdoch's idea of total vision and Dancy's idea of a skill of discernment both concern

what the moral agent brings to situations, but they have very different implications for what we

can say about the characteristics and abilities of these agents.   Dancy is concerned with the

problem of how we bring past experience to bear on new situations and what he sees as the

futility of determining from the way in which a feature "behaved" in a past case how it will

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[15] I will use 'perception' and 'discernment' interchangeably. For my present purposes, there is no significant distinction between the idea of perception in Murdoch and discernment (in the first sense) in Dancy—even though for Dancy when an agent has discerned a situation's shape she is said to have made a moral judgment about it (see previous footnote), and Murdoch does not characterize the upshot of perception in terms of conclusory moral judgments. In my attempt to compare and contrast Murdoch's and Dancy's respective positions, I will sometimes talk of Murdochian perception in terms of moral judgment-making even though Murdoch herself never equates the two—in part because she believes that to do so would suggest finality of opinion. She warns against thinking finality is possible. For Murdoch, correct perception is an on-going, endlessly perfectible task. When I speak of Murdochian perception in terms of moral judgment I do not mean to be implying the sort of finality Murdoch believes is unattainable; rather I mean only to refer to a moment in the on-going process of perfectible perception.

"behave" in a subsequent case.[16] When Dancy tries to get clear about what it is that a competent moral agent brings to a new situation, his focus is on the agent's past acquaintance with features in the new situation and the differences these features have made in previous contexts. Dancy concludes that what it is that we know, although inarticulable, equips us with the ability to make correct moral judgments, and this ability improves through experience. For Dancy, however, the most we can say about what we know is that our experience of how various features have behaved in previous situations is fodder for the development and improvement of our perception (discernment in the first sense) and through this experience we are able to learn how "to tell the differences [features make] case by case" (*Ethics* 143).

But if we find the example of M and D plausible, then it undermines Dancy's view regarding the essentially inarticulate character of the knowledge that enables the skill of discernment (in the second sense, i.e., the ability for moral judgment). For my purposes there are two main points to be gotten from Murdoch's example, which are relevant for the contrast I am drawing between Murdoch and Dancy. First, M's transformation in vision demonstrates the complex and interrelated way in which perception and total vision express our general normative understanding and bear on our ability to make moral judgments. For Murdoch, total vision bears on what we perceive, and what we perceive bears on our moral judgments. Therefore, total vision bears on our moral judgments and is at least an element of what equips us to make moral

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[16] For this characterization of the problem, see Dancy's discussion in *Moral Reasons* where he writes:

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

judgments. To paraphrase the point using some of Dancy's terms, we can say that total vision is (at least) an element of the "ability" or "know-how" that we bring to bear in the discernment of shape (i.e., the making of a moral judgment). In other words, there is a connection between what we on Murdoch's behalf are calling 'total vision,' which we bring to bear in perception, and what Dancy calls 'the ability for moral judgment,' i.e., the 'skill of discernment,' which we bring to bear in discernment (i.e., Murdoch's 'perception ').

There is, of course, a sense in which Dancy's conception of this ability expresses our normative understanding, but it manifests itself differently from the normative understanding we find in total vision. For Dancy, when we make a moral judgment we have, on the way to discerning the shape of the situation, grasped the moral role of all the relevant features. Insofar as we have discerned a shape (i.e., made a moral judgment), our judgment can be said to express our normative understanding, our knowledge-how, our skill of discernment. But we must also take note of the fact that—and this is the second main point of Murdoch's example—M's improved perception comes about largely because of the critical stance she takes toward that dimension of what she brings to bear that Dancy calls her "know-how" or "ability" for moral judgment and which, inspired by Murdoch, we are calling 'total vision'. For Murdoch, making moral judgments involves not just the immediate outward focus on some situation the grasp of which is expressive of our normative understanding; it will often involve a turning inward to take up total vision itself as an object, specifically as an object of appraisal, improvement, and ultimately perfection. Murdoch shows us that articulable reflection on and modification of total vision is a vital component of our moral activity, and she gives us articulate details about how we should go about critically reflecting on vision to improve it. It seems impossible for Dancy's moral agent to take up a critical stance toward and engage in critical reflection on non-

propositional, inchoate know-how. This absence of propositional content is the lacuna in Dancy's view.

We can now see that despite apparent similarities between Dancy and Murdoch, there is a crucial contrast in their positions. We learn from Murdoch that whatever else our basic ability for moral judgment is, and however inarticulable aspects of it may be, a capacity for reflection on total vision is an integral part of it,[17] and there is certainly something we can say about *that*. While we can agree that some aspects of our basic ability for moral judgment may well be inarticulable, Murdoch has shown that there is much we can articulate about, and much we can and should "articulable-y" do to improve, total vision.

Murdoch's example thus shows how astute grasp of particulars is not just a matter of identifying in the moment those features that are normatively significant. It is also a matter of perfecting total vision—as a way of perfecting our grasp of particulars. If we accept Murdoch's

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[17] I have intentionally remained neutral about the relation between Dancy's basic ability for moral judgment, i.e., the skill of discernment, and Murdochian reflection on total vision. For my purposes it is necessary only to show that whatever the ability for moral judgment is, it includes total vision and reflection on it. Since I have left it that the skill of discernment, total vision, and reflection on total vision are all abilities that are in some way or other part of our basic ability for moral judgment, it could seem that there is no *necessary* point of disagreement between Dancy and Murdoch about articulability. Dancy could say that some other part of our basic moral capacity *is* articulable. But the skill of discernment, for Dancy, *just is* the basic capacity to perceive situations in a manner that culminates in moral judgment. We learn from Murdoch, that *that* capacity (moral judgment-making) necessarily involves total vision and reflection thereon. This allows me to say, because of Murdochian points about the possibility and necessity of reflection on total vision, that Dancy is wrong to conclude that our basic ability for moral judgment is inarticulable. So the taxonomy of my position is this: (1) For Dancy the skill of discernment just is the "basic ability for moral judgment," (2) This skill or ability, this know-how, is non-propositional, (3) Total vision and reflection on total vision are necessarily part of the basic ability for moral judgment, (3) Dancy rules out the possibility of any propositional knowledge of these insofar as they are part of our non-propositional know-how, but (4) it is an open to Dancy to expand his ideas about the skill of discernment, so that it encompasses the articulable dimension of total vision and reflection on total vision without affecting the core of his particularism.

point that the possibility of moral judgment presupposes total vision, we consequently must allow that any theory of our basic ability for moral judgment must make room for it. Furthermore, it must allow for the possibility of critical reflection on total vision in the manner described in Murdoch's example. If we take seriously Murdoch's point that total vision is essential moral data, then reflection on the nature and quality of our total vision is *not optional* to the project of moral reasoning and judgment-making. Because Dancy believes our moral "know-how" is non-propositional, he cannot find a place for reflection in the normative understanding that shapes perception, and therefore, he cannot give a complete picture of the full range of our basic moral activity. Dancy has a blank space, a lacuna, which he might have "filled" with propositional knowledge, such as we find in articulated in reflection. Instead, he leaves it not just empty but articulable-y un-fillable.

3.4   DANCY'S PARTICULARISM: A LACUNA

I wish to examine two responses to the charge that there is a lacuna in particularist views like Dancy's because they fail to recognize a role for Murdochian reflection. The first response has particularists acknowledging a role for it, but carving out that role by recasting Murdoch's injunction 'to look with a just and loving gaze' as a reminder. The jumping off point for this response is an argument by Elijah Milgram in his essay "Murdoch, Practical Reasoning, and Particularism" that particularists like Dancy cannot accept Murdoch's injunction. Milgram argues that Dancy's particularist critique of principles requires Dancy to reject such foundational principles as Aristotle's 'do as the *phronimos* does.' Milgram argues that it likewise requires

Dancy to reject Murdoch's injunction (which serves a function similar to 'do what the *phronimos* does' in Aristotle's practical ethics).

Let us suppose Milgram is correct that particularists would reject Murdoch's injunction.[18] Milgram's idea is that because particularists believe there are no general moral relations that obtain across all situations, they will argue that it is always possible an exceptional case will arise in which moral considerations will demand we set aside Murdoch's injunction. For Murdoch, however, the injunction to look with a just and loving gaze is not susceptible to exception.[19] In her view there is no set of circumstances in which we should abandon the aims

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[18] My view is that Milgram is incorrect because Murdoch's injunction should not be construed along subsumptivist or presumptivist lines. In other words, Milgram has misunderstood the domain to which the particularist critique applies; it applies to subsumptivist and presumptivist principles *only*. Moreover, as I argue in chapter four, the particularist can and should accept some principle that plays the role of Murdoch's injunction or Aristotle's 'do as the *phronimos* does.'

[19] This is not to say that there might very well be special circumstances in which a detached gaze is what is *required* by considerations of love and justice. Robert Brustein, in a review of a play based on Primo Levi's first book, *If This Is a Man*, writes about how the Jewish-Italian chemist and Holocaust survivor set out to render comprehensible the abomination of the Holocaust. He writes of Levi that:

> Unlike most other Holocaust memoirists, Levi assumes the manner of a reporter rather than a judge. He does not write about the death camps in order to formulate new accusations, but rather, using what he is later to call "the calm sober language of the witness," to provide "documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind." In other words, Levi is applying the scientific method in which he was trained as a chemist to create an anatomy of human behavior. (25)

In Levi's circumstances taking on the scientific or disinterested gaze is a heroic effort of vision, which arguably expresses Murdoch's injunction to look with just or loving gaze. Murdoch's injunction is not a command to love everyone we seek to understand. This distinction is especially important to understanding Levi's stance toward the individuals he describes, which include both victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust. In circumstances such as Levi's, Murdoch's injunction might plausibly ask only an effort at detached description, an effort that might perhaps be a preliminary step on the way to, say, forgiveness. In any case, this would depend on the substantive understanding of love and justice.

of the injunction and instead look with antipathy or injustice.[20] It is not the case for Murdoch that we should *perhaps*, depending on the context, combat the ego and take up a just or loving gaze. This stance is not optional.

Particularists might respond, however, that even though they cannot accept an unconditional injunction, they can accommodate it by recasting it as a *reminder*: 'be reminded that accuracy might require fighting off the selfish ego and looking with a just or loving gaze.' Such a reminder would develop, in the way of all Dancy's reminders, as a result of focusing on the "behavior" of features in previous cases: in case after case particularists would notice that when we look on a situation with a greedy or selfish attitude we arrive at incorrect or distorted moral judgments. We would notice further that in case after case when we look with a just and loving gaze (in the manner Murdoch describes) we are able to fight back the ego, ward off distortion, and thereby arrive at correct moral judgments. On the basis of these accumulated cases, we would come to the conclusion that if we adopt a just and loving gaze, we have good reason to think the ensuing judgment is correct. Therefore, a reminder to that effect is warranted.

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[20] This is not to deny that there might very well be circumstances in which it is virtually impossible to regard another in light of the Murdochian ideal. At a later point in Brustein's review (discussed in the previous footnote), Brustein writes of moments when Levi understandably is unable to contain his fury:

> [Levi's] prose occasionally erupts out of its measured, quasi-analytical style into an explosion of outrage and anger—like the moment when, referring to the German doctor who stares through him as if he were a fish in an aquarium, he remarks, "That look explains the great insanity of Germany." As for the sadistic assistant who wipes his greasy hands on Levi's shoulder, he thunders: "I judge him and the innumerable others like him, big and small, in Auschwitz and everywhere. (25)

Brustein presents these as episodes when Levi can no longer maintain his ideal stance of detachment, but they are certainly open to alternate interpretations consistent with the ideal, for certainly there are cases in which looking with a just and loving gaze is consistent with and might even call for rage or contempt.

However, reformulating the Murdochian injunction as a reminder serves more to highlight the differences between Dancy and Murdoch than the similarities.[21] First of all, as we have already seen, recasting it as a reminder alters the status of the Murdochian assertion that we should look with a just and loving gaze. Murdoch clearly envisions it as fundamental and non-contingent; but even if we set this difference aside there is another, even bigger difference between the two.

If particularists recast Murdoch's injunction in terms of a reminder, we have to wonder whether we have moved outside particularism's own framework. The explicit task of Dancy's ethical agent is the contemplation of features of situations, *not* features of him or herself as the agent making the judgment about the situation. Murdoch's point is that total vision plays a role in how we read or perceive the situation itself. Total vision and perception are interrelated, but we have distinguished the two ideas, not only to illustrate *how* total vision plays a role in perception of particulars, but also to emphasize the importance of reflecting on total vision itself. It would be possible to *force* the two ideas that Murdoch has distinguished into Dancy's framework: the particularist could treat the agent's perception of the particulars as part of the situation itself, but this is a puzzlingly convoluted way of trying to get to the agent's total vision into the agent's sightline. The awkwardness of bringing reflection on total vision into view

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[21] What Murdoch's view does is open up a place for critical assessment of our commitments. Dancy would have us re-conceive our general moral commitments as reminders. This re-conception is supposed to counteract the blinding effects of thinking in terms of principles. I want to argue that the idea of accuracy does not require us to reduce principles to reminders. To put Dancy's worry in Murdochian terms, we have to clear away principles to get accuracy in vision (just as we must fend off the ego). But why think a principle must function as a prejudice? I will show in chapter four that in the idea of Murdochian reflection and perfection of vision there is a way for principles to retain their status as true expressions of our moral knowledge while not being susceptible to the charges made in the particularist's critique of principles.

reflects the fact that Murdochian vision does not fit comfortably into particularism's framework. Moreover, even if we accept the awkwardness of forcing reflection into the situation itself, we have to admit that once it is brought into view, the particularist does not have much to say about it—since what we know that equips us to see the shape of a situation (i.e., to make a moral judgment) is inarticulable.

At this point particularists like Dancy might offer another response to the charge that they fail to recognize a role for Murdochian reflection. They might say that because they have the idea of accuracy in perception, their position already includes it. Particularists might argue that the Murdochian injunction to look with a just or loving gaze is just a way of saying 'be accurate.' Murdochian talk of perfecting vision is just a way of talking about the characteristics of accurate perception: it should be loving and just and free of selfishness. Insofar as particularists embrace the idea of accuracy in discernment (and because discernment and Murdochian perception are essentially the same), they might argue, it is open to them to discuss the characteristics of accuracy in perception, if he were to choose to do so. Since discussion of the characteristics of accuracy in discernment (or perception) just is discussion about the characteristics of good vision, Dancy can be said to have the idea of vision. Moreover, since he has the idea of improvement in discernment he can be said to have the idea of perfecting vision.

According to this line of defense, the only real difference between Murdoch and Dancy would be that Murdoch, with her discussion of reflection and total vision, is more expansive about how to achieve distortion-free vision. Although there is room on Dancy's view to provide us, as Murdoch does, with a detailed picture of the forces of distortion and how to counteract them, Dancy simply has not taken on the job of spelling out the various techniques we should employ in our efforts to be accurate. If he had, he could cash out the idea of accuracy in more or

less detail and, in doing so, could even draw on the Murdochian ideas of love and justice, if that were his inclination.

One reason to be wary of this interpretation is that Murdoch herself is clear that M's project to take another look at D is not aptly characterized purely in terms of an attempt at accuracy. She explains that:

> What M is *ex hypothesi* trying to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly. (*Sovereignty* 23)

Murdoch makes this comment in the context of a discussion opposing behaviorist views of the time, which designated as *genuine activity* only that which manifested itself externally. As part of her extended case against that view, she makes the above remark about accuracy and elaborates on the nature of M's inner activity, which (as we mentioned earlier in this chapter) Murdoch characterizes as an "infinitely perfectible," "progressive attempt to see a particular object [D] clearly" (23). The concepts of 'love' and 'justice' are important to this characterization because:

> As soon as we begin to use words such as 'love' and 'justice' in characterizing M, we introduce into our whole conceptual picture the idea of progress, that is the idea of perfection . . . (23)

These passages help bring into view the importance for Murdoch of the endlessly perfectible activity of putting oneself in the right relation to the object of which we seek a clear view. The

right relation, according to Murdoch, is one in which we take up a just or loving gaze toward the object of our attention. Creating and maintaining the kind of relation such as we see between M and D:

> is essentially something progressive, something infinitely perfectible . . . M has
> engaged in an endless task. (23)

The task to which Murdoch refers is the perfection of vision, which is illustrated in M's efforts to get straight about D. M is prompted by considerations of love or justice, which are internal to her vision, to make sure she is looking at D in the proper loving and just manner; in light of these considerations she assesses her attitudes, prejudices, commitments, etc., to determine whether she indeed stands in the proper relation to D. To state the point more generally, putting ourselves in the proper relation is the essential task of perfecting vision. We are never finished with the task; it is one of on-going maintenance and perfectibility.

Here is what I take Murdoch's remarks to mean. The on-going, endlessly perfectible character of the task of putting and keeping ourselves in the right relation to others is not aptly described as merely one of 'accuracy.' 'Accuracy' is not a relational concept, and accordingly we cannot use it to describe the relation in which we should stand to others: the *relation* is not more or less accurate. 'Accurate' has its natural place as a characteristic of judgments; its related concept, 'correct,' has its place as a characteristic of actions. When Murdoch says that M is not just trying to see D accurately she means that M is not *simply* trying to make an accurate judgment about D (e.g*.,* she is not bumptious, but gay) or make the correct move toward her (e.g., re-write her will, so D is the beneficiary in case her son predeceases D). In the first

passage excerpted in this section, Murdoch tells us that, in addition to being accurate (in her judgments and correct in her actions), M is also trying to see D justly or lovingly. What Murdoch means is that M is also involved in an on-going effort to perfect her vision of D and thereby maintain a relation of love and justice to D.

When Dancy-style particularists reduce Murdoch's injunction to look with a just and loving gaze to an admonishment to 'be accurate,' they eliminate the space for the on-going Murdochian task of perfecting just and loving relations to others. The particularists' attempt to assimilate the task of accuracy in perception (or discernment) to the on-going task of perfection of vision fails. The former represents a moment of judgment or action;[22] the latter is an on-going effort to perfect the relation in which we stand to the objects of our attention. When Murdoch talks about the perfection of vision, as in the example of M and D, she is not simply talking about accurate perception, but also about the perfection of the relation in which we stand to the object of perception. For Murdoch, the perfection of this relation, the perfection of vision, is one of our chief moral tasks and represents an end in itself. While it is not the handmaiden of accuracy, accuracy is the likely result of efforts at perfection: if we are successful in our efforts to achieve (or at least approximate) the relation of love or justice to another, in the moment when it comes time to make a judgment (or take action), we will be best positioned to achieve accuracy in judgments (or correctness in actions).

According to this particularist reading of Murdoch, talk of perfecting vision is another way of talking about the possibility of accuracy in discernment, the possibility of a judgment's being better or worse, the possibility of seeing objects of attention more or less clearly.

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[22] This is what Murdoch calls "the quick flash of the choosing will," which she charges the behaviorist with having reduced the individual to (53).

Deliberate reflection on total vision, of the sort M displays in the case of D, takes up the question of whether we really have got an accurate grasp of the objects we confront, and so, according to the particularist, its topic really just is whether a correct judgment has been arrived at. I have argued that Murdoch's idea of reflection on total vision encompasses more than reflection about whether our judgments are accurate. We have seen that we cannot accept the particularist's argument that reflection on total vision is just a means of working out the requirements of 'accuracy' in perception *case by case*.

Noticing that we can engage in fruitful reflection on total vision in the absence of any particular object of attention brings out how reflection on total vision is not exclusively an activity that involves articulation of the grounds of (accurate) perception in particular cases. We can imagine cases involving reflection on and improvement of total vision that do not have an immediate connection to any particular object of attention. For example, I might observe that time and again I feel jealous of others, including in situations where jealousy seems completely unwarranted and produces distorted judgments. From this I might determine to take steps against my jealousy—perhaps by making myself focus on all I *do* have or on how unpleasant it is to see the trait in others or on how unhappy the emotion makes me. Such steps exemplify the Murdochian effort to perfect vision, but they are not directly tied to the contemplation of any particular object about which I am trying to get a clear view. That such reflection is possible, and in fact quite familiar, should make it clear that perfection of total vision is not just about accurate judgment or correct action. Perfecting vision—perfecting our relation to the object of our attention—is not a task that aims solely at attaining accuracy in judgment or correctness in action. It involves critical assessment and perfection of ourselves. It plays a role in preparation for judgment and action, but for Murdoch it also has moral value in and of itself.

While Dancy clearly has the notion of accurate perception (or discernment), just as Murdoch does, he cannot really be said to have the idea of *vision*, insofar as that idea encompasses the on-going perfection of the ideal moral relation in which we should stand to others. This is not surprising. If we go back to the root of their respective views we find that, although they both reject some form of generalism, they have very different grounds for doing so. Murdoch's primary reason for rejecting what she calls the 'universal rules model' is that it focuses exclusively on moral assessment of actions and fails to acknowledge the relevance of people's vision. At least part of the reason the model has no room for vision is that it treats the data to which universal rules are meant to apply as, in theory, equally intelligible to everyone. Accordingly, there is no cause to think that how we see things will affect possibilities for the intelligibility and application of the rules.

Dancy, of course, rejects generalism (and therefore the universal rules model), but he does so because he believes it is impossible to codify correct action in a system of rules. No doubt Murdoch would agree about this impossibility, but she stakes her rejection of the model on very different grounds. She is concerned about what the model leaves out, what she calls vision. Dancy's view is susceptible to the same deficiency as the universal rules model, for his view, too, leaves out anything that could play the role of vision. It is ironic that this is so. Particularism originated in the Aristotelian account of the role of good character in moral judgment-making. The Aristotelian notion of good character is akin to Murdoch's conception of vision, whereby the intent to be virtuous (to focus on and aim at the Good) drives moral judgment-making. Dancy, in addition to rejecting the universal rules model, also rejects the need to appeal to something like good character to explain moral judgment in his particularist

account.[23] In doing so, our ability for moral judgment-making is no less mysterious than it was

at the end of chapter two.

3.5   BEYOND MURDOCH: IDEALS IN VISION

I conclude this chapter with the assertion that part of the solution to this mystery involves

acknowledging that we cannot fully make sense of the idea of vision and reflection on total

vision without appeal to a certain kind of generality. This is not a thesis Murdoch advances, but

if we look again at the characteristics of total vision in her example of M and D, we find there is
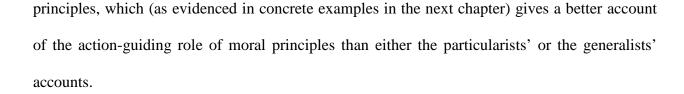
a place and a need for it.

Some characteristics of M's total vision are tied to M's unique personal history. For

example, a fatherless childhood or loveless marriage might exacerbate her jealousy; an anxiety-

prone disposition might exacerbate her hostility. But these idiosyncratic characteristics of vision

are not directly relevant to the connection I am trying to draw between *vision* and *generality.* To

understand this connection it is vital to see that, in Murdoch's example, M's wish to take another

look at D is traceable to a quite general interest in love or justice. This too is part of her total

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[23] See for example Dancy's argument in *Moral Reasons* that John McDowell need not appeal to "the notion of the virtuous person" essentially because it is an unnecessary heuristic for explaining how we arrive at moral judgments (57). Dancy characterizes the virtuous person as "equipped with a full range of sensitivities to the sorts of considerations that can matter morally" and says that the these sensitivities, this ability, "is not conceived in terms of someone who is equipped with a full list of moral principles and an ability to correctly subsume new cases under the right one." But Dancy has perhaps misunderstood the notion of a virtuous person, whose "sensitivities," he says, "have no content of their own. They are . . . simply the ability to recognize whatever morally relevant features we come across for what they are, case by case. . . . There is *nothing* that one brings to the new situation other than a *contentless* ability to discern what matters where it matters . . ." (50, emphasis added).

vision. M has as her primary motive the desire to see D as she is, which, for Murdoch, just is the intent to be virtuous. The intent to be virtuous, in turn, just is the intent to look in the light of the Good. For Murdoch, it is M's *good intentions* and her *capacity for self-criticism* that set her on a path of reflection. In reflection, she comes to suspect herself of being prejudiced, jealous, narrow-minded, and snobbish, and she believes it is wrong to be this way.

While M considers these general moral characteristics of her total vision (or character), she must also figure out how to correct her stance of prejudice, jealousy, narrow-mindedness, and snobbishness. To do this she must reflect on general aspects of the Good, *as they bear on her specific situation*. My point of departure from Murdoch is that I do not think we get a full picture of the actual moral work M engages in if we limit our account of her reflective deliberation to an appeal to love and justice and their neutralizing effects on the ego. Reflection on total vision is a process of clearing away distortions of vision and looking in the light of the Good, but it will also involve reflection on substantive *ideals as* they *bear on her specific situation*. What I am saying is that, in Murdoch's example, M must reflect on *ideals.* To give just one example, the ideal of family may vary across cultures and subcultures, but M must have and reflect on some *general notion* of what "family" should be like in order to assess her stance and behavior toward D. Reflection on total vision is a means of working out the general grounds of clarity in vision. Ideals capture the generality, not explicit in Murdoch, which shows itself in the substantive content of M's reflection. In the next chapter, I develop the concept of ideals and show how they offer a possibility for a kind of generality, not envisioned by generalists or particularists.[24] This alternate conception of generality points to an understanding of moral

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[24] It is plausible that Ross can be interpreted in such a way that his prima facie duties play a role similar to the one I assign to ideals in Murdochian vision. My understanding of the role of

principles, which (as evidenced in concrete examples in the next chapter) gives a better account

of the action-guiding role of moral principles than either the particularists' or the generalists'

accounts.

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reflection would be a supplement to Ross's barebones position that when faced with conflicting
prima facie duties, the most we can say about the process of making a moral judgment is that it
culminates in a "considered opinion (it is never more)" (19). Supplementing Ross's view in this
way would run against the grain of Dancy's interpretation of Ross. According to Dancy, Ross's
prima facie duties are expressions of invariable relations between properties and the
contributions they make to evaluations of actions (e.g., an action is always the worse for being a
lie). Dancy's interpretation of Ross's prima facie duties follows the basic outlines of Hare's
subsumptivism (insofar as both admit of invariable relations between properties and moral
evaluations of action) and is not compatible with the view I am advancing.

4.0   THE IDEAL-BASED ACCOUNT OF GENERALITY

While I sympathize with the particularist's criticism of generalism, there is a lacuna in the particularist's conception of moral thought: it fails to give a satisfactory account of general moral principles and the role they play in moral reasoning. In chapter three, I developed two features of Murdoch's account (reflection and perfection of vision) in order to show that there is a *need* to fill this lacuna—but Murdoch's account stops short of doing so. In this chapter I develop an account of *how* to fill the particularists' lacuna: I call it the *ideal-based account of generality*.[1] This account draws on both vision and ideals to develop a kind of generality that neither particularists nor generalists recognize, but which is necessary to give sense to the richness of real-life moral thought.

At the heart of my ideal-based account of generality is the notion of an *ideal*. I begin this chapter by developing an example that demonstrates the need for such a notion. I use the example to show how ideals can deepen and enrich Murdoch's account of the injunction to look with a just and loving gaze. Her injunction urges us to establish an unvarying general relation between moral beings. But how are we to implement this injunction? The answer to this

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[1] At times I will refer to it simply as the 'ideal-based account.' It is worth noting that the title of Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge's book *Principled Ethics. Generalism as a Regulative Ideal* suggests they might offer a view of generality similar to that of the ideal-based account of generality. Despite invoking the concept of ideals, their view understands moral principles differently than the ideal-based account. According to McKeever and Ridge, the ideal to which generalism aspires is the articulation of specific defeating conditions, enabling conditions, their relative weight, and so on, with the aim of working toward a complete codification of morality in a set of "unhedged principles" (177-95). It will become clear in this chapter that the ideal-based account of generality does not regard ordinary moral principles as candidates for this sort of pursuit, in part because it does not regard moral reasoning as codifiable.

question involves moving beyond the terms of Murdoch's own account and widening our conception of generality to include the notion of generality proposed by the ideal-based account. There are multiple steps in the demonstration of how we move beyond Murdoch's injunction. In sections 4.1 through 4.5, I develop an example that illustrates what ideals are, how they function in moral thought, and how they are related to general moral principles. The upshot is that a proper understanding of the Murdochian process of perfecting vision involves bringing ideals to bear in our reflections. In section 4.6, I address a number of questions whose answers are essential to understanding the role of ideals, principles, and the Good in the ideal-based account of generality. After addressing these questions, I tackle several versions of a criticism particularists might raise against the ideal-based account of generality, specifically, versions that converge as a challenge that the account cannot show a general action-guiding role for ideals or their related principles. In sections 4.7 through 4.9, I develop and respond to these criticisms by showing that particularists and generalists hold an assumption that prevents them from seeing an alternate conception of generality that can make sense of ideals and principles as truly action-guiding; it prevents both parties from seeing how ideals and principles play a crucial, action-guiding role in reflection: as spurs to reflection, objects of reflection, and on-going ends of reflection. In this enriched account of reflection, we see how cultivation of our commitment to ideals and principles is, in turn, part of how we cultivate good character and exemplify it in our actions. In section 4.10 of this chapter draw on an Aristotelian notion of generality, which is often misunderstood, to strengthen the plausibility of the notion of generality proposed by the ideal-based account. Finally, in section 4.11, I conclude with an argument that points the way to a reconciliation between particularism, generalism, and the ideal-based account of generality: once we understand how ideals and the principles associated with them play a role in moral

reasoning, we can see that it is possible for both particularists and generalists to embrace the alternative conception of generality found in the ideal-based account.

4.1   MORAL REFLECTION AND EXAMPLES

To explore the full dimension of moral thought, we need examples rich enough to capture the moral complexity of real life. Murdoch was so convinced of the importance of this fact that she shifted her focus from writing philosophy to writing novels, a form in which she could, so to speak, create extended examples with detail sufficient to give her readers myriad resources for perfecting their moral sensibilities, their vision, their perception. Often it is with the aid of realistically rendered, richly detailed examples that we are trigged to reflect on our own vision; such examples can provide a guiding model for reflection; and they can illustrate the wide range of on-going aims and considerations that come into play in moral reflection.

Murdoch's breakthrough example of M and D, which I discussed in chapter three, has exactly that richness of detail to make undeniable her point that something is missing in the behaviorist account of moral reasoning that reigned in her time. As with the behaviorists of Murdoch's era, for whom Murdoch's example provided an enriching supplement to their impoverished fund of moral data, the particularists of our day can benefit from examples with detail and complexity more like those we actually encounter. As it stands, their examples tend to be too thin to give the full richness of detail necessary to identify the way in which general moral principles play a role in moral thinking. This absence of detail creates an inevitable blindness in the particularists: they cannot see what is not present in their examples. A corrective can be

found in examples that show what is left out by particularists. In what follows, I offer such an example.

4.2   AN EXAMPLE

H's wife, W, with whom he has three grown children, has been hospitalized for a number of years with severe Alzheimer's disease. For about a year H has been romantically involved with O, a widowed woman who is about his age. They have been friends for many years, but now they are also lovers. Their relationship is founded on the basis of genuine affection, commonality of interests, companionability, and mutual respect. H lives with O, but he keeps the house in which he and W raised their now adult children. The house is on the same block as O's. It is still furnished but unoccupied; occasionally their grown children stay there. H lists two phone numbers in the directory at work: one is the landline at the home he shared with W, and one is the landline at O's. H continues to care for W, both practically and emotionally; he visits W regularly, and without O's support and companionship H would not be able to care for W as well as he does or love her in the limited way in which this is still possible for him.

4.3   MORAL REFLECTION AND IDEALS

Just like M in Murdoch's example from *The Sovereignty of Good*, H is "an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism" (17). He wonders whether he is doing the right thing, and so determines to take another look at the entirety of his situation. H's question is

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about his *conduct*; specifically, it is about whether he is acting improperly toward W.[2] Here H's situation does not exactly parallel M's. M wonders if she has a correct view of D's character, while H wonders if he is acting properly toward W (and no doubt others, e.g., O and his children). But this does not make the structure of H's basic task significantly different from M's. As we have already seen, perfection of vision is part of the task of any moral agent, whether she seeks an accurate view of a person or a correct judgment about action. Just as M must reflect on her vision to assess her judgment of D, so must H critically reflect on his vision to assess his conduct toward W.

In the process of reflection, in contrast to the moment of action, H checks himself—his commitments, predilections, aversions, possible prejudices, etc.—in the manner in which M does, to make sure he sees things aright. There is both an inward and outward direction to his reflections. In the case of inward reflection, he considers his dispositions, character traits, values, and commitments (that is, he reflects on his vision) to make sure they are not distorting his judgment. In the case of outward reflection, he considers the circumstances in which his actions occur, as well as the people affected by them. Both sorts of reflection are part of the project of seeing things aright, so he can judge the acceptability of his conduct. For the purposes of my example, I will restrict H's focus to his marriage and whether he is acting properly toward W even though his attention would have to range more widely for his reflection and ultimate assessment to be complete. (For example, he would have to consider whether he is acting properly toward his children in having a relationship with O.)

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[2] I focus on H's assessment of his conduct in order to make my discussion line up more neatly with Dancy's conception of moral judgment, which ranges over actions, as opposed to character.

Obviously, one of the most salient features of H's situation is that he is *married* to W, so it is of central importance to his reflections that he consider the significance of this fact. As soon as he does, his reflections take on a substantive complexity: he must consider the question of what marriage is and whether he is living up to its aims and demands. The complexities can roughly be divided into a public and a private dimension. In his social, legal, and cultural traditions,[3] H will find a rich articulation of the various aims of marriage, which we might call the 'standard' or 'public' dimension of the concept because it depends on a given culture's shared understanding of the concept. While the concept H considers must be intelligibly related to some public conception of marriage, it will also have a more personal dimension, involving H's and W's own particular understanding of the concept. We might call this the 'personal' dimension of H's conception. H is married *to W*, and so H will have to consider not just the relevant public conception of 'marriage,' but also how he and W together think (or, in W's case, thought) about marriage, including the hopes, expectations, obligations, and freedoms they associated with their own particular marriage as it was lived and articulated (implicitly as well as explicitly) between them.

Dividing the concept of marriage into a public and private dimension can make the two seem like entirely distinct strands, but they are entwined and not always clearly distinguishable. Even so, as I reconstruct H's moral reflections, I will speak of them separately, because I want to make explicit how these two different strands function in H's thinking about his conduct. The starting point for H's reflections will to some greater or lesser extent involve simply getting clear about what exactly 'marriage' means in its standard or public usage. Although I will attribute to H what might be recognized as a standard western conception of marriage, there are many other

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[3] For brevity's sake I will refer to these collectively as H's 'traditions.'

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plausible starting points for his reflections. He might have a non-standard western conception of marriage, a non-western conception of marriage, a non-standard, non-western conception of marriage, etc., but for it to be a conception of *marriage* at all it will have to be intelligibly *related* to some concept of marriage. In any case, my point does not depend on which conception of marriage H embraces but rather on how he uses (both dimensions of) his conception of marriage, whatever it is, in arriving at judgments regarding the morality of his actions. In doing so, he will find that marriage is meant to exemplify a number of interrelated purposes.

These purposes and their relative significance to whether something is or is not an acceptable part of marriage have changed markedly over time.[4] For centuries marriage was primarily a way of securing inheritance and consolidating wealth. We can see, for example, in Roman society how these purposes determined permissible and impermissible sexual activity. Because a predominant purpose of marriage for a Roman citizen (who was by definition male) was to perpetuate the ruling class, there was no requirement of sexual fidelity to his wife, that is, there was no connection between 'marriage' and a prohibition on adultery, as we know it today. The sexual activity permitted to the married Roman male citizen extended to all that was consonant with the essential power-amassing purpose of marriage. He was entitled to sex with any slave or servant, whether male or female, adult or child. The sex acts themselves were primarily treated as expressions and proof of his power. Because he had wide discretion over the treatment of any offspring—they could be raised as his own, made into slaves, abandoned, or killed—they were no real threat to his power. The sexual activity of Roman male citizens and their daughters and wives were also circumscribed according to whether they encroached on a

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[4] See Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals*, where he argues that institutions and practices (e.g., punishment) persist, but the reasons for them change.

Roman male's power. Thus, all Roman male citizens were entirely off limits to other Roman male citizens, not because of prohibitions on homosexuality, but because the "submitting" male weakened himself by allowing another male sexual dominion over him. The daughters and wives of Roman male citizens were also off limits *unless* the father or husband gave permission. The sexual activities of daughters and wives were, thus, an expression of the power of their fathers and husbands, which they asserted over their wives and daughters through their jurisdictional decision about who could have sex with them (Graff 55-6).

The current western conception of marriage that I attribute to H involves the union of financial and material resources, which generally enhances the overall material well-being of both partners, and thereby, in some sense, enhances their power.[5] Nevertheless, contemporary western marriage is not primarily about the accrual of power. Childrearing is arguably one of the aims of contemporary western marriage. Married unions are supposed to provide a stable, nurturing environment for raising children, if there are children, but having children (or wanting children) is plainly not the primary purpose of marriage. Recent legal decisions by the United States Supreme Court have increasingly underscored the lack of centrality of childbearing and childrearing to the current conception of marriage in the United States.[6] Of greater importance is

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[5] Hereinafter I will refer to H's western conception of marriage simply as 'conception' or 'marriage' or 'conception of marriage,' unless the context requires more specificity.

[6] There is a long line of contemporary United States Supreme Court cases that underscore this fact, which begins most notably with *Griswold v. Connecticut* and continues with recent same-sex marriage rights cases, such as *United States v. Windsor* and *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Childrearing, though not directly important as a matter of law, was nevertheless empirically important in recent same sex marriage cases: the Court found no empirical data that could show a meaningful difference between the well-being of children raised in same-sex families and children raised in heterosexual families. This finding was pivotal to the Court's Fourteenth Amendment analysis and the resulting conclusion that states had no compelling interest in restricting marriage to heterosexual unions. So even though there is little support as a matter of

the idea that marriage involves an intimate, reciprocal relationship between two people. Each is to be to the other a friend, a companion, a confidante, a lover, a helpmate. They are to be partners, who will assist the other through life's vicissitudes, who will stay with the other in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want. The marriage contract is supposed to formalize and, as such, help satisfy human needs for intimacy, care, companionship, and sex. It provides a public forum for expressing love and commitment, and in the process supposedly transforms that love into something more durable.[7]

The foregoing is an overview of the interrelated purposes of the current western conception of marriage in its public dimension. In H's examination he will find that many of these interrelated purposes are associated with principles that both support these purposes and express the values that undergird them. For example, one purpose of marriage is to form a life-long attachment to a single partner because it is believed there is *value* in two people having this sort of enduring relationship.[8] The legally binding marriage contract is meant to strengthen the

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law for the idea that the right to marry is tied up with the ability or desire to have or to raise children, the empirical data involving the rearing of children was central, for example, to the Court's decision in *Windsor* to overturn a central part of the Defense of Marriage Act.

[7] See the last chapter of J. S. Mill's *Subjection of Women*.

[8] In non-western conceptions of marriage, this is not always the case. For example, polygynous conceptions of marriage do not emphasize a single wife for the husband. Clearly, marriage need not be conceived (nor practiced) as a purely diametric or two-place relationship. Polygynous conceptions will involve principles that promote values in partnering other than those tied up with exclusive coupledom. For example, the Senegalese Family Code stipulates that if a man chooses polygyny, he "can have no more than four wives concurrently" (United Nations). The upper limit to the number of wives can be seen as a principled expression of the need to find a balance between the value of having many offspring and the value of not being economically overstretched. In a recent working paper on discrimination against women, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner questions whether polygyny succeeds in this regard (United Nations).

life-long bond and to buttress it against life's vicissitudes. The prohibition on divorce is meant to further strengthen the bond, and even if the traditional prohibition on divorce has weakened, the illegality of spousal abandonment and gross neglect has not. It is wrong to abandon one's spouse (in fact, it is grounds for divorce). The prohibition on adultery also is meant to strengthen the bond by supporting sexual intimacy through an exclusive, life-long sexual relationship.[9] Principles such as 'do not commit adultery,' 'do not divorce,' and 'do not neglect or abandon a spouse' are all meant to foster conduct that will help spouses sustain an enduring attachment. As such, each principle is an expression of the value of doing so.

What H is doing when he reflects on the relevant conception of marriage—its purposes, principles, and values—is reflecting on an *ideal*, specifically, as I shall call it, the 'ideal of marital fidelity.'[10] The ideal articulates that which a marriage, ideally, aims at and exemplifies. A preliminary articulation of the ideal of marital fidelity can be drawn directly from its complex and interrelated purposes: in the ideal,[11] marriage is a life-long, sexually exclusive, reciprocal relationship between two people in which each is to the other a friend, companion, confidante,

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[9] Again, this is not always the case in non-western conceptions of marriage. See previous footnote. Nor is it the case in some western conceptions of marriage in the "private dimension." See the story of Jim and Anna Marie Will's marriage in *People*. They describe their marriage as happy, loving, and sexual. The husband identifies as gay; the wife as heterosexual; and they stay married "not for [our child]," says the wife, "we stay married because we love each other" (Jerome et al. 81-2).

[10] I will use 'marital fidelity' or 'ideal of marriage' to refer to the ideal that H is considering. As per footnote five, I will use 'marriage' or 'conception of marriage' or 'conception' to refer to the western conception I attribute to H. When I do not adhere to this distinction it should be clear from the context whether I am referring to the ideal or the conception.

[11] Again, this is indexed to the relevant western conception of marriage on which H is reflecting.

lover, helpmate, and partner, who will assist and care for the other throughout their lives in a bond that is resilient enough to endure whatever alterations or hardships in circumstances might develop. The articulation of the ideal includes not only these interrelated purposes, but also familiar principles like 'do not commit adultery,' 'do not divorce,' 'do not neglect or abandon a spouse.' The relationship between such principles and the ideal is dialogic. Getting clear about the ideal of marital fidelity can help H understand its value and how the associated principles help express it. And getting clear about the associated principles, and the values they express, can help H understand the ideal of marital fidelity. Thus, in H's endeavor to see things aright, he takes up as a point of reflection the ideal of marriage, some of which is articulated in terms of principles. As H works out the ideal of marriage, he will find that its purposes and associated principles are an outgrowth or expression of values that a marriage is meant to exemplify. The ideal *regulates* H's reflections, because his task, in reflection, is to consider how best to exemplify marital fidelity in his relationship with W.[12]

As soon as we try to describe the ideal of marriage, we see that surely there is no marriage that can exemplify it without ever deviating or falling short. Even though the ideal may never be attainable, it articulates that to which a marriage *aspires*, that toward which it aims.

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[12] In *Taking Rights Seriously* Ronald Dworkin's discussion of *Riggs v. Palmer* is helpful for understanding how principles can regulate. In *Riggs* a grandson murdered his grandfather before the grandfather can alter his will and disinherit the grandson. A suit was brought to prevent the grandson from inheriting. In his defense, the grandson argued that because the will was valid, he should inherit, even though he was guilty of the murder. The New York Court of Appeals agreed that the will was valid, but in ruling against the grandson, the court found that the statute of wills was not decisive and that principles of law must be considered alongside the statue. Specifically, the court relied heavily on the principle 'no man may profit from his own wrong,' which, as Dworkin points out, does not "purport to set out conditions that make its application necessary" (27). *Riggs v. Palmer* is evidence of how principles can have regulative force and must be taken into account *even* when they do not apply subsumptively or presumptively.

The ideal is aspirational because what it articulates is not static or the sort of thing that is achievable once-and-for-all. For example, one dimension of marital fidelity is the provision of companionship, which finds expression in the principle 'do not desert a marriage by neglect or abandonment.' But while we seek perfection in companionship, it is not the kind of perfection of a process that can go from 'not being done' to 'being done,' as with for example, a perfect backflip. It is not as though a spouse can complete the task, check it off the list, and move on to some other project. The provision of companionship is akin to what John McDowell in "Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology" calls a "standing concern" (30). Standing concerns can be thought of as *on-going ends*, as opposed to ends that have a finite completion point. Furthermore, the term 'on-going end' should not be understood to suggest there is a 'means-end' relationship between the ideal and its associated principles, such that if H followed the principle forbidding adultery, he would thereby achieve the aspect of marital fidelity that concerns sexual intimacy. The point is that the ideal, including its principles, articulate the standing concerns that spouses should seek always to exemplify in their actions. It is in *this* sense that an ideal and its associated principles articulate standing concerns or on-going ends. As expressions of on-going ends, principles like 'do not neglect or abandon a spouse' articulate part of the content of marital fidelity.

The ultimate point I am making with the example of H is that the conception of marital fidelity occupying his reflections is an overarching ideal. The ideal articulates the good toward which a marriage ideally aims and which it ideally exemplifies. Its articulation is tied to the interrelated purposes of marriage and includes moral principles like 'do not commit adultery,' 'do not divorce,' and 'do not neglect or abandon a spouse.' The ideal is *regulative*, and it is *aspirational*. It is regulative because it represents the enduring good that spouses aim to

exemplify in their conduct. It is aspirational because striving to exemplify the ideal is on-going and endlessly perfectible.

4.4   PRINCIPLES AND IDEAL-BASED REASONING

As soon as H reflects on the ideal, he is face-to-face with some basic principles: 'do not commit adultery,' 'do not divorce,' 'do not neglect or abandon a spouse,' 'love and care for your spouse in sickness and in health, until death do you part,' and so on. If H did not understand that these obligations come with being married, it would have to be said that H has misunderstood what marriage is (since I attribute to him a standard western conception). Not only are such principles a likely starting point for his reflections, but H would be obtuse if the principle against adultery never occurred to him in the course of his reflections. Once it does, the matter would seem to be settled against him: adultery is prohibited. But H's question is whether sexual fidelity is required in *his* case. Of course, if H divorced W and married O, he would not be committing adultery, but then he would have to substitute the question of whether divorce is acceptable in his case and begin his reflections anew.

In any event, after H gets clear about marital fidelity and what marriage ideally aims to be, he must determine how the ideal relates to his current situation. How is the ideal of marital fidelity *pertinent* to his and W's situation *now*? Determining how it relates to his current circumstances, and in what manner and to what degree (both of which will be shaped by those purposes which were relevant before W's illness), will have H considering such questions as these: Is providing care and comfort for his spouse pertinent in his circumstances? Is providing

companionship pertinent? Is providing friendship pertinent? Is monogamy? Is insuring the financial security of his spouse? How relevant is the fact that there is a marriage *contract?*

To gain further clarity about whether his relationship with O is morally appropriate or wrongly self-gratifying, H also will have to examine the history of his and W's marriage so as to work out the more personal and individualized understanding he and W shared and developed over the course of their relationship together. That is, he will have to examine not only the public dimension of marital fidelity, but also his and W's specific, personal understanding of it, including the significance of, among other things, sexual fidelity, their marriage vows, their views on friendship, love, and intimacy and their understanding of how to best fulfill these central components of the marital relationship.

Reflecting on the more personal dimension of the ideal of marital fidelity could have H considering such questions as: Did they ever express their wishes about remaining sexually faithful in the event one of them became seriously ill? What were their thoughts about the permissibility of sexual relations outside of marriage? Did they ever discuss open marriage? Did they have an open marriage? Were either of them jealous of the other's relationships outside the marriage? What were their thoughts about the permissibility of divorce? Did they embrace or reject certain social or religious prohibitions on divorce? How did they regard the status of their marital vows? Did they write their own vows? Did they use traditional, scripted vows after careful consideration or merely as an expedient? Did they place weight on the fact that they were bound by *law* to one another?

So how might H's reflections unfold? According to the ideal of marital fidelity, marriage aims to be a relationship of multifaceted intimacy, including reciprocity in friendship, emotional support and companionship, and sexual intimacy. None of these fundamental intimacies is

straight-forwardly pertinent to his and W's circumstances now. Along with a diminishment in all manner of possibilities for intimacy, the sexual dimension of H and W's intimacy simply is no longer possible. Although H is committed to the ideal of marriage, the sort of love and intimacy that is bound up in sexual exclusivity is no longer attainable. H simply cannot exemplify this aspect of the ideal in his marriage to W, and he would have to conclude that trying to attain it with W is futile. While H retains his commitment to the ideal of marriage, there is a wide range of human connection that is impossible to achieve and futile to work toward. In these respects the ideal no longer speaks to H and his marriage to W. Sexual (as well as other) intimacy is no longer an on-going end that H can exemplify in his relation with W. The principle prohibiting adultery nevertheless has an on-going connection to the ideal of marriage (so long as the conception does not change), but the underlying value that the principle expresses is not one that H, in his circumstances, has even a hope of exemplifying in his relationship with W. As such, that which is valuable about sexual fidelity in marriage is not a value that H can exemplify in his relationship with W.

It could be argued that if H were really concerned to stay true to the ideal of marriage, he would not have a sexual relationship with O, even though its emotional sustenance makes him better able to care for W. But if sex and sexual intimacy can be a valuable component in adult companionship, as the ideal of marital fidelity itself suggests, then H might justifiably conclude that it is a good that continues to be central to his well-being. The ideal of marital fidelity is not essentially a "master principle." The ideal of marriage can overlap, for example, with ideals that pertain to adult friendship and companionship. Even if H's relationship with O made no difference to his ability to care for W, these other ideals bear on his case, and they support his relationship with O because he can exemplify them in his relationship with her. Moreover,

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attempting to exemplify with W the kind of intimacy that is fostered through sex is not only not possible with W, but an attempt by H to achieve it might even be wrong.[13]

On these grounds, H might conclude that his sexual relationship with O is not wrong—because sexual fidelity is tied up with a marital aim that is unattainable in his situation and so is not an aspect of the ideal that his marriage to W has any hope of exemplifying. Of course, it is true that H would *not be wrong* to insist on a platonic friendship with O. My point is that it is not wrong for him *not* to, so long as H aims to exemplify such aspects of marital fidelity as he can.

H can and should aim to exemplify other dimensions of marital fidelity in his relationship with W. In his reflections, H will likely find that the ideal of marriage (in both its public and personal dimension) which is pertinent (or speaks) to his current circumstances concerns providing care, comfort, and support in times of need. The significance of this aspect of the ideal bears heavily in his marriage: W cannot care for herself to any degree, and her needs are extreme. For a number of reasons, including the sheer fact of having made a commitment to be the one who will be there through thick and thin, we can imagine that H finds caretaking to be an aspect of marital fidelity with resounding relevance. If so, he concludes that he must provide all

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[13] In Matthew Thomas's novel *We Are Not Ourselves*, we get a glimpse into the sporadic sexual relationship between a wife and her Alzheimer-afflicted husband. The wife initiates the sexual contact, while the husband, utterly passive, appears both disarmed by and detached from the physical outcome of the act. Each time, it is as if he is experiencing sex for the first time, without any understanding of who is doing what to him or what it is happening to his body. It is never clear why the wife initiates a sexual encounter. Is she paying homage to their sexual past? Is she attempting to create a shadowy connection, however limited, through sexual contact? Is it her way of taking care of him, by giving him pleasure? If so, it is not clear that pleasure is what the husband experiences. Is it a self-interested act for her own sexual pleasure? Or does she enjoy having power over him? Does she find gratification in the novelty of his perplexed response? Regardless, their sexual encounters highlight the contrast between sexual intimacy in the ideal and what is possible for Thomas's characters—and by extension what is possible for H and W.

the care and support he can in all the ways that are still available to him. He might also conclude that maintaining the legal bond is an important aspect of marital fidelity, not just because of his marital vow but also as an expedient for caring for W (e.g., expedients such as legal guarantees of a spouse's right to make healthcare decisions, a spouse's right to visit, etc.). So while divorce would release him from adultery, H surely would find that it would interfere in numerous ways with his efforts to exemplify marital fidelity in what remains of the relationship he can have with W. So, H does not divorce W. Instead, he takes special pains to affirm his relationship with her. He continues to keep their family home and their landline; he lists their number in the directory at work, even though he lives with O.

4.4.1   Ideals, principles, and subsumptivism

H's various actions—his rejecting divorce, his caretaking visits, his keeping the house and listing the phone number—each is an exemplification of the ideal of marital fidelity. However, according to the ideal-based account of generality, these actions of H exemplify the ideal of marital fidelity not because they are *necessitated* by a subsumptive application of a moral principle. (We will subsequently examine whether or not they exemplify the ideal on presumptivist grounds.) Actions like the first two exemplify dimensions of the ideal expressed by principles ordinarily associated with marriage and would seem to be deductively required by familiar principles prohibiting divorce and requiring care and support. However, H is not in the right because the rightness of his conduct is deductively entailed by a subsumptive application of, for example, 'do not divorce' or 'care for your spouse in sickness and in health.' If this were the way principles functioned, then we would have to say that H is in the wrong with respect to the principle against adultery.

There are two particularly interesting facets of H's circumstances. The first is that H's relationship with O, which involves adultery, enables him to be a better caretaker of W, which in turn makes him better able to exemplify marital fidelity, especially that aspect expressed by the principle 'do not neglect or abandon one's spouse.' The second is that H could easily make the problem of adultery disappear simply by divorcing W. However, divorcing W would make caring for her logistically and legally much more difficult for H, and it symbolically connotes a weaker, less caring relationship. Both of these are good reasons to conclude that H's adultery is not wrong. Subsumptivism, however, simply cannot make sense of this conclusion—because it cannot handle the moral complexity of H's case. According to the ideal-based account of generality, the reason H is in the right is two-pronged: H can no longer exemplify with W that part of the ideal that concerns sexual intimacy, and H continues to exemplify that part of the ideal that is still possible with W.

Keeping the house and listing the phone number also exemplify the ideal of marital fidelity, even though the ideal is not expressed in terms of any specific moral principle requiring them. There are no ordinary general moral principles that say 'if a spouse falls sick, then keep the family home' or 'list your family landline at work.' Even though, strictly speaking, neither keeping the house nor listing the landline falls under a familiar moral principle, they nevertheless are concrete exemplifications of H's enduring connection to W. These actions exemplify care for and connection to W,[14] and they are more personal ways in which H is able to exemplify the

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[14] Preserving the connection to W might be important to H, not just because of W's needs, but also because of his own, a possibility illustrated in Alice Crary's discussion in *Inside Ethics* of Iris Murdoch's husband John Bayley. Just as Crary describes Bayley as "called on to do as much as he can to—in a phrase of Hilde Lindemann's—'hold her in her identity,'" H might feel called on to help W hold onto as much of her identity as is still possible for her (144,

values that underlie the principle against neglecting or abandoning one's spouse. They, therefore, exemplify the ideal of marital fidelity, and H is in the right to do these things, but it is not subsumptivism that makes it so.

If H found that the ideal was pertinent (or spoke) to his circumstances in some other way, then his conclusion might well be otherwise. We can imagine circumstances in which H's careful consideration of the relation between the ideal of marital fidelity and his situation resulted in a different conclusion about the pertinence of sexual fidelity. For example, H or W might have been especially jealous of other relationships, or they might have had an understanding that sexual infidelity was something they would never tolerate in the other no matter what transpired, including severe illness. Under either of these circumstances, H might well have decided that the mutual understanding he and W had of the role of sexual fidelity in their marriage continued to make it an aspect of the ideal of marital fidelity that is pertinent or integral to their marriage despite W's incapacity. If so, he would (let us assume) modify his conduct so as to exemplify this aspect of the ideal. He would end his sexual relationship with O and might even conclude that further curtailments of their relationship were required to exemplify marital fidelity to W.

On either scenario—whether H does or does not find that adultery is wrong—the underlying point remains the same: the aspects of the ideal of marital fidelity that are pertinent to H's situation will determine which concerns, or on-going ends, have prominence. The example of H and W demonstrates that as H works out both the public and the personal dimensions of the ideal of marital fidelity—those which are practically feasible, as well as those

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footnote omitted). For example, helping W hold onto some part of her identity could in turn help H hold onto part of *his* identity as a husband, as a caretaker, etc.

which are not and those to which he might only be able to gesture—the principles that express these aims are alive in his thinking. But not in the way the subsumptivist thinks they are.

As long as H's and W's situation is more like the first scenario than the second (in which there are further considerations against adultery), then there is good reason to think that the subsumptive application of the principle 'do not commit adultery' gives the incorrect verdict in H's case. H is *not* worthy of blame for his relationship with O, although a subsumptive application of 'do not commit adultery' says otherwise. But if this is true, if the subsumptive application yields an incorrect verdict, then is it not the case that the particularist is correct to conclude that the principle forbidding adultery is false? The ideal-based account of generality holds that the particularist's conclusion is incorrect. The principle forbidding adultery is not false.

The principle is true, but not, as the particularist argues, on condition that it be recast as a "reminder,"[15] "a rule of thumb,"[16] or a summary[17] of past instances of choiceworthy conduct. A principle is not a reminder—it is not like a 'Post-It' on the refrigerator that says 'don't forget to pick up the kids after hockey practice.' H does not make a mental Note-to-Self: 'don't forget

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[15] Dancy develops this idea in *Moral Reasons* (67).

[16] This is Nussbaum's characterization in *Love's Knowledge* (68).

[17] This is Nussbaum's characterization in *Love's Knowledge* (73). At times Nussbaum seems to equate summaries with rules of thumb, as when she writes that "summaries or rules of thumb [are] highly useful for a variety of purposes, but valid only to the extent to which they correctly describe good concrete judgments, and [are] to be assessed, ultimately, against these" (68). It is worth noting that he two they are different. A rule of thumb is something that offers guidance; it tells us what to do, though in a generally-and-for-the-most-part way. A rule of thumb is easily overridden, but it does carry normative force. A summary is an empirical statement describing past (correct) judgments. By itself, a summary does not tell us what to do, but only what has been done.

that adultery might be wrong' or 'don't forget you might not ought to commit adultery.'[18]   The

principle *expresses a value to be grasped*, not a task to which one must be alerted. Nor is the

principle a rule of thumb[19] to be jettisoned, like Smart's revised Nautical Almanac, if it does not

suit current conditions.[20]   The principle forbidding adultery is not a "dispensable crutch."[21]

Finally, it is not a mere summary[22] or record of what has been choiceworthy in the past. What

the principle expresses is something on-going: an on-going *value* in the ideal of marital fidelity.

According to the ideal-based account of generality, principled articulations of the ideal do

not apply subsumptively. Subsumptivism produces morally implausible results. For example, a

subsumptive application of 'do not commit adultery' yields a morally suspect verdict about H's

behavior. The question remains, however, about whether such principles apply presumptively.

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[18] The absurdity of this formulation is brought out in George Saunders's story "The Semplica-Girl Diaries" in his book *Tenth of December: Stories*.

[19] This is Nussbaum's characterization in *Love's Knowledge* (68).

[20] In section three of "Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism," J. J. C. Smart imagines a variation on the Nautical Almanac example that John Stuart Mill gives in *Utilitarianism* (*Utilitarianism* 24). Unlike Mill's Nautical Almanac, Smart's imaginary almanac is only 90% accurate at giving sailors their location at sea. As such, the nautical location tables represent rules of thumb to be jettisoned when there is time to make an actual calculation to determine the sailors' exact location.

[21] This is Dancy's characterization in *Ethics without Principles* (142).

[22] This is Nussbaum's characterization in *Love's Knowledge* (73).

4.4.2   Ideals, principles, and presumptivism

The presumptivist says that the principle forbidding adultery tells us that adultery is always tainting or worse-making—a fact which must be put into the equation of pros and cons that count for and against any of H's actions to which the property 'adulterous' could be ascribed. [23]

How might such an equation be formulated in H's case? Let us continue to suppose that H is able to care for W with greater devotion than he would be able to if he did not have the emotional sustenance he gets from his relationship with O. Suppose also that H is trying to decide which action is morally superior: an action of genuinely devoted care toward W that is "facilitated" by adultery or a less genuinely devoted action that is not. Suppose the presumptivist finds that on balance the former act is morally superior to the latter, *but* according to the presumptivist, it nevertheless is defective. In other words, according to the presumptivist, even though the adulterous care-taking is on balance the right action for H to perform, the action is not

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[23] Sometimes Dancy refers to F-properties, e.g., adultery or theft, not as worse-making but as "wrong-making" (*Moral Reasons* 99). But, to be clear, Dancy's understanding of this presumptive form of generalism (which in *Moral Reasons* he calls 'Generalism 2') does not hold that the presence of such an F-property makes the act to which it applies *necessarily* wrong. According to Dancy, what it tells us is that there is a presumption that the action is wrong *and* that even if the act (to which F can be ascribed) is ultimately right, it is still tainted or worse than it otherwise would be; it is defective to the extent that it is F. Even if the ultimate computation leads us to the conclusion that the action is right, it is not *purely* right. In short, F is always worse-making. The fallacy in this version of generalism, according to Dancy, is that properties like F are *not invariably* worse-making or tainting or defect-inflicting. I am not convinced Dancy's interpretation is correct, but according to Dancy, Generalism 2 is essentially an interpretation of Ross's idea of prima facie duty. Ross argues that when an action can be characterized by more than one prima facie duty, the determination of whether an act is right or wrong, is a matter of considered judgment. As far as I can tell, Ross does not characterize 'considered judgment' in terms of weighing the moral valence of properties that are invariably worse-making and properties that are invariably better-making. He speaks only of prima facie duties resting on circumstances of moral significance.   He does not say they rest on circumstances that possess a certain invariable sort of moral significance (e.g., always worse-making). See also footnote six in chapter two.

as good as it would be if H were not committing adultery. It possesses a defect because the adultery counts against it. The adultery is *worse-making*, even though the adulterous care-taking is not on balance *wrong*.

The foregoing example takes for granted that any act of genuinely devoted caretaking (which is made possible in the *context* of H's relationship with O) must be balanced against the taint of adultery. Yet, if we take more care in our formulation of the presumptivist's equation, we begin to see how difficult it actually is to understand how the caretaking and adultery are supposed to be related to one another in the presumptivist's calculations. In what way is the adultery actually wrong-making? How are we to identify the discrete actions that are "up" for evaluation? Are we to think that each act of adultery with O counts against one or all acts of genuine care toward W? How bizarre to weigh them against each other.[24]

Indeed, the presumptivist's weighing technique yields bizarre conclusions. For example, if W were dead, then an act of caretaking by H (e.g., laying flowers on W's grave) would be *morally* superior to a similar act of caretaking (e.g., bringing flowers to W's bed side when she is alive) because upon W's death H's relationship with O is no longer adulterous. Would that then mean that H's subsequent sexual relations with O are *morally* superior to those when W is alive? Similar bizarre results would occur if H divorced W. H could continue caring for W and conducting his relationship with O in exactly the same fashion, altering none of his behavior except that now he and W are divorced. He would be free of the adultery, while doing exactly the same thing. Would that make H's subsequent acts of genuine caretaking toward W *less*

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[24] It is akin to the problem faced by the utilitarian when she attempts to determine which act on balance will lead to utility maximization. Which acts should she consider? How should she characterize them? How many links in the chain of consequences should she attempt to predict? An act that looks to be utility maximizing now might actually be utility diminishing in its longer range effects, and so forth.

wrong (that is, *better*) than H's adulterous, pre-divorce genuine acts of caretaking? Why not think there is something morally superior in H's *continuing* to stay married to W, even though he has a relationship with O that is more like a true marriage than his marriage to W? Why not think that there is something gallant in H's staying married to W, despite his relationship with O, and that this brings *greater* moral value to his genuine acts of caretaking toward W? If it does bring greater value, is the worsening effect of his adultery thereby diminished (as per presumptivism)? Honoring W with flowers exemplifies an important dimension of the ideal of marital fidelity, whether W is dead or alive. Providing W with heartfelt care exemplifies marital fidelity, whether H remains technically married to W or not. It seems absurd for the presumptivist to maintain that the *moral superiority* of these actions could rise if W dies or if H divorces W.

The example of H shows that it is possible to give a plausible account of his conduct according to which, *contra* the presumptivist, adultery is *not* worse-making. According to the ideal-based account of generality, we do not need to speak about H's conduct in the pejorative terms invited by presumptivism. The question of the morality of H's conduct does not lend itself to a tallying of Fs that are wrong-making (e.g., the property of being an act of adultery) and Fs that are good-making (e.g., the property of being an act of genuine caretaking). In fact, evaluating H's conduct in presumptivist terms yields such bizarre results that the need to look for alternatives to presumptivism feels pressing.[25]

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[25] We saw similarly strange results in the treatment of the rationality of regret in section 2.3 of chapter two.

4.4.3   Defectiveness and imperfection

A first step to finding an alternative requires pushing back against presumptivism's insistence on the claim that there are F-properties that are always worse-making. For the presumptivist, any action that can be described as a violation of a moral principle is to some degree tainted or defective—terms which, for the presumptivist, entail that the agent, who performs the defective act, is to some degree blameworthy for having done so. This claim is the ultimate cause of presumptivism's bizarre results, and therefore, it must be rejected. Why think that H's conduct toward W is defective, blameworthy, or the worse for the absence of sexual fidelity, as the presumptivist believes? According to the ideal-based account of generality, imperfection— falling short of the ideal—does not necessarily entail defectiveness in H's conduct or in H's marriage to W.

Consider the common marketplace disclaimer that certain imperfections are not to be considered defects due to the nature of the materials involved. The disclaimer relies on the assumption that certain imperfections do not constitute defects, because there is nowhere to lay blame for the defect. For example, in the very production of objects (often handmade) so-called imperfections will arise, but we do not consider these defects, because they are not the result of someone's acting carelessly or in some other blameworthy fashion. There will be color variations in tanned goods or ceramic glazes, but the artisans are not to blame. As Aristotle might say, such imperfections are in the nature of the thing.

A similar idea can be extended to H's marriage. Both sexual and non-sexual companionship are no longer possible for H and W, but no one is to blame. It is not through the bad behavior of H or W that sexual, as well as non-sexual, companionship has become impossible. People fall ill; people age; people lose certain capacities. That's life, not a defect.

Their marriage can no longer exemplify that dimension of marital fidelity pertaining to friendship and sexual and non-sexual companionship. The marriage is imperfect, but it is not defective. No one is to blame. We might say W has a physiological defect, namely, a buildup in the brain of beta amyloid and tau, which causes her Alzheimer's, makes her incapable of companionship, and creates a far from ideal marriage. Clearly, this is not a moral defect. Again, no one is to blame. Therefore, according to the ideal-based account of generality, it is wrong to say that H's conduct is defective, and likewise wrong to say that H's marriage is defective.

4.4.4   Inadequacies in subsumptivism and presumptivism

The predicament for the presumptivist is as serious as the subsumptivist's. Neither view can make sense of the plausibility of the conclusion that H's adultery is neither wrong, nor even worse-making—because neither view can handle the moral complexity of H's circumstances. The subsumptivist cannot account for the puzzle that arises in H's case, i.e., that his adultery is not wrong. The presumptivist cannot forestall the contorted thinking that comes with its insistence that H's adultery is always worse-making.

4.5   TWO DISTINCTIONS

The ideal-based account of generality rejects the problematic interpretation of principles that creates a predicament for subsumptivists and presumptivists alike.[26] The rejection turns on two

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[26] In section 4.7, we will see in greater detail that this same interpretation of principles creates a predicament for the particularist, as well.

distinctions out of which emerge the conception of generality advanced by the ideal-based account. The first is a distinction between two types of subsumptivism. The second is between two types of propositions. We will consider each in turn.

4.5.1   Absolute subsumptivism and contextual subsumptivism

Absolute subsumptivism is understood along traditional syllogistic lines. According to this view, subsumption involves bringing a particular case under a rule or principle. The principle—or major premise, as it is often called—takes the form of 'if F, then M.' The act of subsuming is expressed in the minor premise, the proposition that F. In H's reflections, when he brings the principle prohibiting adultery to bear on his case, he recognizes that his case falls under the principle 'adultery is wrong.' The ideal-based account of generality has no problem saying that what H is doing is subsuming his case under a principle. Its dispute lies in the answer to the question of what happens next: what does the principle say? The traditional syllogistic view insists that if a case is subsumed under a principle, then the principle absolutely must apply. That is why the ideal-based account calls the traditional view *absolute subsumptivism*. For the absolute subsumptivist, there is no debate about the question of what the principle says. The answer is 'M.' The proposition 'if F, then M' applies, *absolutely*, just in virtue of the subsumption. It is at this juncture that the ideal-based account of generality breaks with generalists and finds commonality with particularists.

Particularists deliver a compelling argument against the existence of invariable moral relations of the sort 'if the instantiation of F, then M' for all situations; the case of H itself provides reasons for doubting their existence. While the ideal-based account of generality sees merit in the particularists' argument against the existence of invariable moral relations, it

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nevertheless declines to side with the particularist in concluding that, therefore, the possibility of principles is foreclosed. General moral principles are possible, insists the ideal-based account of generality—and not just as watered down reminders, rules of thumb, or summaries! The generalist might find this aspect of the ideal-based account of generality especially vexing because, for the generalist, the existence of invariable relations of the sort 'if the instantiation of F, then M' and subsumptivism go hand-in-hand with the possibility of moral principles.

We can imagine the generalist reasoning as follows:

If there is such a thing as a principle, then subsumptivism must be true, and the truth of subsumptivism depends on the existence of invariable moral relations. How can the ideal-based account of generality intelligibly maintain talk of principles while rejecting the existence of the underlying invariable relations presupposed by subsumptivism? In other words, if the ideal-based account of generality doubts the existence of invariable moral relations, then it must reject subsumptivism; and if it must reject subsumptivism, how can it plausibly argue for the existence of moral principles?

The response to this line of questions is that the ideal-based account of generality *does* embrace subsumptivism—but not the traditional syllogistic or absolute version. It develops an alternative called *contextual subsumptivism*, which departs from generalism's traditional, absolutist understanding of subsumption. According to contextual subsumptivism, H does in fact subsume his case under the principle against adultery, but the subsumption is not syllogistic; it is not absolute. Instead of treating the principle as applying *absolutely* in the traditional syllogistic manner, the ideal-based account of generality offers a different explanation of the way in which

the subsumption figures in H's thinking. The ideal-based account construes the judgment that ensues after the subsumption in terms of a mediated application of the principle—mediation that involves reflective engagement with the relevant ideal along with the wider context of its related principles and purposes.

Contextual subsumptivism gives a name to the complex process of reasoning from which H's judgment results. However, before we can say more about contextual subsumptivism, we must examine the way in which the distinction between absolute subsumptivism and contextual subsumptivism is intertwined with another distinction that emerges from the ideal-based account of generality, a distinction between two types of propositions.

4.5.2 Invariable propositions and unvarying propositions

According to the ideal-based account of generality, we must distinguish between propositions that are *invariable in their application* and propositions that are *unvarying in their relation to the ideal*. Each type of proposition represents a different way of understanding principles. In ordinary usage, principles have the form of commands: 'do F' or 'do not do F.' Their corollaries, respectively, are: 'F is right' or 'F is wrong.' Often the forms are used interchangeably. Instead of saying 'do not do F,' we say 'F is wrong' and mean the same thing. When we use the second formulation to invoke a principle we seem to be recasting the principle as a proposition with the form 'all Fs are M,' where M is a term like 'right' or 'moral' or 'good.' According to the ideal-based account of generality there are two ways to understand a 'principle *qua* proposition' like 'all Fs are M' or 'all Fs are not M,' either as a proposition that is invariable in its application or as a proposition that is unvarying in its relation to an ideal. A proposition

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that is invariable in its application, i.e., an *invariable proposition*, is a proposition that has the form 'all Fs are M' and claims that for any *instantiation* of F, then M.

If a principle is understood as an invariable proposition, then the principle states that for every case that can be subsumed under it, the action it prescribes should be performed. The idea is that any subsumption of a case under a principle is necessarily a case of absolute subsumptivism, and the action prescribed by the principle should be performed. Thinking of principles as propositions that are invariable in their application goes hand-in-hand with absolute subsumptivism. Because absolute subsumptivism stipulates that principles apply absolutely, we can say that the absolute subsumptivist understands principles as propositions that are invariable in their application.

According to the ideal-based account of generality, principles should not be understood in this manner. Rather, they should be understood as propositions that are *unvarying in their relation to the ideal*. A proposition that is unvarying in its relation to the ideal, i.e., an 'unvarying proposition,' has the same form 'all Fs are M,' but it does not make the same claim as an invariable proposition; it does not purport to claim that for any *instantiation* of F, then M. According to the ideal-based account, principles are unvarying propositions because they possess an unvarying connection to the ideal. What they express is *implied* in, for example, the ideal of marriage, and as such, they articulate a dimension of the ideal.[27] Although ideals are stable, they

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[27] To reiterate a point made earlier, I do not mean with this talk of the ideal to suggest that there is only one possible expression of the ideal of marriage; rather I mean only to refer to the ideal to which H aspires in his conduct and appeals to in his evaluations of it. In other words, I take H to be working with a specific ideal: the predominate conception of his western culture, which *ex hypothesi* he accepts and which he understands through the filter of his and W's own interpretation of how the ideal figures (or figured) in their particular union. There are of course other cultures or subcultures or traditions with very different ideals of marriage any of which could just as easily have been drawn on to develop the example of H.

can and do change. The associated principles might change as well, but to the extent the ideal is stable, the connection between it and its associated principles is unvarying. For example, according to (the western conception of) the ideal of marriage, 'do not divorce,' 'do not commit adultery,' and 'do not neglect or abandon a spouse' are unvarying because the substantive content they express gives voice to the on-going and unvarying aims of marriage in the ideal.

Understanding principles as unvarying propositions is central to understanding the idea of contextual subsumptivism advanced by the ideal-based account. A case might be subsumable under a principle, but when the principle is understood as an unvarying proposition the way it figures in moral reasoning is very different from the way it figures when understood as an invariable proposition. H's case, for example, is subsumed under the principle prohibiting adultery, but the principle—understood as unvarying in its relation to the ideal—does not *apply* in the manner of absolute subsumptivism. The principle, in other words, is not understood as invariable in its application. But if this is the case, how *does* it apply to H's case? It applies in the manner of contextual subsumptivism, a view that argues that principles apply contextually, a view that understands principles as unvarying propositions that can be understood, and applied, only in light of a wider context—which necessarily includes their unvarying relation to the ideal.

According to contextual subsumptivism, H's task is to make a judgment about how the principle prohibiting adultery bears on his case. While H's judgment involves his thinking about, reflecting on, and understanding the principle and its connection to the ideal, he will reflect on other principles associated with the ideal, like the prohibitions on divorce, neglect, and abandonment. This appeal will necessarily invoke a fuller context that includes much more than just the principles and purposes bound up with the ideal of marital fidelity. Among other things, it will include facts about H's understanding of the public and personal dimensions of marital

fidelity, facts about his understanding of the public and personal dimensions of any overlapping ideals, and of course it will include facts about the particulars of his situation.

In his reflections, H will recognize that following the principle prohibiting adultery (as absolute subsumptivism requires) would not genuinely contribute to his exemplifying the ideal of marital fidelity. This recognition is a factor in H's thinking about how the principle applies to his case and how (or whether) it directs him. Even though H ultimately concludes the principle prohibiting adultery does not direct him (in the manner of absolute subsumptivism), the ideal-based account of generality insists that there nevertheless is nothing strange about characterizing an *aspect* of H's reflection in terms of subsuming a case (his) under a principle ('do not commit adultery'). In fact, according to the ideal-based account, reflection is exactly the arena in which we can expect an exercise in any sort of subsumption to take place. Contextual subsumptivism recognizes a place for subsumptivism in reflection, but characterizes its significance in terms of a complex, contextual judgment. As a threshold matter, in H's reflection he must recognize that the (western) ideal of marriage is bound up with monogamy, that his case is characterizable as adulterous, and that there is a principle prohibiting it. In any scenario in which H responsibly reflects, he recognizes in some manner the fact that his case is subsumable under the principle. This is true, even though it may very well be that when H reflects on his situation, he does not explicitly declaim to himself: "There is a principle that says 'do not commit adultery.' My case is subsumable under the principle. I must reflect on the significance of this." Even if H does not say these things to himself, he still has to figure out why adultery is wrong—which is just another way of saying he has to understand why there is a principle prohibiting it and how it

figures in the context of his situation.[28] If he does not understand why adultery is wrong, then he cannot figure out whether it might *not* be wrong in his case. Coming to understand the basis of this principle is an essential step in his reflection about whether his conduct with O, while adulterous, might nevertheless, when taken as a whole, exemplify the ideal of marital fidelity. Without this understanding, it is of no significance to H merely to recognize that his case is subsumable under a principle. According to contextual subsumptivism, this understanding is integral to the complex, contextual judgment that emerges from H's reflections.

According to the ideal-based account of generality, the ideal opens up a way to think about conduct that exemplifies the ideal of marital fidelity without necessitating the treatment of the ideal as setting forth a list of requirements or demands that each and every spouse must fulfill on pain of disapprobation. The ideal regulates, but the ideal is not a test. It supports propositions like 'H should not do that action because it would interfere with the on-going effort to exemplify the ideal' or 'H may do that because it does not interfere with the on-going effort to exemplify the ideal.' A spouse's conduct may fall short of the ideal without necessarily being blameworthy; a corollary to this point is that a marriage may fall short of the ideal without being defective for not satisfying the ideal. This last is a matter of complexity, but in the very notion of an ideal is the suggestion that it is something not exactly (or at least not typically) attainable in

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[28] This is related to John McDowell's statement in "Deliberation and Moral Development" that it is "harmless to acknowledge the availability of truths with [the] shape" of such propositions as: "'Other things being equal, an unpaid debt . . . should be paid'" (28-9). The *ceteris paribus* clause refers to something like 'in normal conditions.' The work of the moral agent is to determine whether conditions *are* normal. McDowell emphasizes that when we acknowledge such truths we must be "clear that the acknowledgment is no concession to the idea of a method" for moral judgment-making (29). According to the ideal-based account of generality, recognizing the availability of such truths is not merely harmless; it is vital to moral reflection, and the *ceteris paribus* clause is redundant, because ordinary moral principles should not be understood as universally quantified statements.

every aspect on any occasion. No marriage is perfect.[29] An actual marriage is something (as with vision and the just and loving gaze) that is endlessly perfectible; the ideal marriage is that which we strive to better and better approximate. The on-going effort to exemplify an ideal is part of the on-going aim of perfecting vision. Perfecting vision, and the determination of whether one is achieving a just and loving gaze, involves reflecting on the relevant ideal (or ideals) and the general moral principles that help articulate the ideal. When H considers W, for example, he must take up the ideal of marital fidelity, with its attendant principles, to determine whether his conduct expresses a just and loving gaze toward W and their situation. Ideals and their related principles give necessary content to the injunction to look with a just and loving gaze; they give content to the on-going aim of trying to see things aright. As such, ideals and principles play a necessary role in both discernment and the perfection of vision itself.

4.6   QUESTIONS FOR THE IDEAL-BASED ACCOUNT

While the discussion of the example of H is meant to show how ideals and principles play a role in H's moral thought, the example alone is not sufficient to address some important questions whose answers are essential to understanding the ideal-based account of generality. What follows is an attempt to shed light on some of these questions.

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[29] This looks ahead to section 4.10, but I am brought in mind of Michael Thompson's point that we can produce a complex conjunctive predicate that is true of a species, but not true of *any* member of the kind denoted by the species. What Thompson means, he says, is, "nobody's perfect" ("Representation" 288). The same, presumably, is true of a marriage; no marriage is perfect because no marriage instantiates the ideal in every respect on every occasion.

4.6.1   Is there a highest or ultimate principle or ideal?

The ideal-based account of generality is grounded in Murdoch's injunction to look with a just and loving gaze. For Murdoch, looking with a just and loving gaze is another way of directing the agent to clear away the ego and look in light of the Good. The injunction is so general that it might seem to be simply a command along the lines of 'see things accurately,' but the ideal-based account maintains that, really, it is more than this. The injunction is a command to adopt a certain perspective, the perspective of ego-less love and justice. The ideal-based account of generality regards this as a substantive command to look in light of the Good, and also ultimately as a command to work out and exemplify the Good in action.   In this sense, Murdoch's injunction represents the highest or ultimate principle in the ideal-based account, and the Good is the ultimate, overarching ideal.

4.6.2   Where do ideals come from*?*

According to the ideal-based account of generality, we can say that Murdoch's injunction represents a command to bring the joint concepts of love and justice to bear in an overarching regulative ideal, which, inspired by Murdoch, we might very generally characterize as the 'Good.' The ideal-based account takes on the task of explaining how this might work and cashes out 'Good' in terms of more specific ideals and their related principles. The point is that these ideals give substance to the concept 'Good.' So, in a sense, ideals "come from" the concept of the Good. Although a detailed account of the relation between ideals and the Good is not feasible here, it might be helpful to point out that ideals will vary depending on the culture and time period. For example, the ideal of marriage varies depending on culture and changes over

time within cultures. However, despite these contingencies, marriage is an ideal, insofar as it is an interpretation of the Good.

As an interpretation of the Good, an ideal has both a prescriptive and descriptive dimension. An ideal can be articulated in descriptive terms that are more or less detailed, as indicated in the discussion of marriage in section 4.3, e.g., it is monogamous, it is companionate, and so forth. However, because it is an articulation of some aspect of the Good, it can be reformulated in prescriptive terms as specific, substantive iterations of Murdoch's injunction. These can take the form of prescriptive statements, such as 'a spouse should not commit adultery,' or as commands, like 'do not commit adultery.' [30]

4.6.3   How are ideals related to each other?

Ideals are unified to the extent that they represent a more-or-less worked out interpretation of the Good. As such, they bear an organic relationship to one another, and many of them overlap. For the sake of highlighting certain aspects of H's reflections, the example focuses only on the single ideal of marriage. In actuality, the full scope of H's reflection will be subject to an array of considerations, invoking other ideals, that complicate how the ideal of marriage will figure in his thinking. In addition to the fact of his marriage to W, there are a variety of other important concerns in H's life that will need to be registered and which should always be alive in his thinking. They will add further complexities to the role that marital fidelity and its related principles will play. For example, imagine that H is attached to friends, to work, to certain

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[30] See section 4.10.2 for more discussion of the descriptive and prescriptive nature of ideals.

hobbies, and so on. Ideals come with all these. The ideals to which H aspires in each area will not always be easy to reconcile and at times will compete with each other—which raises a question about how H can live with all these ideals. A fully developed answer is beyond our current reach, but according to the ideal-based account of generality, Murdoch's injunction is the starting-point. Her notion of the Good is the umbrella under which an agent seeks to harmonize all the various ideals in their moment-by-moment exemplification. The ideal-based account lays out and begins to fill in the framework for describing this complex process of harmonization in our moral judgment-making.

4.6.4   How are ideals related to principles?

Part of the substantive content of ideals is expressible in terms of principles, and we can say that the principle is implied in the ideal. For example, the ideal of marriage, according to the standard western conception, entails a prohibition on adultery. However, some familiar moral principles are not tied as directly to any particular ideal as the prohibition on adultery is. These principles cut across many ideals; some examples include the general ideals of truthfulness and beneficence and their related principles, respectively, 'be honest' and 'be beneficent.' These principles certainly can be related to more specific ideals, like acquaintanceship and marriage, or ideals that come with professions like nursing or lawyering. For example, how we would exemplify truthfulness might be different with an acquaintance than with a spouse; how a nurse would exemplify beneficence might be different from how a lawyer would. Nevertheless, honesty and beneficence are not exclusively associated with specific ideals; they express general

aspects of the overarching ideal of the Good. In this sense, they can be thought of along the lines of principled formulations of Aristotelian virtues.[31]

4.6.5   Are principles hypothetical imperatives?

It is tempting to think that principles, on the ideal-based account of generality, should be regarded as hypothetical imperatives. It can seem that the ideal-based account holds the view that in order to attain an ideal, a person must follow the related principle(s). For example, if a person wants to attain the ideal of marriage, then she should follow the principle prohibiting adultery. There are at least three reasons it would be wrong to think of principles as hypothetical imperatives. First, the very formulation of the issue in terms of following a principle to "attain" an ideal is misleading; it is misleading to speak of attaining an ideal because this way of talking suggests the end, i.e., the attainment of the ideal, is something that can be accomplished once and for all. We should instead characterize behavior in terms of whether it *exemplifies* an ideal. Second, speaking of attainment suggests a means/end relationship between principles and ideals. This is not correct. If agents adhere to a principle, it does not follow that their conduct exemplifies a pertinent ideal. Not committing adultery does not mean a marriage exemplifies the ideal or even comes close to the ideal. Likewise, never telling a lie does not guarantee a person's conduct exemplifies honesty: we can imagine someone who always, so to speak, "takes the Fifth." Third, even though some ideals are optional, many are not. Marriage, for example, is optional; therefore, in a sense, the principle against adultery is also optional. But it is not

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[31] See Rosalind Hursthouse's essay "Normative Virtue Ethics" in which she argues that the virtues can be formulated in terms of principles (such as 'be courageous,' 'be honest,' 'be generous') that are as satisfactorily action-guiding as deontological or utilitarian principles.

optional for H because he is married. In H's case, according to the ideal-based account, because sexual intimacy is no longer possible with W, the principle prohibiting adultery does not articulate an aspect of the ideal that is possible. However, it nevertheless articulates part of the ideal of marriage and therefore bears on his situation.[32] In contrast, the ideal of truthfulness is not optional. A person cannot follow Murdoch's injunction and opt out of aspiring to and being regulated by truthfulness.

4.6.6   Is it possible to violate a principle or an ideal?

Our discussion has emphasized the role of ideals in articulating aspects of the Good to which we should aspire. Insofar as we are successful in our aspirations, we have done well. But if we fall short of the ideal, where do we stand? Does it make sense to speak of an action as violating an ideal or a principle? To answer these questions we must draw on the distinction made earlier between behavior that is defective and behavior that is imperfect.[33] Some behavior that fails to exemplify the relevant ideal is defective, i.e., wrong or bad.[34] But some behavior that falls short of the ideal nevertheless exemplifies it, and is simply less than perfect, i.e., imperfect. It is not as good as it could be. Of course, whether an act is wrong or merely imperfect is a complex

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[32] See the discussion of absolute subsumptivism and contextual subsumptivism in section 4.5.1.

[33] See the discussion of the difference between defectiveness and imperfection in section 4.4.3.

[34] I say "some" because the behavior might exemplify some relevant overlapping ideal.

judgment.[35]   The ideal-based account of generality sheds some light on how this judgment is made.

Judgments about where an action lies on the continuum between defectiveness and imperfection may or may not include reference to a principle related to the ideal. As an example of the latter, consider an alternative scenario in which W, in more lucid times, tells H_1 that she would like to keep the family home because she would like her memorial service to be held there. Assume H_1 has the financial means to keep it, but never promises to do so. In fact, the request annoys him. In time, W develops Alzheimer's. Because W will never know the difference, H_1 sells the house before she dies. It seems fair to say that H_1's conduct is wrong. As an example of the former, consider an alternative scenario, years before W ever got sick, in which H_2 commits a straightforward act of adultery. H_2 simply has an extramarital encounter. In this case it also seems fair to say H_2's conduct is wrong. Now consider a third case, the case we have been discussing from the outset of this chapter, in which W is sick, and H and O are a quasi-married couple. This case is not straightforward, but as in the second (straightforward) scenario, H's conduct goes against the principle against adultery.   Unlike the second (straightforward) scenario, there is good reason to think H's conduct is not wrong (for reasons given in section 4.4.3).

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[35] The distinction between being imperfect and being wrong suggests a refinement to the response given by Jon Ives, Apple's Chief Design Officer, to the charge that the circular hockey puck mouse was one of Apple's few design failures because some people found it hard to use. Ives defended it on grounds that arms and wrists differ, and one mouse might not suit them all. Ives continued, "Everything we make I could describe as being partially wrong, because it's not perfect." The ideal-based account of generality would say that the shape of the mouse was not *wrong*—as in bad or defective—*just because* it was not perfect. We might think of differences in arms and wrists as analogous to "overlapping ideals." Surely, a mouse that suits no one (or just a few) is defective, just as a mouse that suits most everyone is not. The difference between the two lies on a continuum, while the aim is to create a mouse that is perfect for all. (Parker)

At this point we might ask how the ideal-based account of generality differentiates these cases and how it makes sense of the very idea of a *violation.* It is helpful to distinguish between a violation of a principle and a failure to exemplify an ideal. We can think of a violation of a principle in the manner invited by absolute subsumptivism: if an action can be subsumed under a principle, and the principle prohibits the action, then performing the action violates the principle. But as should be clear by now, according to the ideal-based account, a judgment about whether an action violates a principles in the absolute subsumptivist sense, is different from a judgment about whether the action is wrong. In the first scenario, no clear-cut, ordinary moral principle is violated, but the conduct is nevertheless wrong. In the second, a principle is violated, and the conduct is wrong. In the third case, a principle is violated, but the conduct is *not* wrong. The difference in these cases lies in their relationship to the relevant ideal(s) and how and whether they exemplify them.

According to the ideal-based account of generality, in the first scenario, H_1 fails to exemplify marital fidelity. His behavior is wrong, not less than ideal or imperfect. He completely disregards certain important aspects of marital fidelity. He wantonly ignores an important wish for no reason in circumstances in which she is helpless to contest or to express her wishes about some alternate arrangement. According to the scenario, it would have been no real hardship to have kept the house. H_1's action also fails to exemplify various overlapping ideals. Although, he never promised he would keep the house, H_1 he has not been faithful to her wishes; we might say H_1 has broken something like an implicit promise, about an especially important matter that is tied up with showing marital fidelity, with showing respect in death, and with striving to satisfy last wishes. It is worth repeating here that any individual action must be judged in light of its full context of ideals, principles, and circumstances. Imagine that H_1 cares

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for W with as much devotion as H does, but H_1 does not have anyone like O in his life—*and* he sells the house. We would still have reasons to conclude that selling the house is wrong, even though H_1 exemplifies marital fidelity in other conduct. It is not just that H_1's action could have been better, could have more closely approximated the ideal of marital fidelity. H_1's action does not exemplify marital fidelity in any way. In fact, there is *no* ideal in light of which H_1's conduct good.

In the second scenario, H_2 violates the familiar moral principle prohibiting adultery, and his action fails to exemplify the ideal. As in the first case, his action is not simply less than perfect, it is wrong. The very fact that he violated a principle that articulates some of the content of the ideal is relevant to his failure and to the conclusion that his action is wrong, but this conclusion is not made solely on the basis of the violation. That an action violates a principle does not necessarily mean it is wrong or defective, as opposed to simply less than perfect.[36] How the determination is made is a non-algorithmic, complex judgment, part of which can be explained in terms of ideals. As in H_1's case, we can say that H_2's action does not exemplify marital fidelity. Moreover, there is *no* ideal that this behavior exemplifies, no ideal in light of which it is good.

The third scenario (which, really, is the original scenario) demonstrates the point that behavior (i.e., H's adultery) that violates a principle is not necessarily wrong or defective. The fact that H's behavior violates a principle is not sufficient to conclude that his behavior is defective or wrong, nor is it sufficient for concluding that his behavior fails to exemplify the ideal. According to the ideal-based account of generality, H's behavior is not wrong because it

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[36] An action can be *not wrong*, but *less* than ideal, as in H's adultery. We often talk this way, as when we say of the decision to break a trivial promise in order to tend to pressing work: "Well, it's not ideal, but . . ." The implicit ending to the sentence is "but it's not wrong."

nevertheless exemplifies marital fidelity (and other ideals as well, e.g., those in light of which his relationship with O is good).

The foregoing scenarios are intended to illustrate the relationship between principles and ideals and how to think about the moral reasoning involved in making judgments about when conduct is *wrong*. Clearly, according to the ideal-based account of generality, this determination is not best made sense of in terms of the concept of 'violation' of a moral principle. The first case illustrates how conduct can be wrong in its failure to exemplify an ideal regardless of whether it involves a violation of a clear-cut, ordinary moral principle. The second case, which involves the violation of a moral principle, shows how the violation can be an important (albeit always non-decisive factor) in the determination of whether the behavior is wrong. The third case illustrates how conduct might be good in that it exemplifies an ideal—even when it involves the violation of an ordinary moral principle. In short, whether conduct is wrong or not is a matter of whether it fails to exemplify some ideal.[37]

It should be clear that, according to the ideal-based account of generality, it is possible to violate a principle and yet nevertheless exemplify an ideal. This raises the question of what role a principle plays in the determination of whether and to what extent conduct that violates it, nevertheless, exemplifies it. The first part of the answer to this question is that the very fact that a principle is violated is an important consideration in any judgment about the wrongness of the violating conduct. But the violation does not occur a-contextually. The violation always must

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[37] This may seem unsatisfying because in the case of overlapping ideals, the interesting question is which ideal ought we exemplify. Some find Ross's account similarly unsatisfyingly because it does not tell us which prima facie obligation prevails when conflicts arise between those that are relevant. My account does not have an answer, if by answer we mean 'decision procedure.' However, it does offer a much more detailed account than Ross's, the generalist's, or the particularist's.

be assessed in light of the context. In many cases, the very fact of the violation is relevant because the judgment at issue *just is* the moral status of the violation (or contemplated violation). Another part of the answer to this question is taken up in sections 4.8 and 4.9, in which an account is given of the important role principles play in reflection and cultivation of commitment. The upshot of those sections is that principles play a role in moral thinking according to which they are not best thought of as yardsticks against which to measure the rightness or wrongness of particular actions. According to the ideal-based account, a principle represents an on-going commitment, the cultivation of which acts like an internal rudder that steers us in our actions and keeps us on a proper course.

It is worth noting here how the concept of 'violation' relates to ideals. For the most part we have discussed whether conduct *exemplifies* an ideal. In the first two scenarios above, we might be tempted to say that the actions in question violate the ideal of marriage. We do sometimes speak this way, such as when we say that a person has violated our trust. But because ideals are complex, it also can seem odd to speak in the toggled terms of 'violates x' or 'does not violate x.' The concept of violation seems more at home in the realm of principles, which is why we often say things such as: *technically* the action violates a principle, but it is not wrong. In contrast, we cannot really speak of an action that is a *technical* violation of an ideal—because the ideal does not set down technical (or algorithmic) requirements. The role of the ideal is to help frame our judgment-making—to help frame the judgments we make in light of the complexities of the full context, which includes ideals. For example, if we focus only on the violation of the principle against adultery, there is no difference between H's conduct in the second and third scenario. But, of course, the conduct *is* different and in ways that matter to the judgment about whether H's violation of the principle is wrong or not. This is where the ideal comes into play in

judgment. Instead of characterizing wrong actions in terms of violations of ideals, we should speak in terms of exemplification: we should say that whether behavior fails to exemplify some ideal is a complex, non-algorithmic determination, which takes into view the context of ideals, principles, and circumstances necessary to make a responsible judgment.

Up to this point we have fudged the issue of pinpointing exactly which ideals are at issue. Instead, at times, we have said that conduct is not wrong if it exemplifies *some* ideal. It can seem obfuscating, if not circular, to argue that the reason why H's adultery is not wrong is because it exemplifies some aspect of the Good articulated by an ideal. *Why* is it Good? That is the question. If the answer is simply because it exemplifies the Good, then moral judgment-making seems ungrounded. The ideal-based account of generality, however, provides a framework for thinking about what more we can say. The framework is expressed in terms of ideals; ideals provide a structure of principles and purposes that help us avoid the potential circularity. In H's case, when we see that the principle prohibiting adultery is an expression of the content of an ideal, we can look to the ideal and its general framework of considerations to help us understand the significance of the violation. Because H's conduct nevertheless exemplifies the ideal of marriage we can conclude that it is not wrong. Determining whether an action is wrong is a judgment that reflects awareness of a continuum where there can be behavior that does not exemplify an ideal and behavior that does. A violation of a principle is a factor in the judgment, and we conclude that the behavior is defective or wrong when it completely fails to exemplify the relevant ideal.

When there are competing or overlapping ideals the judgment is more complex; it might be that behavior that fails to exemplify a relevant ideal nevertheless exemplifies some other relevant ideal. Again the judgment will be about where the action falls on a continuum.

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Consider Ross's example in which a trivial promise is broken in order to prevent a serious accident (18). The rule about keeping promises is violated, but nevertheless we might conclude with Ross that the action is good because, e.g., it exemplifies the ideal of friendship or parenthood or citizenship, etc. Whatever the relevant ideal(s) might be in such a case, the breaking of the promise is not wrong because rendering aid exemplifies some dimension of the Good, which can be articulated in terms of the relevant ideals. In light of the full context— which could even include a post-hoc notification to the promisee of the reason for breaking the promise and an apology—we might well find that the behavior even exemplifies the ideal of fidelity in promise-keeping itself.

4.6.7   Is the ideal-based account unrealistic?

The ideal-based account of generality claims to be giving a reconstruction of what happens in ordinary moral judgment. It aims to describe a way in which we use ideals in our moral thinking and to make sense of principles in a way that is neither generalist nor particularist. But the question remains of whether it simply is too complicated to be a fair characterization of what actually does or can happen in moral reasoning, except maybe in the overwrought philosopher's. Is it too arcane to be a fair characterization of our ordinary moral reasoning? The particularist seems to have a more straightforward and accessible account: the details "wash over" the agent (perhaps this is intended as a kind of reflection) and the shape of the situation presents itself. Good moral judgment-making, for the particularist, just is seeing the shape of a situation. This simple, straightforward picture of moral judgment-making is open to everyone, the particularist might say.

The central idea in the ideal-based account of generality is a robust conception of *reflection*, which centers on ideals and associated principles. The view argues that ideals and their related principles have a true normative force in reflection. Is reflection the province only of the overwrought philosopher? Of course not. In fact, current multi-disciplinary research suggests principled reflection is a crucial element (1) in determining our behavior and (2) in changing our behavior.

One example that lies in the intersection of psychology, philosophy, and criminal rehabilitation is the work of a London-based organization called The Forgiveness Project—which suggests, even if it does not prove, that there is an important role for reflection in moral reasoning and moral transformation. The Forgiveness Project runs several different programs, including RESTORE, the in-prison arm of The Forgiveness Project. RESTORE's organizing idea is that many offenders offend in order to seek revenge for wrongs that have been done to them. Learning to forgive is seen, therefore, as critical for breaking the cycle of offending behavior. RESTORE relies on five strategies to achieve its mission to reduce offending behaviors by bringing about personal change in the offender. Three of these strategies are especially relevant to the picture of moral thought described by the ideal-based account:

(i) creating a safe space for reflection (on, e.g., criminality, society, humanity, forgiveness, and revenge, and how they are related to the individual participant)

(ii) transforming the offender's perspective (through, e.g., "appreciating, seeking and attaining forgiveness")

(iii) "catalysing different choices and intentions" (by, e.g., focusing on positive life paths and following inspirational examples of reconciliation) (RESTORE).

The program begins each day with personal reflection. This endeavor is supported and developed in many ways, including meeting crime victims, trading stories, exploring existing habitual behaviors, and engaging in self-appraisal, empathy training, and other guided cell-work. All of these are aimed at encouraging transformative reflection. RESTORE seems to work. Participants in the program show lower rates of offending behavior in prison and after prison than those who do not participate.

RESTORE regards personal reflection as a key component in the participants' success, but the fact that the program emphasizes reflection and the fact that reflection is seen as a key component in producing better outcomes in action do not *prove* that ideals and their related principles have a place in this process. However, it really is not a stretch to characterize some of the content on which participants are encouraged to reflect in terms of ideals. Some are very general like 'humanity,' which presumably includes principles like the right to life, liberty, and security, the right of conscience, and so on, as well as rights against cruel and unusual punishment, enslavement, servitude, arbitrary arrest, detention, exile, and so on. Other ideals are less general, like 'forgiveness' (the centerpiece of The Forgiveness Project), which might be thought of in terms of abbreviated commands, like 'be forgiving,' or 'turn the other cheek.' Forgiveness also can be expressed in more specific principled terms, like Buddhism's twelve principles of forgiveness, which seem primarily to be principle-like instructions or steps to take in order to become forgiving, e.g., 'be willing to grieve,' 'discover that it is not necessary to be loyal to your suffering,' 'reflect on the benefits of a loving heart,' 'practice forgiveness in easy cases,' and so on. These principles are interesting because they can look like hypothetical imperatives, which is an interpretation of moral principles that the ideal-based account of generality rejects. However, against this interpretation of principles-as-hypothetical-imperatives

is the obvious fact that following these principles will not necessarily make a person forgiving. Moreover, following these principles would seem to result in something more like a form of reflective exercise meant to help a person better understand the ideal of forgiveness (by shifting various beliefs, emotions, and habits) in order to make exemplification of the ideal of forgiveness more reliably and steadily achievable. But, again, it is not a stretch to characterize the Buddhist forgiveness program as one that involves reflecting on the ideal of forgiveness and on the meaning of the related principles.

Also important for showing the plausibility of the ideal-based account of generality are the first-person accounts of perspective transformation that have been gathered by The Forgiveness Project. These accounts, which are listed on The Forgiveness Project website under "Stories," suggest that the kind of thinking described by the ideal-based account of generality is not overwrought. The accounts, of course, are not given in terms of the nomenclature and philosophical systemization that we find in the ideal-based account, but we can find a degree of sensitivity and commitment to what is aptly characterized as reflection involving ideals and principles.

Consider the story of Jacob Dunne, a participant in The Forgiveness Project, who by the age of fifteen had been expelled from two schools. At eighteen—immersed in what he calls a "gang mindset"—he was in a group brawl and threw a punch that killed a man. In prison, he says:

> I was consumed by anger [at friends for snitching on him] and . . . self-pity, as if I was the only victim of these tragic circumstances. There was no space in custody for me to reflect on what I'd done. No one was there to challenge me and I was surrounded by

other inmates who shared the same common criminal values I did. By the time I was

released I had become an even worse person than when I went in. (Dunne)

Dunne complains that in prison "there was no one to challenge [his] common criminal values," and "there was no space in custody for [him] to reflect" on his actions. He found both in RESTORE, a restorative justice charity, where he corresponded with and eventually met his victim's parents, gained their forgiveness, and also learned to forgive the "snitches." As a result of the program, he says, "I decided to move forward in a positive way . . . I was determined to do . . . everything I could to prevent others from going through the kind of trauma [the victim's parents] went through." Ultimately, Dunne went from being homeless after prison to enrolling in 2015 at university (Dunne).

If we describe Dunne's experience in terms of the ideal-based account of generality, we would say that Dunne effectively shifts his overarching ideal away from the gang mindset to the Good. Furthermore, it is no stretch to say that when Dunne decides that he is determined to prevent others from experiencing the pain suffered by the parents of the man he killed, he is committing himself to ideals—some of whose content can be articulated in terms of principles such as: prevent suffering, atone for wrongs, and so on.[38]

Another storyteller on The Forgiveness Project website is Sammy Rangel, who describes a childhood of violence and sexual abuse that began when he was three years old. By the time he was eleven, he had joined a gang, and by seventeen he was in prison, where, he says, the gang fighting that had started on the outside crystallized:

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[38] So can the content of gang pseudo-ideals, e.g., Omerta.

Now I had an ideology where violence was glamorized and glorified. It gave my life a sense of meaning and legitimized everything I did . . . I went in as a street punk and came out as a brutal leader with a killer mentality. I started walking the streets with both a gun and a shank. I'd tell people I was more animal than man. Seven months later I was back in for armed robbery and again immediately put in the segregation hole. (Rangel)

In prison, he was involved in gang fights, race riots, shootings, stabbings, and beatings. Rangel says that his transformation came incrementally, but took firm hold in an in-prison drug rehabilitation program:

When a fellow inmate told me that I didn't love my daughter because I hadn't properly tried to find her, that hurt terribly because I knew it was the truth. In an instant I went from feeling self-pity to feeling remorse. In fact, it was the first time I'd experienced empathy. (Rangel)

Rangel organized his transformation around love and forgiveness:

When I left prison I decided I needed to find forgiveness from my son and daughter, and also to forgive my mother [who had repeatedly abused him physically] and everyone else who had hurt me – including her brother [who had raped him]. (Rangel)

Now Rangel has a master's degree in social work; he consults with law enforcement and other agencies on violence reduction strategies, and he founded a group that helps others exit lives of crime and violence.

There is no doubt that the mechanism of Rangel's transformation was complex and had multiple causes. It does, however, share features with Dunne's. He is triggered by the charge that he is not a good parent, that he does not really love his daughter. In what we can call a reflective moment he realizes that this is true. Driven by an experience of "empathy" for the "first time," he makes a choice to exemplify what the ideal-based account of generality would call the ideal of parenthood. We are not told how he fares in this pursuit, but from his account we can see that the ideal, along with principles like 'communicate with your child,' 'get to know your child,' and 'love your child,' are at work in his thinking and serve as an internal rudder for him: he will find his daughter, he will make amends, he will exemplify parental love. What the details of Dunne's and Rangel's stories are meant to show is that ideals figure in people's thinking.

Evidence that the ideal-based account's emphasis on ideals and reflection is not an out-of-reach philosopher's creation can be extracted from much less detailed examples. When a brother was released from prison, he said he needed to repair his relationship with his son. How did he arrive at this conclusion? There can be a tendency to think that if such words are not uttered by a moral sophisticate, then they erupt essentially from nowhere. This is unrealistic and demeaning. We are all moral sophisticates in a sense, even if we are not always moral, because except in the most perplexing cases we all have some grasp of values embedded in the Good, and to the extent that we have such values, we strive—with greater or less success—to exemplify them. And to the extent that we think at all, we seem to possess the ability to reflect on what we

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value in—more or less—articulate detail. The virtuous peasant and the particularist shape-diviner are both the product of a philosophical blind spot (or else hubris) because both are, however inadvertently, seen as instances of some sort of *idiot savant*. Commitment (including proto-commitment) to ideals and principles, and reflection thereon, is not an esoteric activity. Moreover, the claim that it is not esoteric is perfectly compatible with the claim that it can and should be guided, educated, and developed, as in programs like RESTORE. As with most endeavors, educated coaching and practice help.[39]

Ideals not only play a role in rehabilitative reflection. There is relevant research in the intersection of psychology and philosophy that, unsurprisingly, suggests a vital role for ideals and principles in the lives of people who are morally exemplary or "moral exemplars," to borrow the term used by Anne Colby and William Damon in *The Power of Ideals*. Colby and Damon focus their book on six moral exemplars: Jane Addams, Nelson Mandela, Dag Hammarskjöld, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Eleanor Roosevelt. While acknowledging that all these moral exemplars were without doubt flawed in various ways, the authors use them as case studies to show how their "choices and actions were clearly informed . . . by ideals" (52).

The authors do not offer an explicit definition of the term 'ideal,' but their discussion suggests that it is something like an abstract moral value to which a person is committed and which goes beyond immediate self-interest. We are given examples of specific, often interrelated ideals in the discussion of the life of each of the moral exemplars, e.g., ideals of social and economic equality, charity, service, benevolence, racial equality, international peace,

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[39] See, e.g., Atul Gawande's article "Personal Best" in *The New Yorker*. Gawande describes how an esteemed senior surgeon, whom Gawande enlisted as his coach in the operating room, helped Gawande improve his already accomplished surgical skills. Gawande argues that most all endeavors, including those of experts, can benefit from "coaching."

democracy, and religious freedom. The ideal-based account of generality involves ideals such as these, but it also involves others that are more specifically tied to various practices, like marriage, and it does not necessarily rule out ideals that could be said to involve some element of immediate self-interest, like ideals related to a hobby. Despite these differences, there is enough overlap in the ideals of the ideal-based account of generality and the ideals that figure in the thinking of the six exemplars to conclude that the authors' findings can be mined for support for the plausibility of the ideal-based account of generality.

The authors' discussion of moral exemplars makes a persuasive case that a key element of the exemplars' moral psychology is an explicit commitment to certain ideals. The authors also argue that three fundamental virtues—truthfulness, humility, and faith—are necessary to sustain a commitment to an ideal. This interesting further dimension is not of primary interest to the ideal-based account of generality. Rather, it is the authors' argument that commitment to ideals has profound effects on shaping people's behavior. For each of the exemplars, the authors describe what amounts to an on-going circle of experience, reflection, and action: in light of various experiences the exemplar commits to an ideal, puts it into action as best as possible, reflects on how well the ideal was exemplified, and then makes adjustments in both thought and action in order to better exemplify the ideal. For these moral psychologists, principles and ideals seem interchangeable. They are not regarded as yardsticks, nor as reminders, rules of thumb, or summaries. Instead, they represent on-going commitments; they are like internal rudders that help us navigate our lives.

This section has covered a lot of ground. We have seen that in both the offender rehabilitation cases and the moral exemplar cases there is *empirical* evidence that ideals and principles play an important role in moral reasoning and action. We also have tackled a number

of important *theoretical* questions about the ideal-based account of generality, with the aim of showing how it explains the role of principles and ideals in moral reasoning and action. Now that more of the details of the account have been presented, we will return to particularism, and ask: would particularists find any merit in the ideal-based account's understanding of ideals and principles? In the next section, we explore this question by taking up an objection we anticipate particularists would likely raise against the ideal-based account of generality.

4.7   THE CHARGE OF *IGNORATIO ELENCHI*

Particularists, in particular Dancy, will be likely to disagree with the conclusion that ideals and principles play a necessary role in moral thought. They might argue that whatever the ideal-based account of generality amounts to it does not show that principles *of the sort they have in mind* play such a role. The particularist might elaborate as follows:

> The ideal-based account of generality is off base and amounts to nothing more than an *ignoratio elenchi*. Even if the account succeeds in showing there are such things as ideals with related principles, it does not provide a critique of particularism because it does not address itself to the issue in question. We particularists are not attacking ideals; nor are we attacking the principles the ideal-based account claims are connected to ideals. We particularists are arguing against principles that purport to be *action-guiding* in the context of a specific practice (like marriage) and purport to give specific directives about how people should or should not behave in the context of the practice.

The ideals and principles appealed to by the ideal-based account of generality are not principles in the sense we particularists are attacking, for they have no determinate action-guiding content. Therefore, the ideal-based account does not undermine our particularist conclusion that right action simply cannot be codified. Just look at H's case. According to the terms of the example, it is permissible for H to violate the principle forbidding adultery. Clearly, the principle 'adultery is wrong,' which forbids adulterous actions, does not tell H what he should do in his particular situation. Clearly, whatever the ideal-based account means by 'principle,' it does not involve the sort of situation-based, action-guiding principles against which we particularists mounted our attack. The ideal-based account of generality argues in favor of a conception of general principles that merely gives the *appearance* of being the same as the conception of principles under attack by particularism.

Is there any merit to this particularist charge of *ignoratio elenchi*? To determine whether it undermines the ideal-based account of generality, we will need to renew our examination of the way particularists and generalists conceive the logical form of general moral principles.

4.7.1 The common assumption elaborated

In section 1.5, I argued that generalists and particularists share a common assumption about general moral principles. Specifically, for both, a moral principle is a universally quantified statement linking grounding properties (Fs) and moral properties (Ms). Even though they share an assumption about the nature of general moral principles they nevertheless reach very different

conclusions. While the generalist concludes that general principles are true, the particularist finds they are false. The divergence arises because each succumbs to a variation of a certain confusion about the relation between the general and the particular. The confusion, however, takes them in different directions because each recognizes a different and only partial insight about the relation. Each partial insight illuminates an important dimension in moral reasoning, but because each fails to satisfactorily recognize the insight in the other's view neither is able to arrive at a proper understanding of the relation between the general and the particular.

Generalists are correct to think general moral principles have a role to play in moral deliberation, but problems arise for generalists when they further conclude that if there are any general moral principles, then, first, they must take the form of a universally quantified statement, and, second, they must apply to situations in either the subsumptive or presumptive manner. The second point follows from the first. If one thinks the only form a general expression can take is as a universally quantified statement, then it necessarily follows that such expressions must apply to situations either presumptively or subsumptively. Why is this? Because, according to generalists, if generalism is true, then for any given principle [i.e., '$\forall$x (Fx $\rightarrow$ Mx)] there must be an invariable connection between F and M. According to generalists, for the connection to be invariable, then it must be either subsumptive or presumptive. If the connection is subsumptive, the view is: if F, then absolutely x is M, unconditionally and without qualification. If the connection is presumptivist, the view is: if F, then x is the worse (or the better) for being F.

Since generalists hold one of these two views of how a general moral principle is related to a particular case, generalists—wanting to hold onto the insight that principles express genuine moral knowledge—conclude that principles do in fact apply (either subsumptively or

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presumptively). If principles are to apply in the way generalists think they must, then the relations between Fs and Ms must be invariable in any particular case in which the Fs appear. My view is that generalists are right that principles play a role in our moral deliberations, but they are wrong to think the general relations principles articulate must take the form of universally quantified statements (understood either presumptively or subsumptively).

In sum, generalists hold (A) there are general moral principles if and only if they can be expressed in terms of universally quantified statements (understood either presumptively or subsumptively). They also hold (B) there are general moral principles. Because the possibility of true universally quantified statements depends on the existence of invariable moral relations that hold across particular situations, generalists conclude (C) there are such invariable moral relations between Fs and Ms that hold (subsumptively or presumptively), such that F entails M in each any every situation in which F is instantiated.

In response to generalists, particularists generate examples meant to prove that in particular situations relations between Fs and Ms are *not* invariable. Particularists are correct to think these relations are not invariable. But because particularists, like generalists, believe principles must take the form of universally quantified statements—and therefore must apply to situations in either the presumptive or subsumptive manner—particularists conclude that any putative moral principle that attempts to capture these non-existent relations between Fs and Ms is necessarily false. There are no such relations; there simply is *no way* a general proposition, so understood, can capture the endlessly variable relations between Fs and Ms in particular situations.

In sum, particularists believe that (C) is false—there are no invariable moral relations that hold across particular situations. They also believe (A), that is, there are genuine moral

principles if and only if they can be expressed as universally quantified statements (this is the aforementioned assumption in common with generalists). On the basis that (A) is true and (C) is false, particularists conclude that (B) is false—that is, particularists conclude there are no genuine general moral principles. Holding onto (A) in conjunction with the denial of (C), of course, necessitates the conclusion that there are no general moral principles and any putative moral principle is necessarily false (since to be a genuine moral principle it must take the universally quantified form).

I believe there is a better account to be had of the generality in moral principles, according to which both particularists and the generalists should reject only (A). If particularists were to reject (A), they could continue to hold onto their fundamental idea that (C) is false, i.e., they could hold onto the idea that there are no invariable (subsumptive or presumptive) moral relations between Fs and Ms that obtain in each and every situation, without being forced as a matter of logic to reject the generalist insight that (B) there are genuine general moral principles. I will argue later that indeed particularists should embrace the generalist insight that (B) there are genuine moral principles. Furthermore, if generalists were to reject (A), they could continue to hold onto their fundamental belief that (B) there are genuine moral principles and accept what seems obviously true, i.e., the particularist insight that (C) is false.[40] Whether either party would go along with my suggestion to reject (A) depends on the plausibility of some alternative account of the generality expressed in moral principles.

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[40] I will argue that both the generalist and the particularist should accept a role for propositions that are unvarying in their relation to the ideal. The generalist is incorrect to think that propositions that are invariable in their instantiation play a role in moral thought, but can accept that unvarying propositions do play a role. The particularist is incorrect to think that no general proposition can play a role in moral thought, and instead can accept a role for unvarying propositions. See further discussion in this section and also the discussion in section 4.5.2.

Understanding the alternative proposed by the ideal-based account of generality requires prizing the common assumption (A) into two related claims. The common assumption, most obviously, is a claim about the logical form of principles: they are universally quantified statements. Closely connected to this, however, is a claim about the relationship between principles and action and how the former guide the latter, i.e., if principles do guide actions, then they do so only subsumptively or presumptively. According to generalists of the subsumptivist stripe, if an F-property entails an M-property in any situation, it does so in every situation. Principles guide action when a particular case can be subsumed under a principle with the relevant F-property, which results in a syllogistic conclusion about what to do. If F is 'telling a lie' and M is 'bad,' then F should not be done. For the presumptivist, principles provide less direct guidance, but nevertheless rely on syllogistic conclusions. The presumptivist, like the subsumptivist, believes that if an F-property entails an M-property in any situation, it does so unconditionally in every situation. However, presumptivism differs from subsumptivism because in situations with multiple F-properties the conclusion about which act to perform is a function of what *on balance*[41] would be right (yield the highest moral valence). So while conclusions about the moral valence of any given F-property are syllogistic, it is not always the case that the ultimate conclusion about right action is. Despite this difference, both the subsumptivist and the presumptivist share the view that (i) the essential function of principles is to guide actions, (ii) if principles do guide actions, then they only do so algorithmically in either the subsumptive or presumptive manner, a claim which is implicit in assumption (A), and (iii) principles *do* guide actions in either the subsumptive or presumptive manner.

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[41] This is Dancy's view about how a judgment is made when multiple F-properties apply, not necessarily Ross's. See discussion in chapters one and two, which makes clear that presumptivism refers only to Dancy's reading of Ross.

Particularists likewise believe that (i) the essential function of principles is to guide actions and—as we can now see—because the particularist holds assumption (A) she is likewise committed to the view that (ii) if principles guide actions, then they can only do so algorithmically in either the subsumptive or presumptive manner. However, for particularists, the essential problem with principles is that they *cannot* guide actions algorithmically because there are no invariable relations between F- and M-properties for principles to codify. As we have seen, in response to any principle generalists can produce there is a card up the particularists' sleeve: the possibility of a counterexample that can refute the generalists' claim to have produced a principle that provides either presumptive or subsumptive guidance.

Implicit in this refutation is the particularist's commitment to a specific view about the relationship between principles and action: it is the generalists' view. In other words, not only do generalists and particularists share a common assumption about the logical form moral principles must take, but their common assumption entails they must agree about the action-guiding relation between principles and actions, *viz.*, they must agree that if principles guide at all, they do it algorithmically in either the subsumptive or presumptive manner. Because particularists believe it is impossible for principles to guide in this way, particularists conclude that principles are false and therefore play no role in moral thought.

4.7.2   A response to the charge of *ignoratio elenchi*

With the common assumption prized apart and the particularists' view about the relationship between principles and action now explicit, we can address the particularists' charge of *ignoratio elenchi*. It is, at its core, a complaint that the ideal-based account of generality fails to show that principles play a role in moral thought because it does not show that the kind of principles it

endorses are action-guiding. There actually are two ways of understanding this complaint. On the one hand, the charge might be that the ideal-based account of generality fails to demonstrate a role for principles because it does not show that principles can provide subsumptive or presumptive conclusions about right action. If this is the charge, then it is true, but it is harmless for the ideal-based account of generality. However, if the particularists' charge is that the ideal-based account does not tell against particularism because the ideal-based account cannot show that its principles can be action-guiding, then their charge is incorrect.

In other words, the matter in question for particularists is exactly the question of whether principles *can* guide action. *Contra* the charge of *ignoratio elenchi*, I have addressed precisely that question. But I have done so not by showing that principles play the role particularists (as well as generalists) seek them to play. I have instead shown that principles *once properly conceived* are action-guiding. Therefore, according to the ideal-based account of generality, principles do indeed play a role in moral thought. Particularists reject a role for principles because (like generalists) they believe (A), which entails a limited view of how principles can guide action. Once shed of the common assumption about the logical form of principles, it is possible for both generalists and particularists to reconceive principles as action-guiding in ways not envisioned by either of them.

4.7.3   Insights in particularism, generalism, and the ideal-based account

We turn now to an examination of the way in which the example of H's moral reflections gives credence to some aspects of the generalist and particularist positions, and discredits others, in ways that bring the merits of the ideal-based account of generality into clearer focus. Recall from section 4.5.2, the distinction between propositions that are invariable in their instantiation

('invariable propositions') and propositions that are unvarying in their relation to the ideal ('unvarying propositions'). We can use the distinction to refine our account of the generalist and the particularist positions.

Generalists are correct to insist that principles play an essential role in moral-judgment making. In H's case we see that they do indeed play a role in his moral deliberations about what to do—but *contra* the generalist position, principles do not function subsumptively or presumptively, and therefore, they are not propositions that are invariable in their instantiation. That is, they do not depend on the invariable instantiation of invariable moral relations that obtain between specific Fs and Ms in every situation, as generalists suppose they must. According to the ideal-based account of generality, when H reflects on the ideal of marital fidelity, he is, at some point, reflecting on a proposition ('do not commit adultery' or 'adultery is wrong') that is unvarying in its relation to the ideal of marriage. The proposition is unvarying because it expresses an on-going concern or value that is entailed by the ideal. Its relation to the ideal is unvarying because it simply makes more articulate an aspect of the ideal. But the relation between 'adultery' and 'wrong' is not invariable in its instantiation, i.e., it is not the case that for any instantiation of F, then invariably M is instantiated. Thus, we should not understand the proposition 'adultery is wrong' as an invariable proposition because it should not be understood as purporting to claim that each and every instantiation of adultery (F) invariably entails wrongness or wrong-making-ness (M). We should understand it as an unvarying proposition, i.e., it has an unvarying relation to the (content of the) ideal of marriage.

Particularists are correct to insist on the infinite variability of situations, but wrong to think that this renders impossible the applicability of principles. The complexities of H's case indeed point up the inadequacy of a *subsumptive* or *presumptive* application of, for example, the

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principle 'adultery is wrong.' But *contra* the particularists' view, the infinite variability of situations does not mean that situations forever outrun the reach of general moral principles, like 'adultery is wrong.' H's situation appears to be a counterexample that falsifies the principle against adultery. But it is obvious that the complexities of H's situation do not place it out of reach of the principle. The complexities do not falsify the principle prohibiting adultery. The principle, with its unvarying relation to the ideal of marital fidelity, must bear on H's situation. Indeed, the principle necessarily bears on any situation involving the western conception of marriage. Regardless of whether H enunciates the principle to himself, he must come to understand why adultery is wrong—which is just another way of saying he has to understand why there is a principle prohibiting it. Only through an understanding of what is expressed by this principle can he determine whether adultery might *not* be wrong in his case. In other words, what is expressed by the principle is not something false; it expresses an on-going value.

While generalists are correct that a principle like 'adultery is wrong' does indeed play a role in reflections like H's, it is not quite in the way generalists imagine; and although particularists are correct that the unique complexity of H's situation renders the familiar principle against adultery subsumptively and presumptively inapplicable, particularists are wrong to conclude that the complexity renders the principle false or useless in the way they presume. Ideals insure that particular situations are not forever beyond the reach of principles. The general relation between 'adultery' and 'wrongness' does not evaporate because there are cases like H's. Ideals are bound up with principles (e.g., 'do not commit adultery'). Reflecting on an ideal can help us understand the aims and values of the ideal; reflecting on these can help us understand how to exemplify the ideal or whether in certain circumstances it is impossible (in whole or in

part). Even when impossible, the relevant principles still play a role in H's reflections.[42]

Determining whether an agent's action exemplifies an ideal is not a matter of assessing the single

action in isolation; it is a process of engagement with the circumstances, principles, and ideals

(which often overlap with other ideals) in all their complexity.

It is not for no reason that both particularists and generalists are drawn to common

assumption (A). What the common assumption is meant to capture is a kind of decisiveness or

definitiveness: if F is the case, then M is the case: absolutely and without question, no

exceptions. Generalists seek exceptionless principles and find them by insisting on invariable

relations between Fs and Ms. Particularists seek exceptionless principles, but finds exceptions to

any candidate, and reject their possibility. For both, a true principle is supposed to represent a

higher authority, a court of last resort in which a matter can be settled once and for all. [43] As we

discussed in the previous section, Murdoch's injunction functions as the highest or ultimate

principle in the ideal-based account of generality. It is final; there are no exceptions. For this

reason, it does not take the form of a conditional proposition, as common assumption (A)

requires. There is no reason for it to take that form. There are no conditions under which it does

not hold. It is unconditional. If what draws both generalists and particularists to common

assumption (A) is the lure of something truly unconditional, then it should be amenable to both

the generalist and particularist to embrace Murdoch's truly exceptionless injunction. In the next

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[42] See discussion in previous section under the heading 'Is it possible to violate a
principle or an ideal?'

[43] For some legal thinkers, even the court of last resort, e.g., the United States Supreme
Court, is not truly definitive. See Ronald Dworkin's discussion of civil disobedience in *Taking
Rights Seriously*, where he argues, for example, that the Court's decision in *Minersville School
District v. Board of Education* was not truly *law* because it was not consistent with the
underlying political morality of the United States Constitution. In fact, the Court reversed itself
three years later (206-22).

section, after first dealing with an objection, we see how embracing Murdoch's injunction involves ideals.

4.8   THE CHARGE THAT PRINCIPLES CANNOT GUIDE ACTION

Whereas the particularists' previous charge of *ignoratio elenchi* was that the ideal-based account does not tell against the principles particularists have in mind because it does not tell against principles with the generality that figures in assumption (A), particularists might make yet another charge against the ideal-based account of generality: it fails to provide an acceptable alternative to assumption (A); it fails to show that its principles play a role in moral thought because it fails to show how its principles can be action-guiding. In other words, particularists might say, "Even if it is granted that principles of the sort you describe *play a role in H's reflections*, the ideal-based account of generality fails to show that they *guide H's actions*. H is precisely *not* guided by the principle against adultery. He does the opposite; he violates it." It is true that the example of H emphasizes the role of ideals and their attendant principles in H's *reflections*. This, however, is precisely of a piece with what makes such principles action-guiding. But these principles are not action-guiding in the manner envisioned by particularists (or generalists).

4.8.1   Conditioning the system and the mechanism of choice

To explain in greater detail how principles are action-guiding, I would like to develop a suggestion we find in Murdoch. The core idea is that principles are action-guiding in the sense

that they play a necessary role in *preparing* the agent for the moment when action is called for. We should distinguish between preparations that are guiding and preparations that are instrumental. The latter sort of preparation includes buying the ingredients to make soup, or sharpening blades to go ice skating. The buying of ingredients does not guide the making of the soup, and the sharpening of blades does not guide the skating. The kind of preparing in Murdoch's suggestion is the former sort: preparation that guides action in the sense of directing it.

Murdoch presents this idea in her criticism of what she calls western moral philosophy; her main target is existentialism and what she calls Oxford philosophy. Part of her problem with these views, she writes, is that the "idea of goodness (and of virtue) has been largely superseded . . . by the idea of rightness, supported perhaps by some conception of sincerity," which she sees as:

> to some extent a natural outcome of the disappearance of a permanent background to human activity: a permanent background, whether provided by God, by Reason, by History, or by the self. The agent, thin as a needle, appears in the quick flash of the choosing will . . . The agent's freedom, indeed his moral quality, resides in his choices, and yet we are not told what prepares him for the choices. (*Sovereignty* 53)

Her overarching gripe with western moral philosophy is that the moral value of persons resides in their choices and yet the state of the agent—that which drives the choice, what I call the

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'mechanism of choice'—is left mysterious.[44]   Unsurprisingly, the problem persists in today's generalism. R. M. Hare, in fact, is one of Murdoch's direct targets. What is curious is that it persists in particularism, which developed as a response to the generalists' portrayal of choice as the product of an algorithmic application of principles to situations.   Particularism speaks eloquently about the complexities of situations that make implausible the algorithmic depiction of choice. However, particularists, like the generalists of old, ignore the connection between the choice itself (what the agent chooses) and the "mechanism of choice" (the state of the agent). Instead, it focuses narrowly on the complexities of situations—complexities that resolve themselves into what the particularist calls a situation's shape. Shape is expressible as the upshot of reasons for and against various actions—the arrangement of which reveals the *right* choice of action—but, for the particularist, what drives the revelation of shape, what drives the choice, is unaccounted for.   On the particularist's account it remains not only unarticulated, but "inarticulable" (Dancy, *Ethics* 191).[45] What I in chapter three called the particularist's lacuna is, in other words, the gaping mystery of the mechanism of choice.

It is no doubt true that there are limits to what we can say about the mechanism of choice and that what can be said can be difficult to state. Murdoch identifies several (of what she finds to be unsatisfactory) attempts made by western philosophers to describe it. The existentialist view Murdoch finds to be "unrealistic" and "over-optimistic" because "it ignores what appears at

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[44] I craft this phrase from the specific terms in which Murdoch lodges her complaint against western moral philosophy. On the heels of describing her problem with existentialism and Oxford philosophy as a problem about how to solve the "mystery of *choice*," she discusses Freud and characterizes his solution to the mystery in terms of a powerful, highly individual, and personal *mechanism* (54, emphasis added). From these two closely related bits of text, I fashion the term "mechanism of choice."

[45] See also the discussion in chapter three.

least to be a sort of continuous background with a life of its own; and it is surely in the tissue of that life that the secrets of good and evil are to be found" (*Sovereignty* 54). She finds the views of Oxford and British philosophers unrealistically truncated because they focus exclusively on choice and reasons for choice, but ignore intentions and motives. Murdoch gives as an example Hare, whom she says "holds that the identification of mental data, such as 'intentions', is philosophically difficult" and who decides, therefore, that "we had better say that a man is morally the set of his actual choices" (53). She gives, as another example, British philosophers, who use the fact "that motives don't readily yield to 'introspection' . . . as an excuse for forgetting them and talking about 'reasons' instead" (53). These views, concludes Murdoch, are "unhelpful to the moral pilgrim and also profoundly unrealistic"(53). Even Kant, who according to Murdoch, acknowledged that moral choice was often a mystery, nevertheless inadequately pictured it as "an indiscernible balance between a pure rational agent and an impersonal mechanism, neither of which," according to Murdoch, represent "what we normally think of as personality" (53-4).

In Murdoch's estimation, all these views fall short: "neither the inspiring [existentialist] ideas of freedom, [nor the Oxfordian notions of] sincerity and fiats of will, nor the plain wholesome [Kantian] concept of a rational discernment of duty, seem complex enough to do justice to what we really are" (54). For Murdoch, the failure to do adequate justice to what we really are is attributable to the fact that western moral philosophy has not done justice to the mechanism of choice. Murdoch herself finds it difficult to do it justice. She gropes for an account of this mysterious mechanism and settles on a view in which we are:

> much more like a system of energy out of which choices and visible acts of will emerge
> at intervals in ways which are often unclear and often dependent on the condition of the

system in between the moments of choice. If this is so, one of the main problems of moral philosophy might be formulated thus: are there any techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting right? We shall also have to ask whether, if there are such techniques, they should be simply described in quasi-psychological terms, perhaps in psychological terms, or whether they can be spoken of in a more systematic philosophical way. (*Sovereignty* 54)

The ideal-based account of generality tackles the last of these and shows there indeed are techniques for conditioning the system that can be spoken of in a "systematic philosophical way" (54). It provides an account of what we can articulate about both "the condition of the system" and "techniques" for conditioning it "in between moments of choice" in order to prepare for "acting right" (54).

4.8.2   A response to the charge that principles cannot guide action

According to the ideal-based account of generality, reflection is one such technique for conditioning the system and preparing for acting right. Principles play an indirect yet integral role in guiding or directing actions, and there are at least three systematic philosophical ways in which they do so. Principles can be *objects of reflection*, *spurs to reflection*, and *articulations of on-going ends for reflection*. This preparation is such that the actions that result from it will be better guided than actions that call for such reflection, but do not receive it. Not all actions call for this kind of reflective preparation; for example, with practice and repetition, much spontaneous action is actually the result of earlier preparative reflection.

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In order to develop this idea of preparative reflection that indirectly guides action, I first will discuss the role of principles in H's reflections and its connection to Murdoch's idea of the just and loving gaze. I will then discuss the three systematic philosophical ways in which principles that figure in reflection thereby play an indirect role in guiding action. Finally, in section 4.9, I will focus on a special role that reflecting on principles can play in cultivating ongoing commitments that "condition the system" (i.e., develop character) in preparation for right action.

4.8.2.1 The action-guiding role of principles in H's reflection

Any adequate reconstruction of H's reflections must involve *more* than his noting that he should follow Murdoch's unconditional injunction to look with a just and loving gaze and ask himself the two key questions: Have I cleared away the distortions of my ego? Am I looking in the light of the Good? The ideal-based account of generality insists that the task of reflection cannot be so vague as these questions suggest. H must clear away egoistic influences, yes, but he must also take up the stance appropriate to W, who is the "object" of his attention. Murdoch does not emphasize the ways in which specific considerations play a role in arriving at the relation specified by her injunction to look with a just and loving gaze, but a *more detailed* specification of the relevant dimensions of the Good must come into play. That is, it simply is not enough to "look in light of the Good," where 'Good' is a vague, abstract idea that risks looking like the command to be "sincere," which Murdoch condemns in her critique of western philosophy (54).

It is on this matter that the ideal-based account of generality moves beyond Murdoch's.[46]

Murdoch's injunction directs us to clear everything away, look in light of the Good, and see the object for what it is, but the lesson of the ideal-based account of generality is that we are always looking in light of some *enriched* conception of the Good. We never could, and never should, clear *everything* away. H's reflections must necessarily involve his understanding of the sort of values and obligations that bear on the situation in which he and W are enmeshed. He cannot achieve a clear view of W without taking up the ideal of marriage and its attendant principles, such as 'adultery is wrong' and 'abandonment of one's spouse is wrong.'[47] Both principles express some of the aims of the ideal of marital fidelity, which H seeks to exemplify toward W. What H must do is reflect on the Good in a specific way, that is, as it specifically pertains to his situation.

For H to answer the question of whether his egoistic concerns are interfering with his attainment of the ideal of marital fidelity, he will have to examine whether any selfish or other distorting forces have caused him to wrongly conclude that adultery is *not* wrong in his case. He will have to consider what makes adultery wrong and whether his behavior nevertheless exemplifies marital fidelity. In other words, when H reflects on whether adultery is wrong in his case, he must consider the meaning of 'do not commit adultery.' There is nothing esoteric about

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[46] Maria Antonaccio's discussion in *Picturing the Good: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* suggests it might be a substantial departure from Murdoch, if Murdoch holds that the "route" to the Good is a matter of inarticulate faith (56-7). But see Antonaccio's argument in the same discussion for evidence that this is not the only route to the Good on Murdoch's view.

[47] As with the example of M and D, M (with her view of D as common and overly-familiar) cannot help but take up the matter of what sort of conduct is appropriate between family members, especially between mothers- and daughters-in-law. Murdoch, however, does not characterize M's reflections with this level of specificity.

characterizing this aspect of H's reflections in terms of his reflecting on the principle prohibiting adultery.

H's reflections illustrate how the ideal-based account of generality forges a connection between Murdoch's general, unconditional injunction to look with a just and loving gaze and specific principles like 'adultery is wrong.' The injunction satisfies the urge for exceptionless-ness that draws the generalist and the particularist to common assumption (A), but its exceptionless-ness must be fleshed out and developed in terms of ideals. In this regard, the ideal-based account of generality expands on Murdoch's account by showing how ideals give content to her injunction and steer the on-going aim of trying to see things aright. Attending to the ideal and its related principles is an essential part of the task of looking with a just and loving gaze, i.e., it is an essential task of perfecting vision. Perfecting vision involves attending to the Good—the Good as it is expressed in ideals that bear on any particular situations—which will involve reflecting on the principles that are connected to those ideals. Reflecting on these helps H get clear about his values and what he ought to do. This in turn helps H clear away the ego. It gives him a clearer view of what *matters*, which helps him get a clearer view of himself, of W, and of their relation to one another. This effort is, I think, part of what Murdoch calls the "energy" that drives the mechanism of choice.

4.8.2.2 Three action-guiding roles for principles in reflection

According to the ideal-based account of generality, it is fitting to characterize H's effort to act well as involving reflection on ordinary moral principles. We can, however, be more specific about the ways in which principles are involved: principles can be *objects of reflection*, *spurs to reflection*, and *articulations of on-going ends for reflection*. An examination of H's reflections

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helps illustrate the complexity and nuance of these overlapping ways in which principles play a guiding role in reflection and preparation for action.

Because H understands and is committed to the ideal of marital fidelity, it functions as a sight point from which he embraces the various principles associated with the ideal, such as the principles forbidding adultery, spousal abandonment, and spousal neglect. These ordinary moral principles can provide to H a ready spur and give him cause to reflect on his conduct and its relation to the relevant ideal. For example, the principle 'do not commit adultery' establishes a sort of checkpoint, which can trigger reflection. When it does so, H necessarily is aware of the principle, but he can deepen his focus. When H brings the principle into deeper focus, he makes it an object of reflection, which can be a touchstone for considering why adultery is wrong in the ideal and whether a sexual relationship with O is wrong in his circumstances. The principle, therefore, is both an *object of reflection*, as well as a *spur to reflection*.

Furthermore, principles like those forbidding adultery, spousal abandonment, and spousal neglect, are part of the articulation of *on-going ends for reflection*. Principles give *content* and *direction* to reflection and help in directing H's efforts. They package and make articulate values associated with marital fidelity, which he, ideally, always aims to exemplify in his conduct. If he values sexual fidelity, caretaking, and companionship in marriage, then he ideally always wants to exemplify these in his actions when they are called for. Obviously, such a goal is aspirational, because it is not attainable always and without deviation, but H cannot aspire to it without some articulation of it. Principles provide some of that articulation: they articulate on-going ends for reflection, which ideally are exemplified in action.

We can see that ordinary moral principles, like 'promises should be kept' or 'tell the truth' or 'be beneficent' can play similar roles in cases that involve ideals other than marital

fidelity. Consider the example of Q, who finds herself easing her path by telling increasingly frequent "white lies." Suppose she is committed to the ideal of truthfulness, and with it the associated principle 'do not lie.' She begins to worry that she is falling into a habit of lying whenever it is expedient. Her embrace of the familiar moral principle 'lying is wrong' (as part of the ideal of truthfulness to which she is committed), and the fact that she violates it, is *a spur to reflection* on its meaning and its bearing on her conduct. When she thinks about its relation to her conduct, she makes the principle an *object of reflection*. Doing so is of a piece with the task of reflecting on why lying is wrong, why telling the truth is right, and why she should check herself against an encroaching habit of needless, even heedless, fibbing. The principle also provides an *on-going end for reflection* as part of the ideal of truthfulness. Is it ever okay to violate the principle? If so, when? How can she improve in her efforts to follow the principle when she should? As in H's case, the principle gives content and direction to her reflections; it packages and makes articulate some of the relevant values and aims that are part of the ideal of truthfulness, which she seeks to exemplify.

It is worth noting that her commitment to the ideal of truthfulness involves more than simply understanding and reflecting on the principle 'do not lie.' Truthfulness in the ideal involves knowing the difference between deception and discretion; it involves becoming sensitive to different ways of conveying the truth; it involves understanding spheres of confidentiality (and related principles like 'mind your own business' and 'do not pry'); it even involves knowing how to interact with others to help foster truthful dialogue, e.g., a person committed to truthfulness might not ask a friend to answer a question that pressures her to breach confidentiality.

An illustrative case appeared in Kwame Anthony Appiah's *New York Times* ethics column recently. A teacher's male friend applied for a job at the school where she teaches. The friend did not get the job. Later, at lunch with her department head, the teacher learns her friend was not hired because he had made a bad impression and seemed full of himself. Knowing about the lunch, the friend asks the teacher if she found out why he did not get the job.

Suppose the teacher is like Q from the example above and is trying to squelch a nascent habit of fibbing. Must she tell her male friend the truth? She wants to tell a white lie, and indeed, there is pressure to shade the truth (to say 'I don't know' or 'the topic didn't come up at lunch') or even to tell an outright lie ('I was told you were overqualified'). She can, of course, say 'no comment' or 'that's confidential,' but both responses would be sufficiently awkward in a friendship that they would be hard to muster. What should she do to exemplify the ideal of truthfulness? Is a white lie ever justified? If so, is this a case in which it is? How does the fact that she is acquiring a habit of lying factor into her reflections? If she fibs, she misses an opportunity to instruct her friend about spheres of confidentiality. Maybe she does not think confidentiality is pertinent. Maybe she simply does not want to hurt her friend's feelings or deal with his reaction, if he becomes upset. How do these personal desires bear on the question of how best to exemplify the ideal of truthfulness?

The behavior of the male friend raises other interesting questions about truthfulness. Although he does not seem to realize it, the male friend has failed to exemplify aspects of various overlapping ideals of truthfulness, of friendship, and so on. If he were more attuned to the ideal of truthfulness, he would realize the difficult position he puts his friend in, and he would not ask such a pointed question. Interlocutors committed to the ideal of truth foster conversational conditions in which truthfulness is possible, rather than create conversational

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gambits in which there is pressure to lie. The friend should be aware of and respect the zone of confidentiality around the topic of why he was not hired. His pointed question is an encroachment that fails to exemplify the ideal of truthfulness.

These examples show that principles must be understood in terms of ideals. Mere compliance with a principle is not sufficient to exemplify an ideal, nor is non-compliance with a principle sufficient to constitute a definitive failure to exemplify an ideal. The latter of these raises the question of how to think about actions that fail to comply with a principle that articulates part of the content of a relevant ideal. Q should stop telling lies, but H is not supposed to stop committing adultery. The question posed earlier by the particularists remains: how can the ideal-based account of generality maintain that H's conduct is *guided* by the principle against adultery, when he *violates* it? Does the ideal-based account of generality claim that H is guided by the principle prohibiting adultery regardless of whether or not he violates it? It looks like the ideal-based account of generality wants to have its cake and eat it, too.

If we refer to section 4.6.6 and the answer to the question about whether it is possible to violate a principle, we can see that, according to a proper understanding of the ideal-based account of generality, it can have both. If the notion of *being guided* by a principle is understood subsumptively or presumptively, i.e., in terms of common assumption (A), then it will appear odd to say that H is guided by a principle that he violates. As we have seen, however, the ideal-based account of generality offers a conception of being *guided* by a principle that differs from the conception of guidance shared by both the generalist and particularist. The question for H, according to the ideal-based account of generality, therefore, is not whether H violates the principle, but to what degree he fails to exemplify the ideal of marital fidelity. The ideal and its principles guide H in making this judgment. Determining whether H's behavior is wrong, on

this view, is a judgment about where it falls on the continuum of behavior that (we might say) merely falls short of the ideal and behavior that definitely does not exemplify the (or perhaps any) ideal. In the latter case, it is defective, i.e., wrong.

Where a behavior is located on the continuum is not simply a matter of determining whether an associated principle has been violated. H technically has violated the principle prohibiting adultery, but his behavior nevertheless exemplifies the ideal of marital fidelity. In fact, there is no longer any way H and W can exemplify that aspect of the ideal pertaining to sexual intimacy. H exemplifies the ideal of marital fidelity to the extent it is possible to do so. Thus, the central issue according to the ideal-based account of generality is whether H's behavior, in light of the full context of circumstances, ideals, and their principles, *exemplifies* the ideal of marital fidelity. There are reasons for his behavior that are connected to the ideal of marital fidelity itself as well as other overlapping ideals, such as those concerning companionship and intimacy that apply to his relationship with O.

H's adultery is permissible because, seen in the light of the full context, his behavior toward and relationship with W nevertheless do indeed exemplify marital fidelity. The marriage falls short of the ideal because of W's incapacity; the fault is not in H's conduct. The adultery does not interfere with exemplifying the ideal of marital fidelity. In fact, any attempt to exemplify that part of the ideal of marital fidelity that pertains to sexual intimacy could be quite wrong, e.g., having sex with W might be akin to having sexual intercourse with someone in a coma.[48]

We can imagine a scenario in which some other H, call him H_3, is sexually faithful and yet fails to exemplify the ideal of marital fidelity because, e.g., he abandons W in the hospital

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[48] See the discussion in footnote 13 of this chapter.

and essentially forgets she exists. Such conduct obviously does not on the whole exemplify marital fidelity, even though it adheres to the prohibition on adultery. Obviously, technical compliance with a principle is compatible with behavior that fails to exemplify the ideal. Also obvious is the fact that H_3 violates another relevant principle, i.e., the principle prohibiting spousal neglect and abandonment. However, the violation of this principle is blameworthy—because, in violating it, H_3 fails to exemplify the ideal of marital fidelity for no reason that can be seen as exemplifying the ideal of marital fidelity or any other ideal. Conversely, as H's case demonstrates, failure to comply with a principle can nevertheless be compatible with the ideal of marital fidelity and, therefore, not blameworthy.

It is important to make explicit that, on the ideal-based account of generality, the ways in which principles and ideals figure in reflection are intermingling; there is a "to and fro" in how principles and overlapping ideals relate to one another. The relation is not algorithmic. For example, H's commitment to the principle 'do not commit adultery' is grounded in his commitment to the ideal of marriage, and the principle guides him as part of that commitment (as a spur, an object, and an on-going end for reflection). But, no doubt, H's reflections will reach beyond the ideal of marital fidelity. To answer the question of whether his relationship with O is compatible with his on-going aim to exemplify the ideal of marriage, H will reflect not only on the broader web of commitments that inform the ideal of marital fidelity. He will also find himself reflecting on other relevant ideals, such as ideals of friendship and sexual and non-sexual companionship. The ideal of marriage overlaps with these ideals, and H will likely find that his relation with O exemplifies aspects of many of them, including the ideal of marital fidelity itself.

4.9   FILLING THE LACUNA: FROM PRINCIPLES TO CHARACTER

According to the ideal-based account of generality, having principles in mind and reflecting on them is a necessary part of preparing for right action. But even if an agent accepts a principle, like 'do not lie,' it is surely true that merely thinking about, or reflecting on, the principle is not sufficient to prepare the agent for acting on it when the time comes. Surely, the ideal-based account of generality must accept the point that reflecting on ideals and their associated principles is not enough to "condition the system" for right action. A famous experiment involving divinity students at the Princeton Theological Seminary makes vivid the challenge this point poses.

The subjects (all divinity students at Princeton) were told that the object of the experiment was to see how they "think on their feet" (Batson 103). The true purpose was to investigate personality and situational variables that determine helping behavior (100, *passim*). The students were asked to read a passage and then, without the aid of notes, deliver a brief lecture that would be recorded for assessment of their ability to extemporize. Half the students were asked to read the Biblical parable about the Good Samaritan. The other half was given a passage about the "possible vocational roles of ministers" (107). After reading the assigned passage, each was told to walk to a nearby building to meet an assistant, who would record the student's talk. Some students were told they were "already late" to meet the assistant and that they had better "get moving" and hurry to the next building. Others were told that the assistant was ready and that they should "go right over." The final group was told that it would "be a few minutes before the assistant is ready" but that they "might as well head on over" and that if they had "to wait over there, it shouldn't be long" (103-4). En route to meeting the assistant, each student encountered a stranger in an alley who was slumped over on the ground, moaning, and

obviously needing help. The experimenters' hypothesis was that the students who had read the passage on the Good Samaritan would be more likely to help the stranger, but this turned out not to be the case. Instead, the key determining factor in the "likelihood of offering the victim help" depended on how hurried the students perceived themselves to be (107). In other words, the more pressed they felt for time, the less likely they were to offer help.

What interests me are not the technical conclusions drawn by the experimenters, but rather a suggestion we might investigate in the penumbra of this experiment. The striking result is that the seminary students who had read the parable of the Good Samaritan were *not* any better Samaritans than those who had not read the parable. At first glance, the experiment seems to support the view that awareness, or even acceptance, of a principle, does not make it any more likely that an agent will follow it. Furthermore, we can presume that the seminary students not only accepted the principle of Good Samaritanism, but they reflected on it while reading the parable and preparing for their note-free talk. If true, these facts pose a problem for the ideal-based account of generality, which emphasizes the importance of reflecting on accepted principles as a means of preparing for right action. The Princeton experiment does pose a problem for the ideal-based account of generality, but more importantly for my purposes, it also suggests a way into the solution.

If we extrapolate from the Princeton experiment, we will find good reasons to think that if people give themselves more time, they can prime, prepare, or condition themselves to be better able to exemplify the principle of Good Samaritanism (which is analogous to the familiar principle of beneficence or 'be beneficent'). For example, the Senegalese are brought up to engage with (or even give spontaneous gifts to) passers-by and to offer material aid to anyone in need in the moment. This is part of their tradition of *taranga*, which loosely means 'hospitality.'

As a result, the implicit cultural expectations about time management and timeliness tend to allow for greetings or, if necessary, assisting people who may be encountered en route. We could describe this in terms closer to those of the ideal-based account of generality: the Senegalese cultivate a cultural commitment to beneficence by organizing and prioritizing their time in ways that enable them to be better able to exemplify this commitment.

Accepting a principle is different from being committed to it. True commitment requires cultivating the commitment, which is an on-going process.[49] Cultivation of commitment to a principle is what prepares agents for acting rightly. Consider the principle of Good Samaritanism or 'be beneficent.' The principle articulates an aim for which agents can prepare themselves so that they are better able to exemplify it in their actions; it articulates an aim around which agents can organize and direct their efforts so that they are better prepared when the moment for action arrives. They cannot consciously prime or condition themselves to be *better able* to exhibit beneficence unless they have made a commitment to being beneficent, and yet part of achieving a commitment to being beneficent itself involves priming or conditioning. More to the point, *having* a commitment to beneficence involves *cultivating* the commitment.

Reflection plays a special role in cultivating a commitment to principles—not just because reflection involves becoming clearer about what the principles mean, but also because reflection on principles can involve the cultivation of the commitment itself. Cultivation of the commitment—by way of reflection and as an on-going end of reflection—can help us learn how to make ourselves better able to carry out the commitment. Another way of saying this is:

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[49] We are speaking here of commitments to principles that form part of the content of ideals that give specific content to the Good. Therefore, the commitments in question are ultimately commitments to the Good. As such, they are not optional, and the principles in question are not hypothetical imperatives. See the related discussion in section 4.6.5.

reflection on principles is a way of *guiding ourselves in advance*; in this way, it prepares us for right action. To be clear, the preparation we are discussing is the kind that guides, not the instrumental kind of preparation as in gathering the equipment necessary to get the job done. The guiding sort of preparation guides in several ways: in part because it is on-going, in part because it is aimed at the Good, and in part because when we allow ourselves, e.g., more time to get to the office, so we can be open to people along the way, it is our commitment to beneficence that is guiding us in our preparations to be beneficent when the moment calls for it.

By reflecting on the principle prescribing beneficence, an agent can actually cultivate a commitment to it by *conditioning* or *priming* herself to foster beneficent actions, by *conditioning* or *priming* herself to make beneficence more likely and easier when the time for action comes. A principle can guide the agent not as an invariable diktat specifying how she ought to conduct herself in the moment-by-moment, "quick flash of the choosing will" (*Sovereignty* 54). Rather, as part of the ideal, the principle serves as an unvarying end for reflection, a commitment to which she conditions herself to exemplify *when the time comes*. Her commitment is something of a precondition for consciously preparing or conditioning herself to exemplify the commitment when a moment calling for beneficent action arrives. This is one of the ways she *becomes* beneficent, through the cultivation of her commitment to it, by creating the conditions both within and without that make her the sort of person who will be beneficent when the time comes.

It would be a mistake to take these remarks as saying that, according to the ideal-based account of generality, each and every person who is kind is so because she has articulated to herself the words 'be beneficent when possible' or that she has arrived at the idea that the ability to demonstrate beneficence is a function of how hurried she is, etc. What the ideal-based account of generality is trying to do is make sense of our appeal to principles and show that we

do not make the best sense of them when we portray them as exceptionless diktats or defect-inflicting in the generalist manner, or as suggestive reminders, discardable rules of thumb, or mere summaries, in the particularist manner. According to the ideal-based account of generality, we should think of principles as unvarying propositions that help articulate the content of the ideals to which we are committed. In other words, principles represent *commitments*, and it is especially hard to square the idea of a commitment, which necessarily is *on-going*, with the particularist conception of a principle as merely suggestive, potentially discardable, or only a summary of what counted as right action in the past.

Even more to the point, true commitment requires an effort to prepare and guide oneself to be better able to *act* on the commitment, something which is cultivated through reflection, as well as in other ways, like Aristotelian practicing, play acting, training, etc.[50] Preparation for the sort of action we are discussing here involves a commitment to the Good and its iterations in ideals and their principles.[51] Commitment is not most aptly characterized as a moment-to-moment endeavor. Much of the groundwork for our becoming people who exemplify the Good in actions takes place behind the scenes. Reflecting on ideals and their principles bears on the

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[50] Stephen Engstrom mentions an illustrative example of purely reflective preparation recounted by C. S. Peirce in volume five of *The Collected Papers*. At a Peirce family dinner, Peirce's mother spilled "some burning spirits on her skirt" and it caught fire. The other diners sat motionless, but instantly Peirce's young brother leapt to his feet, "snatched up the rug and smothered the fire" (par. 538). Apparently, at other dinners the brother had seen close calls with burning spirits from a "blazer" or "chafing dish" and had worked out in fine detail what he would do if someone actually caught fire. Peirce writes of his brother that "he had often run over in imagination all the details of what ought to be done in such an emergency. It was a striking example of a real habit produced by exercises in the imagination" (par. 487 fn. 1). The brother's seemingly spontaneous action was induced by pure reflection on how to render aid. The results of his reflections were concretely beneficial without any concrete practice in advance.

[51] Of course, it need not be; people can make a commitment to evil and presumably use the techniques described here to cultivate it, but that is not what is on the table here.

choices we make. Of course, we make decisions in the moment and on the fly, sometimes rashly, sometimes not. But an agent with a well-developed mechanism of choice—an agent who is prepared or conditioned for acting on her commitments—expresses something more or less cohesive about herself when she, in fact, acts on those commitments. There are many dimensions and sources of cohesiveness in a person's character, and it is natural to say that one source of cohesion in action lies in an agent's commitment to ideals and their principles—a commitment that cannot be made sense of in terms of subsumptivism or presumptivism or particularism. Commitment to principles is strengthened through an on-going effort to exemplify them in action, an effort that must involve some degree of reflection, an effort that conditions the agent, and in this indirect and non-algorithmic way, ultimately guides the agent in right action when the time comes.

How does H's case illustrate the view that reflection on principles plays a special role in cultivating commitments? Is it not odd to say that H is committed to the principle prohibiting adultery even though, technically, he violates it? On its face it seems odd, but recall that H is committed to the ideal of marital fidelity. It is, therefore, fair to say he is committed to the principle prohibiting adultery because it is an aspect of the ideal. He cannot condition himself to exemplify the ideal of marital fidelity without understanding the role that sexual fidelity plays in the ideal. In H's case, we can assume his past efforts to condition himself to exemplify the ideal of marital fidelity involved conditioning himself to exemplify sexual fidelity, and his understanding of the ideal continues to involve his understanding of its relation to sexual fidelity. Although H can no longer exemplify this part of his commitment to the ideal, his commitment to the ideal persists. Other principles, such as those prohibiting spousal neglect and abandonment, articulate commitments that H can continue to cultivate because they express aspects of the ideal

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that H can continue to exemplify in his relationship with W. These will be the principles to which he can cultivate a commitment through reflection. H might find, for example, that he can more patiently care for W during his hospital visits, if he is well-fed and well-rested before he visits her. Cultivating his commitment to caretaking would therefore involve efforts to insure these conditions are met. Again, these efforts should not be thought of as instrumental to "getting the job done." Rather it is H's commitment to caretaking that is guiding him in his preparations, in his on-going effort, to be caring when the moment comes.

According to the ideal-based account of generality, we can say that H's conduct is guided by reflection on the ideal of marital fidelity, including principles prohibiting adultery, spousal neglect, and spousal abandonment. These principles play a role in H's reflection in three ways: they are *spurs to reflection*, they are *objects of reflection*, and they are part of the *articulation of on-going ends for reflection*. Reflection on principles helps H decide what he ought to do, and it helps him cultivate commitments that enable him to be better able to do it. With its account of the role of principles and ideals in reflection, the ideal-based account of generality proposes to fill the particularist's lacuna (the gaping mystery of the mechanism of choice) with what Murdoch was looking for: a systematic philosophical account of what we can articulate about the condition of the system—and techniques for conditioning it—in between moments of choice (*Sovereignty* 54). A well-conditioned system (or agent) is prepared to act rightly. One technique for conditioning the system to act rightly involves the cultivation of on-going commitments through reflection on principles and the ideals whose content they help articulate.

It is in the sphere of reflection that principles guide; they are prescriptive in reflection. In this sense, the guidance they provide is indirect. We cannot rely on them to make algorithmic inferences about what we should do. This alternate conception of how general principles guide

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action through reflection is one way of working out the ultimate point of the ideal-based account of generality: namely, we need not accept the particularist's rejection of moral principles, because in the ideal-based account we can find an alternate, non-subsumptivist, non-presumptivist account of generality that makes sense of them and the ideals that undergird them.

4.10   ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF GENERALITY

The ideal-based account of generality resists the idea that there are only two ways to make sense of generalism. It may be true that particularism intends its critique to be directed only at subsumptivism and presumptivism, but Dancy, as a leading spokesperson for particularism, comes close to stating in *Ethics without Principles* that subsumptivism and presumptivism constitute the full range of options for a plausible generalism. If this is true, then particularists like Dancy have a view of generality that is unnecessarily narrow.

Dancy writes that the essential task of the generalist is to explain "what it is that a moral principle says that has any chance of being true" (*Ethics* 138). He believes that the generalist's attempts at explanation boil down to two main sorts: attempts to show that principles "tell us that all actions of a certain sort are actually right (or actually wrong), or that a principle specifies a feature (perhaps a thick moral feature) that always counts in the same way wherever it crops up" (138). The former view of principles corresponds to the sort of generalism I call 'subsumptivism;' the latter view corresponds to the sort I call 'presumptivism.'

In chapter seven of *Ethics without Principles*, in a brief section titled "Aristotelian Teleology," Dancy identifies a third generalist approach, which purports to be different from these two main sorts. This third approach Dancy finds in the work of Michael Thompson, T. H.

Irwin, and Jay Garfield. Dancy examines what he describes as their "rather surprising" appeal to Aristotelian biology to see if the conception of generality it advances can help explain "what it is that a moral principle says that has any chance of being true" (138). According to Dancy, the central idea in this possible third sort of generalism is the "Aristotelian categorical." Dancy, however, does not discuss the details of these authors' views or describe what they mean by the term 'Aristotelian categorical.' Therefore, before we can understand Dancy's assessment of this possible third form of generalism, we need to have a better idea of what is meant by 'Aristotelian categorical.'

To this end, we will look at an account of Aristotelian categoricals presented by one of the authors Dancy cites: the account given by Michael Thompson in his essay "The Representation of Life." What Dancy calls Aristotelian categoricals Thompson refers to as 'natural-historical judgments,' and I will alternate between both formulations, except when context requires a specific formulation.[52] According to Thompson's account, natural-historical judgments are general propositions that make claims about the natural history of biological organisms. Natural-historical judgments are common in nature documentaries or life science textbooks and describe characteristics of a species, including its habits, lifecycle, or physical make-up. Some examples are 'the female loggerhead turtle returns to her birth site to lay her eggs' and 'the mayfly breeds shortly before dying' and 'acorns grow into oaks.' Statements like these can easily *appear* to be translatable into universally quantified propositions, such as 'for all

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[52] Dancy does not discuss the specifics of these three biological approaches, so it is not surprising that there is no mention of the term 'natural-historical judgment.' But it nevertheless seems clear that 'natural-historical judgment' is the focus of Dancy's brief investigation into the question of whether this approach will explain how a principle has "any chance of saying something true" (138). As we will see, his example of an Aristotelian categorical, 'tigers have tails,' is a paradigmatic example of what Thompson calls 'natural-historical judgment.'

x, if *x* is a mayfly, then *x* breeds shortly before dying.' But, if this were the correct analysis of such statements, they would be false: most loggerheads never reach sexual maturity, most mayflies do not survive long enough to breed, and many acorns never grow into oaks. Whether loggerhead, mayfly, or acorn—most are eaten, squashed, or otherwise extinguished before maturity.

Thompson's seemingly uncontroversial position is that general propositions, like the natural-historical judgment 'mayflies breed before dying,' are true. The proposition ascribes a predicate to a general kind in such a way that the proposition does not entail the ascription of the predicate to every individual member of the kind. In other words, the proposition 'the mayfly breeds shortly before dying' ascribes the predicate 'breeds shortly before dying' to 'the mayfly,' but the proposition does not entail that each and every individual mayfly necessarily breeds before it dies. Thompson's view is that the natural-historical judgment expresses a perfectly intelligible general truth—even though only some, or indeed very few, mayflies breed shortly before dying.

We can come to an understanding of the logical form of natural-historical judgments by seeing what goes wrong in Dancy's analysis of them. He finds them just as unintelligible as any general moral principle he has encountered, but this is because he has misunderstood them. We find an example of this misunderstanding in Dancy's discussion of the general proposition, 'tigers have tails' (which is a paradigmatic natural-historical judgment). In Dancy's view, the Aristotelian biological approach treats propositions like 'tigers have tails' as "scientific laws" that "can be normative" (138). Thus, for Dancy, 'tigers have tails'—understood as a normative, scientific law—means tigers ought to have tails. The corollary is 'a tiger without a tail is defective one of its kind' (138). For Dancy, this means that the general proposition 'tigers have

tails' is equivalent to a universal proposition such that for all *x*, if *x* is a tiger and *x* does not have a tail, then *x* is defective.

But imagine, as Dancy asks us to do, that tigers have no tails because they have all been removed to make aphrodisiacs. Dancy argues that in such a case there would be nothing defective about these tigers; they have simply been given an operation to serve human desire. Dancy, therefore, concludes that there can be tail-less tigers that are not defective. On this basis, he finds that the Aristotelian suggestion (of which we find articulation in Thompson's natural-historical judgments) does not appear to offer a promising generalist alternative.

Despite his suspicion that it lacks promise, Dancy examines whether the Aristotelian suggestion could provide a plausible interpretation of moral principles. Does it provide a way to understand a moral principle so that it has any chance of being true? Dancy considers what he regards as "a specimen moral principle," namely "'one should look after one's aging parents'" (138).[53] Dancy's verdict is that "[o]n the analogy . . . [with 'tigers have tails'], it looks as if this

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[53] Interestingly, the Chinese government in 2013 passed a statute requiring children to visit their elderly parents. The headline in *The New York Times* was "A Chinese Virtue Is Now the Law." According to *Times* reporter Edward Wong:

> The law was passed in December by the standing committee of the National People's Congress. It does not stipulate any punishments for people who neglect their parents. Nevertheless, that officials felt the need to make filial duty a legal matter is a reflection of the monumental [practical and moral] changes taking place throughout Chinese society.

It is not obvious why the Chinese government did not specify a punishment, but the ideal-based account of generality provides a possible explanation. According to the ideal-based account, the law is an expression of a commitment to the ideal of filial duty and the associated principle that children should take care of their aging a parents. Enacting the principle into law is evidence of the importance of making society's commitments explicit. The decision not to stipulate a punishment can be seen as official acknowledgement that an on-going commitment to a principle does not mean that in every case the right course of action will involve adhering to that principle. In other words, one can consistently assert a commitment to a principle (e.g., assert the content of the ideal of filial duty), and at the same time accept that there may be cases in which *apparent*

principle should be saying that an action of failing to look after one's ageing parents is a defective one of its kind. But this looks utterly unpromising" (138).

Why does Dancy find it unpromising? According to Dancy's interpretation of the Aristotelian suggestion, the principle means that the *agent* who fails to look after his aging parents is a defective agent. He is defective because he has not acted as he should. But, as Dancy correctly points out, there could be cases in which it is *not* wrong for an agent *not* to look after his parents, in which case it would be wrong to judge the agent defective. An agent might have more urgent obligations, or he may have suffered terrible parental mistreatment and therefore not owe his parents anything (138).

With seeming ease, Dancy is able to imagine plausible cases in which an agent who does not care for her aging parents is not defective. Once he has found a counterexample, he concludes that the moral principle is false. If the specimen moral principle is understood as a universally quantified statement, then it *is* false, and Dancy is right to conclude as much. We have seen Dancy deploy this method of refuting general moral principles in numerous examples throughout *Moral Reasons* and *Ethics without Principles*. Upon redeployment of his method, Dancy naturally concludes that the couplet (the Aristotelian suggestion plus refutation via counterexample) "is just normal stuff, entirely predictable by now . . . the Aristotelian suggestion about what moral principles or laws tell us is as vulnerable to such attack as is any other" (139).

It is no wonder Dancy is unimpressed by this return to familiar ground under the guise of something new. But it is Dancy's misunderstanding that has landed him there: he has recast the

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violations of the principle are not blameworthy (*e.g.*, there may be cases in which adults who do not take care of their aging parents are not blameworthy). In other words, a commitment to principles is consistent with a non-subsumptivist, non-presumptivist understanding of them.

Aristotelian suggestion in terms of the standard generalist interpretation of moral principles as universally quantified propositions. The principle in question is 'one should look after one's aging parents.' An application of this principle, recast as an Aristotelian categorical (*as understood by Dancy*) would entail that an agent who does not look after his parents is defective (where 'defect' might mean something along the lines of 'acts wrongly' or 'has a bad character'). But of course there *will* be cases in which it is permissible for an agent *not* to look after his parents, and in these cases the agent will not be defective—even though (according to Dancy) the Aristotelian categorical entails that he is.

Understood this way, I find the Aristotelian suggestion as unpromising as Dancy does. Cashing out a natural-historical judgment in terms of a universal claim about defectiveness basically insures a return to the same old problems. Particularists like Dancy seem stuck in an infinite loop in which *any* sort of general statement is falsifiable via failure of instantiation in a particular situation. But the loop is escapable, once particularists see that there are other possibilities. The particularists will contend that their target was never more, nor less, than the conception of generality associated with subsumptivism and presumptivism, but there is reason to think that it is their only target because it is the only sort of generalism they have eyes for. If their eyes were open to other conceptions of generality, then they might see that the Aristotelian suggestion does not ensnare them in the infinite loop. However, because they have only a narrow conception of generalism in mind, they fail to see the Aristotelian suggestion for what it is and for the evidence it provides that there are perfectly intelligible conceptions of generality other than subsumptivism and presumptivism.

4.10.1 Aristotelian generality

There are several misunderstandings of Aristotelian categoricals—which we have referred to as 'natural-historical judgments'—that blind particularists like Dancy to the sort of generality they express. First, the particularists' interpretation of natural-historical judgments misunderstands their logical form. According to particularists, they should be treated as universally quantified propositions. For example, the general proposition 'tigers have tails' should be understood as saying: for all *x*, if *x* is a tiger and *x* does not have a tail, then *x* is defective. But it should be obvious by now that natural-historical judgments do not make sense if they are treated as universally quantified statements; in fact, if they are so treated, then what they express is patently false. A proper understanding of natural-historical judgments recognizes that they ascribe predicates to *general kinds*. They do not purport to entail the ascription of the predicate to *every individual member* of the kind. If we correctly understand 'tigers have tails,' then we see that, contrary to what Dancy says, it is a general proposition that ascribes a predicate 'have tails' to the general kind 'tigers,' which should not be understood as making a universal claim about each and every individual tiger that it either has a tail or is defective.

There is a second way in which Dancy-style particularists misunderstand natural-historical judgments that is closely connected to their misunderstanding of their logical form. Because particularists treat 'tigers have tails' as making a claim about each and every tiger, they are led to a mistaken belief about its substantive content. Contrary to what particularists think, natural-historical judgments are not expressions of defectiveness. In other words, not only are particularists wrong to think that 'tigers have tails' makes a universal claim about each and every tiger, but they are also wrong to think the universal claim it makes is that every tiger *ought* to have a tail and those who do not are defective. Likewise, to use one of Thompson's favored

examples, particularists would be wrong to think 'acorns grow into oaks' means all acorns ought to grow into oaks, and those that do not are defective. If an acorn with adequate water, light, air, and all the other conditions conducive to growth, nevertheless does not germinate, then we would say that something has gone wrong with the acorn—in which case it would make sense to say the acorn is *defective*.

But what should we say, for example, of a case in which an acorn is eaten by a squirrel? It obviously will not become an oak tree, but we have no evidence one way or the other that it is defective. The same is true of an acorn that is squirreled away in conditions that are excellent for overwintering, but not at all good for growing oaks. If it does not become an oak, it is not necessarily defective. We can make a similar point about a cluster of acorns competing for space, soil, air, and light. Some or all of these will not grow into oaks, but not necessarily because they are defective.

While any of the acorns in these three scenarios may indeed *be* defective (i.e., may be an acorn that would have failed to become an oak even in ideal conditions) none of the acorns can be said to be defective *simply on the basis* that they did not grow into oaks. Each of these scenarios describes a fate that befalls most acorns, but it is clearly wrong to conclude that most acorns are defective. In other words, what natural-historical judgments express is not essentially about defectiveness.

When particularists regard natural-historical judgments as universally quantified statements about defectiveness, it is easy to falsify them. It is clear, however, that natural-historical judgments are not false. They say something *intelligible* about their subjects, including the loggerhead, the mayfly, the tiger, and the acorn. It also is clear that natural-historical judgments say something *general*, but when particularists misunderstand natural-historical

judgments, they fail to recognize the sort of generality they express. Does this failure mean there is still a possibility that natural-historical judgments say something that has any chance of being true? If so, what is it? The answer to this question can be found via an examination of the third way in which particularists fail to understand the content of natural-historical judgments.

This third misunderstanding is a function of the particularists' failure to take into account the fact that when we recognize something as, for example, an acorn we see it in (what Thompson calls) the "wider context" of its being a thing that can grow into an oak tree ("Representation" 275). According to Thompson, the natural-historical judgment 'acorns grow into oaks' is a claim about the "vital operation" of acorns, which includes the wider context in which we find it (*Life* 156). At a minimum, understanding the wider context of the acorn involves knowing that oak trees operate to survive; they germinate acorn seeds in order to reproduce; these acorn seeds draw on limited resources, including nutrients, soil, light water, air, and are vulnerable to environmental disruption; *and* in a certain range of conditions acorns grow into oaks.

Only when we look to the wider context do we see that there *is* something in common to all acorns that is expressed in the general proposition 'acorns grow into oaks.' It is their potential to grow into oaks. The word 'grow' suggests *telos* or potentiality, and *telos* suggests universality. It brings into view the fact that there is something universal in common to all acorns. Once we bring in the notion of *telos* or potentiality, we see that we can restate the proposition 'acorns grow oaks' as 'acorns have the potentiality to grow into oaks by nature.' We can also see that there are no exceptions to this universally quantified proposition. It is true of all acorns, even those that are defective, even those that do not realize their natural potentiality.

Everything (i.e. every acorn) that can be subsumed under the proposition 'acorns grow into oaks' will have something general in common.

Now we can see that even in the Aristotelian categorical there is generality. It is not something explicitly *stated* in the Aristotelian categorical, but it is still *in* the categorical because the categorical includes the wider context. In other words, to determine whether 'acorns grow into oaks' is true or false, it is necessary to grasp the wider context of the acorn, its vital operation, its lifecycle, which will include a grasp of the fact that acorns grow into oaks—which throws us back to the question: what does the statement 'acorns grow into oaks' say that is true? It says something about the *telos* of the acorn. It tells us something *general* about the kind of thing at which the acorn aims. In other words, the general claim 'acorns grow into oaks' is true, even if what it says is not true of every single acorn.

There are ways other than Thompson's to make the point about wider context. We can find an example of a similar point in Frege's discussion of the origin of the concept 'three' in the *Foundations of Arithmetic*. Frege presents three small dots, printed on a page, as a part an argument ridiculing the empiricist contention that the dots so placed in proximity to each other give us the concept 'three.' Frege argues that the concept 'three' does not simply come to us in the face of:

To see these as three we must have some understanding of what 'three' means and also some understanding of the context in which it makes sense to recognize these dots *as* 'three,' rather than as, for example, eyes and nose in a schematic face or as the finger hole pattern of a bowling

ball. The point is that we see in the three dots *more* than what is simply there in the three tiny round marks printed on the page. If it is a schematic face, it is so in virtue of a wider context. If it is the finger pattern of a bowling ball, it is so in virtue of a wider context. If it is three, that too depends on a wider context.

Of course, we do not see an actual face in the three dots, just as we do not see the actual growth of an oak in the acorn seed. But there is an important sense in which what we see *is* in the dots or the acorn—but we cannot see it without the wider context. It is the understanding of the wider context that gives us the vision to see a face or to see the capacity to grow into an oak.

We can see this idea at work in H's case. Just as the wider context (or *telos*) is in the acorn, the ideal is in H; it is in his potentiality. H is potentially someone who would not commit adultery. H's case is similar to the case of the acorn that is being eaten by a squirrel. Just as we can say 'were it not for the squirrel, the acorn would grow into an oak,' we can say 'were it not for W's incapacity, H would not have a sexual relationship with O.' It is the wider context of the ideal of marriage that gives us (and H) the vision to see in H (himself) the capacity for marital fidelity even though he violates the principle against adultery.

Examples like these show that we 'see more in the object before us than simply what is present to us in the particular object itself,'[54] and there is nothing mysterious in claiming that general propositions express this. Thus, there is nothing mysterious about the Aristotelian suggestion: general propositions like natural-historical judgments capture the "more." A true understanding of such propositions, like 'acorns grow into oaks,' includes an understanding of the wider context. Understanding this wider context is what gives us the vision to see what more

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[54] This is a paraphrase of an expression of Thompson's.

is in the object. Is it mysterious to use the Aristotelian suggestion and its idea of seeing "more" to make sense of ideals and moral principles? Not according to the ideal-based account of generality. Although there is no clear-cut division, it might be helpful to think of the relationship like this: we see principles through the wider context of ideals, and we see ideals through the wider context of the Good. That is, we see in principles the "more" that is expressed in ideals, and we see in ideals the "more" that is expressed in the Good, the umbrella which unifies them all. So long as it is an expression of the Good, our embrace of an ideal persists even if there is no case that perfectly exemplifies it. Likewise, our embrace of a principle, with its unvarying connection to the ideal, persists—even if there is a case in which it is permissible to go against it.

4.10.2 Ideal-based generality

The Aristotelian suggestion gives support to the idea that there are conceptions of generality other than the subsumptivist or presumptivist conceptions that particularists have in view. Furthermore, it makes plausible a particular conception of generalism, according to which a general proposition that ascribes a predicate to a kind is not *necessarily* falsified by a case in which the predicate is not true of some individual member of the kind. Another way to put this point is, Aristotelian categoricals or natural-historical judgments convey intelligible information, and there is nothing bizarre or mystical in claiming that they capture more than what we (perhaps ever) see in any particular individual.

Even if Dancy-style particularists would agree that they have misunderstood the Aristotelian suggestion, they might continue to wonder what can be learned from it. While we have shown that there is an alternate conception of generality in the biological sphere, and while this provides evidence that there are alternatives to subsumptivism and presumptivism,

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particularists might nevertheless ask what this can tell us about moral principles. They will point out that the charge against them is that they have misconstrued natural-historical judgments as normative for, say, what tigers ought to have or what acorns ought to grow into and that they have thereby failed to recognize that natural-historical judgments are purely *descriptive* propositions. If natural-historical judgments are purely descriptive, then how, particularists will ask, do they help us make sense of the *prescriptive* or guiding character of moral principles? According to the ideal-based account of generality, moral principles, as part of ideals, play a guiding role in reflection, so surely, the particularist will say, they must in some sense be *prescriptive* of what we ought to do. Given the analogy with natural-historical judgments, how does the ideal-based account of generality make sense of prescriptivity?

The answer lies in understanding the relationship between natural-historical judgments and ideals, which is aided by taking a look at the application of natural-historical judgments to human beings. There are, of course, natural-historical judgments of the biological and behavioral sort that capture vital operations of human beings and are analogous to the propositions we have discussed about loggerheads, mayflies, tigers, and acorns. One such example is 'human beings have two legs,' which is similar to 'tigers have tails' and is perfectly intelligible even though there are people with one or no legs. Another example is 'human beings are omnivorous,' which also is intelligible even though some people are vegans or pescatarians. Both of these are examples of natural-historical judgments that convey intelligible information even though they involve predicates that do not apply in every instance.

'Human beings marry' is another example, but it is more complex than the other two. In one sense, it is analogous to natural-historical judgments like those about loggerheads returning to their birthplace to lay their eggs and mayflies dying shortly after they breed. 'Human beings

marry' describes a human behavior and predicates it of the human kind. It is intelligible even though, if we look across cultures, we will find variations in and exceptions to the behavior, e.g., some people cohabitate; some people are bachelors; and so on. The disanalogy with natural-historical judgments about non-human life arises because 'human beings marry' can also be understood as a description of a social practice. In fact, many natural-historical judgments about human behaviors can also be characterized in terms of human social practices, like 'human beings make promises' and 'human beings care for their dead'. Such practices do create normative expectations in ways that natural-historical judgments do not, because there are often cases in which deviations from the ideal are blameworthy.

Despite this disanalogy there are important similarities between natural-historical judgments and the conception of ideals found in the ideal-based account of generality.[55] Understanding these similarities will shed light on the notion of moral principles advanced by the ideal-based account. First of all, ideals can be expressed in terms of descriptive general propositions. For example, according to the ideal of marital fidelity, an ideal marriage is caring, monogamous, companionate, respectful, helpful, supportive, life-long, etc. Another way to put this is: the ideal of marital fidelity describes the general kind 'marriage' in terms of predicates such as 'caring,' 'monogamous,' 'companionate,' 'respectful,' 'helpful,' 'supportive,' 'life-long,' etc. Like natural-historical judgments, ideals describe a general kind (as a species of the Good) in terms of various predications. These can be stated in general, descriptive propositions:

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[55] The ideal-based account of generality develops a conception of ideals that helps us understand how the Aristotelian suggestion makes sense of moral principles. My claim is that the best way to make sense of moral principles is in terms of the ideal-based account of generality.

- Marriage is caring.

- Marriage is companionate.

- Marriage is monogamous.

- Marriage is a lifelong commitment.

Put this way, the ideal is descriptive in much the same way as natural-historical judgments are descriptive.

There is a second way in which ideals share certain features with natural-historical judgments. Like natural-historical judgments, ideals involve predications of general kinds that *are not falsified* by the mere fact that there are specific instances of the kind to which the predicate cannot be ascribed. Even though there are acorns that never germinate, we do not modify the natural-historical judgment 'acorns grow into oaks,' nor is the natural-historical judgment thereby falsified. Likewise, according to the ideal-based account of generality, even though there are some cases in which a spouse does, in fact, commit adultery, we do not alter the description of the ideal or its related principles. The reason they are not falsified by a failure of instantiation is because they draw on the wider context in which they are formulated. The general proposition 'acorns grow into oaks' has its wider context in virtue of which we can understand the general truth expressed by it as: acorns have the potential or capacity to grow into oaks. Likewise, 'marriage is monogamous' has its wider context (i.e., the ideal of marital fidelity) in virtue of which we can understand the general truth it expresses. However, the general truth expressed by 'marriage is monogamous' is much harder to summarize than in the acorn's case, because it consists of the full array of purposes and other principles that give

content to the ideal (e.g., involving social and legal rights and responsibilities, conventions, expectations, etc.).

The third way in which natural-historical judgments and ideals are similar is that the general propositions that articulate the content of any given ideal are not essentially expressions of defectiveness. According to the ideal-based account of generality, 'human beings marry' should not to be understood in the same way Dancy understands 'tigers have tails' as equivalent to 'a tiger without a tail is defective.' In other words, 'marriage is monogamous' is not equivalent to 'a marriage that is not monogamous is a defective one of its kind.' Just as instances of deviation from a natural-historical judgment are not necessarily indicative of defectiveness, instances of deviation from the ideal are not necessarily indicative of a defect in the agent (or the agent's action).

Along with these three similarities, there is a significant difference between natural-historical judgments and ideals. This difference is the key to providing an answer to particularists like Dancy, who ask what a moral principle "says that has a chance of being true" (*Ethics* 138). Unlike the content of natural-historical judgments, there is a sense in which the descriptive content of an ideal is also prescriptive or guiding. The ideal of marital fidelity, for example, can be given in descriptive propositions like those in the list presented above, e.g., 'marriage is monogamous,' but according to the ideal-based account of generality, the ideal itself is nevertheless prescriptive. Prescriptive propositions, in the form of principles, can be recast as the descriptive content of an ideal, just as these descriptive propositions can be recast in terms of principles. Another way of putting 'marriage is monogamous' is in terms of the principle 'do not commit adultery.' In a sense, the descriptive proposition and the prescriptive proposition are

different ways of expressing the same aspect of the ideal. Neither has priority over the other. They are different sides of the same coin.

At this point, we can return to the question posed by particularists: how can the principle say anything prescriptive, if it is not a universally quantified statement stipulating which action the agent ought to perform, i.e., which action is right? If the principle 'adultery is wrong' is not equivalent to 'for all *x*, if *x* is a spouse and *x* is commits adultery, then *x* (or *x*'s action) is defective,' then what does the principle mean? If the principle does *not* entail that H should not commit adultery with O (or anyone else), then in what sense can it be prescriptive? The notion of a 'wider context' helps answer the question.

To make sense of the prescriptivity in the principle 'adultery is wrong' requires understanding the wider context, including the ideal, in which the principle plays a part. In H's case, for example, understanding the principle 'adultery is wrong' involves his understanding the concept of marriage and the ideal of marital fidelity. With an understanding of the concept 'marriage,' H can identify adulterous conduct, but having made such an identification (as in his own case) he is immediately thrown back into the wider context of the ideal of marital fidelity. We can reconstruct H's understanding of the concept and the related ideal as follows. To recognize an act of copulation as adultery H has to know who is married to whom, and to understand the importance of this bit of information he has to understand a nexus of social and legal rights and responsibilities, conventions, and expectations. Only with some grasp (which can be better or worse) of that nexus (which can be more or less comprehensive) is it possible to identify an act *as* adultery, and with that identification comes the idea that adultery is wrong. In other words, if H understands the principle 'adultery is wrong' he also understands its wider

context, i.e., he understands *why* it is wrong, and if he understands why it is wrong, he can determine whether it is wrong in his case.

According to the ideal-based account of generality, we can preserve the logical connection between adultery and its wrongness (as an expression of the ideal of marriage) without committing ourselves to the generalist position that the proposition 'adultery is wrong' must be understood as a proposition that is invariable in its application—nor must we commit ourselves to the particularist idea that there is no connection between adultery and wrongness, except as we might find in a particular case. The fact that we must understand *something* broader about what makes adultery wrong does not mean that we must be able to lay out in advance specific conditions for every possible case of adultery that determine whether each case indeed is wrong. This is not what the principle expresses. It does not purport to give us a moral verdict in each and every case in which a person has sexual relations with someone other than the spouse. The principle is an expression of the wider context that, for example, enables H to understand his act of adultery as one that does not prevent him from exemplifying the ideal of marital fidelity.

According to the ideal-based account of generality, ideals and their related principles express their own intelligible kind of generality not cast into doubt by exceptions in particular cases. The generality of ideals lies in the content of the ideals themselves; they guide and orient moral reasoning and shape what is seen. Some of the content of ideals is expressed in terms of principles, e.g., the ideal of marital fidelity tells us marriage is monogamous, i.e., spouses ought to be monogamous, i.e., adultery is wrong, i.e., do not commit adultery. In other words, ideals include what we would call ordinary moral principles. In this way, a moral principle is an unvarying proposition; it has an unvarying logical connection with the ideal. What the principle

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expresses is an on-going commitment—a commitment that we cultivate as part of the cultivation of our on-going commitment to the ideal.

Now we have all the pieces in place for answering the particularists' call to explain what the ideal-based account of generality can say about moral principles that has a chance of being true. First, moral principles are propositions that have an unvarying relation to ideals, for they express part of the content in which ideals are articulated. In this way, principles, like ideals, give specificity to the concept of the Good. Insofar as an ideal expresses the Good, the principles entailed by the ideal are true. Second, principles are not prescriptive in the manner of subsumptivism or presumptivism—which is the only form of prescriptivity that generalists and particularists recognize. Principles are prescriptive in a more complex and indirect way: they represent on-going commitments to the Good that we cultivate in reflection, and through this reflection, they guide us and prepare us to exemplify the Good in our actions.

4.11   CONCLUSION: RECONCILING PARTICULARISM, GENERALISM, AND THE IDEAL-BASED ACCOUNT OF GENERALITY

The ideal-based account of generality develops Murdoch's exceptionless injunction in a way that makes sense of general moral principles in the face of the seemingly insurmountable particularist critique that there are no invariable relations between Fs and Ms (i.e., not every instantiation of F entails M). Generalism, whether subsumptivist or presumptivist, depends on the existence of such invariable relations to make sense of its claim that there are genuine moral principles; without them, subsumptivism and presumptivism are false, and generalists find themselves in the same boat as particularists, who are looking for a way to make sense of moral principles. With

presumptivism and subsumptivism now overboard, it is open to both generalists and particularists to follow my suggestion that they embrace an alternative conception of generality, specifically the ideal-based account of generality, as a way of understanding the generality in moral principles.

The ideal-based account of generality is rooted in Murdoch's injunction to look with a just and loving gaze. Her injunction can be made to take the shape of a universally quantified proposition that shares the form of the generalists' moral principles: for all *x,* if *x* is a person, then *x* must look with a just and loving gaze. Because her injunction is exceptionless, particularists might seem theoretically obliged to reject it—and along with it, the ideal-based account of generality. *Nothing* is exceptionless, say the particularists. Yet, interestingly this proposition is not vulnerable to refutation via counterexample. It possesses exactly the unconditional, exceptionless quality that particularists and generalists alike seek in a genuine moral principle. Indeed, how could there be an exception to this command? The Murdochian injunction sounds at a different logical register than the subsumptive and presumptive interpretation of principles, which generalists embrace and particularists reject, but which both believe provide the only viable understanding for the sort of generality expressed in moral principles. Indeed, the particularists' critique, although not always explicitly presented as such, should be understood as directed only at the subsumptivist and presumptivist interpretation of principles.[56] Because an understanding of moral principles is separable from the limited conception of generality on which both generalists and particularists have narrowly focused, it is

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[56] This is common assumption (A). See section 4.7.1 of this chapter.

open to them to seek an alternate way of understanding the generality expressed by such principles.

I end this dissertation with an argument that there is no reason for particularists or generalists to reject Murdoch's injunction, and on this basis there is no reason for them to reject the ideal-based account of generality. In fact, I believe they can and should embrace both. According to the ideal-based account, there are at least two kinds of generality which generalists and particularists should accept. The first kind is characteristic of fundamental principles of the sort forming the foundation of the Murdochian and Aristotelian views: 'look with a just and loving gaze' and 'do as the *phronimos* does.' These have the unconditional, universal characteristics that generalists and particularists require for establishing the truth of a general principle. The second sort of generality they should accept is the alternative interpretation of principles like 'adultery is wrong' developed by the ideal-based account, according to which principles should be understood as unvarying propositions that express general truths about the ideals to which we are committed. According to this account, Murdoch's injunction to look with a just and loving gaze is inextricably tied to reflection on ideals and their attendant principles, both of which give content to the overarching ideal of the Good. As such, they play a necessary role in the perfection of vision. And so, like vision itself, they have a guiding role in preparing us for right action when the time comes. The lesson from this and the previous chapter is that principled reflection is crucial to the on-going effort of perfection in vision and to the process of perfecting agency. It is through this reflection that principles guide actions: they play an indelible role in preparing us for action. They guide us in the cultivation of our commitment to the Good, so that we act *well* when the moment for action comes.

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