Who the Moral Agent Is:

A Case against Impersonal Ethics

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Abstract

In this thesis, I present an argument against conceptualising ethics as impartial. I begin by discussing the problems with universalizing moral requirements for all individuals, arguing that the impersonal point of view is insufficient to impart the same moral demands on everyone. We are meaningfully distinct from one another, and because of this we choose to act differently, as well as have different reasons for the choices we make. Thus, morality – if its purpose is in telling us how to live well – cannot prescribe sameness without compromising this aspect of humanity.

Next, I consider the conception of morality as a system of rules or principles meant to guide action on the basis of sufficient similarity between different situations. I argue that the world is not repetitive enough that strict adherence to rules could adequately address each situation, as well as that the capacity to morally respond to a situation is only fully exercised when applied directly to the features of each situation. Accordingly, the power of moral rules to compel us to act in certain ways is limited at best.

I proceed by giving a positive argument for a personal conception of morality. On my view, the distinctness of who each of us is is an essential component of our living good human lives. Insofar as our capacity to make moral choices is influenced by, as well as constitutive of, who we are, morality cannot be external to us or the same across the board. I conclude by addressing some objections to my position.

To Tati

I made it.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Problem

Taking morality to be impersonal is to understand its demands to be general, independent of who it is that must fulfil a duty and whom they must fulfil it for; the same for the things which it asks us to value. On impersonal accounts, some things are good irrespective of whether they are experienced by anyone or how they are experienced (for example, beauty, health, happiness of the majority… are good in themselves); and duties as general statements always come before the particular features of the situation – except, as Williams points out, "in so far as these can be treated as universal features of any morally similar situation" (1981, 2). Kantian deontology and utilitarianism, although different in significant ways, both take this approach and consider it to be an advantage that they can settle the questions of what is good and how one ought to act in a formulaic manner, so that the answers, once discovered, may be applied to persons and circumstances across the board.

The advantages of impersonal moral theories – relative simplicity, high justificatory value, and straightforward codifiability – come at the expense of practical applicability. Most of us have things, people, and projects we value without expecting anyone else to – I love my parents and my friends, I want to complete my degree, I enjoy painting… and I take these things along with behaviours that promote them to be reasons for my actions without universalizing them into principles other people should adhere to as well. The same goes for the order in which I consider them – whether it is more important to call home today or to study, whether I should prioritize one friend over the other, and so on. Impersonal morality theories have been widely criticized for their inability to account for how to make our partial, person-relative considerations compatible with

impersonal moral ideals. However, given the problematic nature of converting personal considerations into normative moral claims, the debate is still inconclusive. Is morality impersonal?

In this paper, I will argue that morality is fundamentally not reducible to impersonal considerations, but is instead grounded in personal ones. Broadly, there are two types of reasons for this. On the one hand, personal concerns – that is, matters such as relationships, personal projects and so forth, which serve as reasons for action for the individual to whom they belong, but not necessarily for anyone else – shape human lives and make them meaningful. Williams, for example, writes that the projects an individual engages in and deep attachments they have to other people are what constitutes their character and what gives them a reason to keep living by "providing the motive force which propels [them] into the future" (1981, 13). He calls these "ground projects," noting that they need not be selfish (though they might be), and even if they were altruistic, that would not automatically make them conform to the demands of impersonal morality (14). The common thread to all ground projects is that they belong to the agent themselves (and no one else), so there is an element of self-interest that cannot be avoided in living *one's own* life; if morality is to answer the question of how we should live, and it tells us that we may not live for ourselves, Williams concludes that it will leave us with no reason to go on at all. Impartial morality can therefore not be coherently proposed as the first and foremost means of deciding what we should do, given that "life has to have substance if anything is to have sense, including adherence to the impartial system; but if it has substance, then it cannot grant supreme importance to the impartial system, and that system's hold on it will be, at the limit, insecure" (1981, 18).

Scheffler takes a similar route but approaches the matter from the perspective of value. He begins from the observation that humans are fundamentally valuing creatures (that is to say, creatures who value) (2010, 45), understanding "valuing" to mean having "a complex syndrome of dispositions and attitudes. These include *dispositions to treat certain characteristic types of consideration as reasons for action*" (2010, 46; my emphasis). Based on the things we value, he distinguishes between three kinds of value-based reasons for action: project-dependent, relationship-dependent, and group membership-dependent ones. Given that morality is meant to limit and direct the behaviour of "people who are understood from the outset as valuing creatures" (2010, 73), he argues that value-based reasons have direct bearing on the rightness or wrongness of an action – insofar as morality is meant to guide our actions, he is in agreement with Williams in saying that there is no sense in separating it from what we actually do.[1]

The other kind of reasons has to do with how we make decisions about our actions, and how we are *able* to make them in the first place. In "Virtue and Reason," McDowell arrives to the conclusion, similar to Williams, that it is suspicious at best to equate reason (an impersonal, universal faculty) with morality, since we are not only rational beings; we might put this by saying that it is patently impossible for a human being to fully adopt a "God's eye" point of view. Instead, Williams writes, particularly in the case of moral deliberation (which is to say, practical deliberation), my 1st person perspective is always present and never derivative or replaceable by any abstract moral agent (1993, 85; 1981, 68; McDowell 1979, 345). McDowell, who argues in

[1] Scheffler also points out that any kind of argument for partial morality "turns ultimately on some of the most basic and abstract questions about the nature and function of morality, and it is difficult to produce arguments about morality and partiality that do not already presuppose some answers to those questions" (2010, 73). In this thesis, I am assuming without argument that the purpose of morality is to answer the question "How to live well?" While this is not uncontroversial, the matter of what morality is for is a different question from the one I am interested in discussing here.

favour of virtue ethics, points out that an individual's decision to act is always based on their perception of the situation as a whole, not of its separate parts (343) – "a conception of how to live is not simply an unorganized collection of propensities to act, on this or that occasion, in pursuit of this or that concern… Acting in the light of a conception of how to live requires selecting and acting on the right concern" (344). Naturally, different individuals, having different conceptions of how to live, will notice and take into consideration different concerns. He thinks that the impersonalist inclination to appoint an objective arbiter over moral concerns is a reaction to our "distaste for the idea that a manifestation of reason might be recognizable as such only from within the practice whose status is in question" (345) – barring the possibility of ordering other people what to value, not merely how to act, we must acknowledge the (uncomfortable?) fact that very few people are ever in a position to view a situation in the same way as ourselves, if anyone at all; and so, the likelihood is that most people will arrive to the same conclusion about how to act by different paths, or to different conclusions altogether, even if competently using the very same capacity for reason.

These authors touch on another matter important to living a human life that bears greatly on how we choose our actions, as well as on how we judge them: the individual difference of a moral agent, or the question of "who one is" as the decision maker. Williams comes close to what I mean when he discusses how our projects shape our characters (1981, 10); on his view, differences of character that result from different personal commitments are significant to morality because they "give substance to the idea that individuals are not inter-substitutable" (15). We value our friends and loved ones for who they are as individuals. As Scheffler says, we value them by being attentive to their idiosyncratic needs, interests, and desires (2010, 47), which is one aspect of partiality for

which any moral theory must account. But this perspective still keeps the moral agent largely undefined – we have progressed slightly from an agent who is "omniscient, disinterested, dispassionate, but otherwise normal" (Firth, qtd. in Williams 1993, 84) to one who has distinctive and important personal preferences that they must be allowed to use as reasons for action if their life is to make sense, but aside from trivial differences in the content of preferences, the process of moral deliberation is functionally the same for everyone. In emphasising the role one's "way of seeing," a conception of how to live, in one's process of apprehending and responding to a situation, McDowell brings to attention the individuality of the agent as well – but he is committed to the ideal of a virtuous person, whose conception of how to live is a model by which the rest of us should adjust ours. Accordingly, the differences between people's conceptions of how to live are a bug in the system – one that cannot be easily removed (by introducing a neater method, such as reason, for example), but a problem nonetheless.

In this paper, I wish to go further than that and argue that moral agency (an individual's capacity for independent moral deliberation) itself serves as an expression of who a person is. The significance of the distinctness of each individual for giving a person's life meaning has not been sufficiently attended to by the existing body of work. Expressing oneself *as oneself* is a key component of a human life as belonging to its owner, even if it does not follow from this that each person's life *must* necessarily be unlike any other's (Williams 1981, 15). We value in ourselves and in each other the fact that we desire, will, and reason by ourselves even when working with the same input. Given that who a person is also consists in their projects and relationships, their conception of how to live, which gives them a view of any situation particular to themselves, and their need to associate these things with themselves as the distinct individual for whom they serve

as a reason for living, it is not only expected that there should be continuous moral disagreement, but necessary that at least the possibility for disagreement stay open insofar as human beings are taken to be moral agents in their own right. In this way, moral thinking must be primarily person-relative; if there is an impersonal aspect to it, it is derivative.

I will endeavour to show that moral choice constitutes who a person is to a significant degree. A sense of the ways in which one is oneself, different from others and not interchangeable with anyone else, is an important component of human life. If morality is what answers the question of how to live well, then the answers it provides cannot contradict or stifle something fundamental to what a good human life is like. If I make the argument successfully, it will fortify the position expressed by authors such as Williams (1981, 18) and Scheffler (2010, 43): that, insofar as the way we are – valuing creatures, creatures with deeply significant personal projects, creatures with identities – grounds everything we engage in, it is senseless to adhere to any system of rules that is not personally significant to us, including morality.

I will begin by discussing some arguments against the universalizability of morality to show there cannot be rules that guide action in the same way for everyone encountering a given situation. Next. I will look at the applicability of principles across different situations, arguing that although making some generalisations is inevitable, strict adherence to them is not what is expected of a moral agent. The core of my argument is found in Chapter 4, where I make and defend the claim that insofar as the distinctness of who one is matters to living a good human life, and our moral choices significantly contribute to who each of us is, morality cannot be based on anything external to us and the same for everyone who engages with it. I will conclude the thesis in Chapter 5, in

which I will address a few obvious objections to the idea presented in Chapter 4, as well as indicate some ways in which the subject matter of this thesis might be pursued in the future.

Chapter 2: Why the Demands of Morality Cannot Be the Same for Everyone

In this section, I will argue that morality is not a universal enterprise. By universal I mean that the demands of morality, no matter what they may be, cannot be the same for all moral agents. To do this, I will first look at the impersonal point of view and show that it does not result in universal concrete guidelines for action; next, I will show that if the reasons for our actions come from what moral agents value, then we cannot give the same reasons for action to every moral agent; and finally, I will make the point that the differences between individuals matter to morality (living well) in a way that contradicts with the practice of imposing universal demands.

In *Equality and Partiality*, Thomas Nagel describes the internal conflict each moral agent must face when determining whose interests their actions should promote. On the one hand, we begin from a personal point of view, which colours our perception of the world with our own desires; on the other, we are able to abstract from the personal point of view and recognize that we are but one among many individuals who love, fear, value... different things. The coexistence of both perspectives in a single individual is a source of dilemma upon dilemma, but neither is dispensable. Nagel argues that abstracting from oneself inevitably reveals that some things matter impersonally, not only to this or that individual or group (10): as we acknowledge that other people live and value as we do, we must conclude that if our own life has value, then so do the lives of everyone else. Moreover, he believes that if the human life has any impersonal value at all,[2] then it has an immense amount of it; hence the weight of moral dilemmas and the extent of the demands that the

[2]He denies the sceptical claim that nothing has impersonal value (19), but even if we take that to be a possibility, it remains true that we cannot escape the personal point of view any further than to acknowledge that other people have their own – we cannot conceive of the world from a point of view in which nothing has any value at all.

impersonal standpoint can make of us. Although the evident seriousness of the impersonal standpoint easily motivates us to suppress or ignore it, its reality is undeniable; Nagel thus makes the point that denying impersonal values and their consequences amounts to no less than a "denial of our full humanity" (20), insofar as humanity involves recognizing the value of our own lives and thereby the value of the lives of everyone else.

In this argument, Nagel recognizes that the starting point for value of any kind is the personal point of view – the impersonal is only a derivative, made possible by our exercising of the capacity to abstract from ourselves and to conceive of ourselves as a specimen of a group based on certain similarities (in this case, the ability to value; I will address this in more detail a little later). But while his line of thinking brings him to the conclusion that at least one thing, the human life, is impersonally valuable to the extent that it is able to compel anyone capable of recognizing this fact to either face the demands of the impersonal point of view or suppress them as a form of psychological defence, I want to call attention to two other aspects of his view.

First, in order for an object of impersonal value to matter to *me*, I have to have a personal stake in the matter. In Nagel's case it follows that I do from the kind of being that I am – a valuing creature capable of adopting an impersonal point of view – and therefore human life indeed matters to me. However, if Nagel is correct (and I find nothing obviously contentious in his sketch of a moral agent), he establishes only that there is a certain value shared by all beings of my kind, but not that this value is impersonal in the sense that it could compel to action anyone who does not already accept it as compelling. That is to say, Nagel's brand of impersonal value leans into internalism about moral reasons, compatible with the view Williams presents in "Internal and External

Reasons" (1981, 101-113), according to which something can serve as a reason for action only if the agent's existing motivations and desires (their "subjective motivational set") already entail that it should, given that the agent reasons soundly.[3] If we are to come up with internalist-impersonal rules for the behaviour of all moral beings, it then follows either that all moral beings share something that is to serve as a stable source of such rules, or that there are no universal moral rules.

Now, even if we accept that all moral agents, however defined, have in common at least the traits that qualify them as moral agents according to the chosen definition, it is doubtful that this is enough to ensure universal concrete guidelines for action. The second aspect of Nagel's view we should take notice of is the fact that even if we accept the value of human life as a universal constant – which is not entirely unquestionable itself – there are many ways in which our valuing of it may manifest in action. Do we honour life better by promoting as much happiness for as many people as possible, even at the expense of the suffering of a few, or by allowing those with greater burdens to submit reasonable complaints (Scanlon, 189), or by never treating an individual as a means to the desired end, no matter how justifiable it seems (Kant, 36)? In the event that a friend acts with the intention to harm herself, do I honour her life better by preventing her from doing so (prioritising her physical well-being), or is it better not to interfere with her right to choose (and prioritise her free will, which normally constitutes a significant part of a good human life)? It is not in my interest to discuss these dilemmas here – other authors have addressed them at length and with greater skill than I can, and the fact that these are contentious questions alone is enough

[3] For a concise summary and explanation, see van Roojen, p. 66.

to illustrate my point: the fact that all moral agents are beings who have the capacities to value and to abstract from themselves is not enough to produce universally compelling moral demands.[4]

Morality has to do with choosing what to do and for which reasons. In the process of choosing the reasons for our action, Scheffler argues that the personal point of view cannot be ignored; instead, he finds that reasons of partiality are "inevitable concomitants of certain of the most basic forms of human valuing" (2010, 43) – reiterating what we have already seen, that if human beings are fundamentally creatures who value, then not only will their personal point of view take precedence, but also that personal reasons will have "nearly unavoidable" normative force. This is a strong claim to make – normally, we expect normative claims to come from the impersonal point of view, in direct opposition to the personal and often in the form of prohibiting acting on the basis of personal impulses. To defend it, Scheffler defines valuing as a complex set of dispositions and attitudes, among which he emphasises the disposition to take certain types of considerations as *reasons for action* (2010, 46): to value a relationship or a project, for example, involves "seeing it as reason-giving" to oneself (48)[5]. My valuing my friend entails that I take her distress as a reason to take action, for example; the fact that I value getting a degree entails that I complete this thesis; in a different paper, Scheffler also makes the point that part of what we value in interpersonal

[4]If I claim that "the fact that all moral agents share the trait that makes them moral agents is not enough to produce universally compelling moral demands," then all views which consider the shared trait of moral beings to be the capacity to track mind-independent moral properties (Enoch's robust realism, some reductive naturalisms, etc.) can argue against me by saying that that the thing we can track *are* universally compelling demands. If it's also somehow the case that our tracking capacity factors into our subjective motivational sets in such a way that recognizing a "good" thing entails being motivated to do it, or desiring it, or something similar, then it may be the case that the demands of morality are universal for all who are capable of tracking them. Street has an article arguing against robust realism in detail (2006), in which she objects that mind-independent moral facts are "mysterious entities", and unless their proponents can explain what they are and how come we can track them, any view that does not *need* to propose them is better off (141).

[5]That is without having to deny that other people's projects and relationships are reason giving to *them*; Scheffler does not disagree with Nagel on this point, he only switches our focus from the impersonal to the personal half of a moral agent's internal conflict.

relationships is deference to the values of others (2010, 333), such that my valuing of my friend, or a member of my community, may mean promoting their values at the expense of my own (arguably, it is no more an "expense" than it is for me to forego a good night's rest in favour of completing my work, or for me to delay learning how to play piano in favour of learning how to paint first – it simply indicates I have a stronger desire to adhere to reasons for acting from one of the things I value over others, not that the others have ceased to give me reasons for acting).

As long as morality is meant to guide the actions of human beings, and human beings are fundamentally beings who value,[6] then it seems that morality must at the very least be compatible with reasons of partiality or else risk being contrary to the nature of beings whose actions it is meant to guide (Scheffler 2010, 43); and insofar as we accept the premise that morality is the enterprise of determining how to live well, antagonism to our nature is antithetical to it. So, what we now have is a community of moral beings, who are fundamentally valuers and who will be motivated to act in ways that promote what they value, as long as they recognise them; and the force behind these value-based reasons is normative in the moral sense because promoting what we value is conducive to living well.[7] It is also the case that different individuals value different things, and although there are many similarities among us, there does not seem to be a single thing (object, state, relationship, person, or anything else) *all* of us value – the stronger claim would be

[6]On which point there is a respectable amount of agreement in literature, even across normative moral theories; the point of divergence seems to be only what we ought to do with this aspect of ourselves – suppress or control it, or accept it as (one of) the chief source(s) of permissible reasons for action (Street 2010, 366; Williams 1993, 51; Nagel 10, Wolf 244).

[7]I should point out that I am not claiming that promoting just anything we value is always conducive to living well in the same way, but rather that things that are conducive to one's living well must be things this person values (takes as reasons for action, cf. Scheffler). If we imagine an individual who is provided for in all aspects except in that he never does anything for his own reasons, then he either suffers an unfulfilling life because his autonomy is not respected (if he recognizes his predicament as problematic), or fails to qualify as a moral agent (if he is not a valuing being to whom it matters by definition that he be able to promote the things he values).

that we simply have no universal valued thing (*pace* Nagel), and the weaker that we have nothing we all value to the same extent, such that it would give anyone an equivalent reason for action in a given situation.

I would hazard to suggest the former: unlike Nagel, I do not find it obvious that human life *necessarily* has value, either from the personal point of view or from the impersonal. From the personal point of view, failing to value life (one's own or the lives of others) is perhaps uncommon or undesirable, but unfortunately not unheard of; from the impersonal point of view, one learns only that some people value life, and that their "valuing" is the same kind of thing as one's own "valuing," even if one happens to value something bizarre such as torturing babies, counting blades of grass, or turning on every radio one sees (Quinn 236). Simply the fact that I *am* a valuing being (which I must be if I am able to contemplate these matters) does not entail that I must *value* being a valuing being – it is not incoherent to imagine that I detest my predicament and would prefer to escape it. I might even continue to live as one anyway, detesting my predicament all the while, and while that would compromise my well-being by causing me to be frustrated, I would be under no obvious obligation to value changing this state of affairs.

It is, of course, possible to argue that I am mistaken about what I really value, or that I value the wrong things (or fail to value the right ones). However, it is at least possible for me to have correct beliefs about what I value in this case; and it is unclear what makes valuing something "wrong" as opposed to "right" – if the strength of normative claims originates from what we value to begin with, then there is no way to impose normative standards on the act of valuing itself, and although we can judge different objects of value by a variety of standards (whether it is desirable, intelligent,

useful, expedient… to value X), it is not clear that we can (or should) "correct" someone else's preferences on moral grounds (Williams 1993, 88). That said, even if the reader finds the stronger claim objectionable, either of the two is enough to cast doubt on the possibility of universal moral demands: what one should do depends on the particular individual's particular circumstances. Any claim more specific than this will have to assume further shared traits of moral agents, either about the way we are or about what we all value (such as rationality, pleasure, self-interested behaviour, etc.), and such assumptions easily invite objections by counterexample – if I do not already value being rational, experiencing pleasure and so forth, why *should* I take these things as principles by which to organize my system of values?

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams writes that for agents who act on reasons, the impartial point of view is reached by one's standing back from one's desires and interests, so that instead of being taken as causes for action, they become something for the agent to consider and choose either to endorse or not (66). It is a mistake, however, to think of the process of choosing how to act as perfectly analogous to theoretical deliberation – the latter is guided by an interest in the truth about the world, asking questions and making statements which involve the "I" only derivatively – the point of deliberation aimed at discovering the truth is outside of oneself, and the thinker is involved only insofar as they happen to be the one engaging with the question at hand. He writes: "The question 'What should I think about this question' could as well be 'What should anyone think about this question?' This is so even when it means 'What should I think about this on the evidence I have?'" (68). But on his view, practical deliberation is importantly different from the theoretical in that the first person is not detachable from the process in the same way. The actions I take *belong* to me in the way that the conclusions of my logical deliberations do not. Or,

otherwise put, desires and interests are not things just anyone can adopt the way anyone can adopt the premises of an argument in order to see where they lead (88).

In choosing how to act, each individual person lives a life that is meaningfully different from the lives of other people – not only in its content, but in the fact that I have a certain kind of ownership over my life and my decisions that I would not have over the life of my clone, even if my and her lives were identical in content. The actions *I* decide to take and the reasons for action *I* endorse come to involve, as Williams puts it, "changes in the world of which I shall be empirically the cause, and of which [my] desires and this deliberation itself will be, in some part, the cause" (1993, 68). If this is right, then there we cannot possibly codify the right actions in such a way that anyone, irrespective of their identity, could fill the shoes of a moral agent in exactly the same way. In proposing this kind of a moral system, we would be indicating that the differences between individuals are fundamentally insignificant. At first glance, this seems to be what the impersonal point of view is trying to emphasise – that all persons are in a certain sense equivalent and should have their interests taken into consideration accordingly – but Nagel's idea of the impersonal point of view originated from an importantly different point of departure. The sense in which we are equal is not that the differences in our interests do not matter, but precisely in the fact that each individual's own interests matter to them in the same way as mine matter to me. Insofar as a sense of ownership over my life is at least in part constituted by my having my own values which give me reasons for acting the way I do, then a formulation of universal principles stating what everyone should do in all sufficiently similar situations would contradict it, and in doing so, contradict the point from which we began: that we are beings who value.

In this chapter, I have shown how the idea of universal moral principles is problematic if we take moral agents to be inseparable from their personal points of view from which they value, deliberate, and choose. I argued that on such a picture of a moral agent, impersonal moral demands cannot compel anyone who does not already value them personally. Furthermore, being a moral agent of this kind does not entail valuing any specific thing, and even less so expressing one's valuing of something in the same way as other moral agents; in order to make universal claims about what we value or how, the proponent of the idea must assume additional traits shared among all moral agents (such as, for example, rationality). Finally, I pointed out that meaningful differences between persons come not only from the differences in their respective sets of desires and interests, but also from the fact that each person owns the actions they choose to take and the reasons for action they endorse; introducing a moral system wherein these differences are made insignificant infringes upon this aspect of human life.

Next, let us look at the other side of the coin – the question of whether moral demands are the same across all sufficiently similar situations. In the interest of preparing the ground for the argument in support of an entirely person-relative morality, I will make the argument that although devising principles based on relevant similarities is possible, it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for living a good life.

Chapter 3: Morality as a System of Rules

In the previous chapter, I discussed why moral matters cannot be the same for different people. But to advance the argument that I want to make, this is not enough; I must also make a case for there not being strict moral rules applicable to all (sufficiently similar) situations. Even if we accept that morality is not generalizable across individuals, it is still possible to argue that within one person's life, there are rules and principles that guide the behaviour of that person so as to make their life morally optimal; it does not matter according to what conception of the good, since as long as there is a concept of a good life for person A, and A is a person with certain psychological traits, predictable behaviours, etc., then it seems in principle possible to find out how A ought to act under such and such circumstances in order to advance it. In that case, all we would need to do is discover what they are for the particular individual in question, and although it would be a tedious process in the absence of a universal method of discovery, we might be able to do so for any individual. In essence, this project is not immensely different from the project of discovering universal moral principles, and perhaps appears slightly easier due to the fact that one factor –the agent – has been made constant; we can bypass the matter of why *anyone* should care about morality as long as we can answer the question of why *this person* cares. But because I want to deny that even in one individual's life, consistent adherence to principles is not necessary, I first need to address the problem of conceiving of morality as a code to begin with and show why generalizing across situations is not a good way of approaching moral questions.

One way to make this argument is to begin with the consideration that principles serve to specify moral reasons. We use them as reasons for action (e.g., I choose not to lie because of the principle

that I ought not to lie), as well as to explain why an action is right or wrong (e. g., lying is wrong because it causes harm and the principle states that causing harm or failing to prevent it is wrong). There are two ways to understand principles: if we take them to be absolute, then on the principle that specifies lying is wrong, any action that involves lying is always wrong irrespective of the surrounding circumstances (even if my lie is about to save someone's life); or, we can take them to be contributory, meaning that they point out features that count as reasons for or against an action (lying is a part of my saving someone's life) but they do not determine the value of the action overall (it may be that the positive fact that a life will be saved outweighs the negative value of my lying). Dancy (2009; 2004, 8) argues that both of these views are problematic when it comes to morality, because they assume that a given principle *always has the same value* – lying always counts against an action, although it "weighs more" on the absolutist view, where its presence is enough to render an action wrong as a whole. He calls the position that "a feature which is a reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity, in any other" atomism about reasons (2004, 7).

Atomism about reasons is undefended in literature and on Dancy's view, untenable (2004, 74). If we look at the way various features of situations behave in reality when they serve as reasons, we easily find that sometimes, the same feature is taken to be relevant and counted as a reason and sometimes it is not, under some circumstances or on its own it counts in favour of doing an action and in other circumstances against it. Principles about reasons state that some feature behaves as the same kind of reason in all (sufficiently similar) circumstances; but there does not seem to be a reason to hold that moral reasons are atomistic where non-moral reasons are obviously holistic (2004, 76). Therefore, Dancy concludes that if one is a holist about reasons, it is inconsistent for

them to take a principle-based approach to ethics (2004, 77); instead, a particularistic approach is preferable.

It does not follow from holism that there are in fact no atomistic reasons at all. Dancy does consider the possibilities that a) there are some reasons that behave atomistically, and b) that all moral reasons are of the kind that behaves atomistically. About the former, he says that admitting the existence of some atomistic reasons is very different from claiming that "the very possibility of our moral thought and judgement is dependent on our being able to find some such reasons" (2004, 77); therefore, he is able to admit of some counterexamples to holism without danger to the core claim about moral principles. His defence against the latter is much weaker: he says that given general holism and the fact that no one has managed to distinguish moral reasons from ordinary reasons yet, it seems "inevitable" that moral reasons are just as holistic as non-moral ones (2004, 76); and furthermore, that if all moral reasons were indeed atomistic, that would be an inexplicable "cosmic coincidence," and since there is no need for moral reasons to be such, it would be unnecessary (though perhaps not impossible) to provide principles about them (2004, 82). The problem is that if moral reasons are indeed such, accident or not, then it is not at all obvious that a moral system *without* principles is better than a moral system which can provide accurate ones – quite the opposite, in fact, since knowing the correct principles would at the very least make acting rightly easier and better understood, even if the explanation would only be able to go as far as explaining how things are (but not why they are that way).

Ethics Without Principles is Dancy's latest formulation of particularism, and it is a great deal weaker than the version presented in his earlier works.[8] Nonetheless, it is vulnerable to at least two serious objections[9]: the one outlined in the preceding paragraph, and the problem that the strength of authority morality has over us seems to come from its rules – given the unreliability of human resolve, moral rules are what guides us in situations where it fails. The accusation goes that particularism cannot provide an account of moral authority, unprincipled as it is. The best Dancy seems to be able to do in response to is to say that the problem does not *require* principles – to recognise the weakness of our resolve we need to have already decided what is right, and there is nothing in this complaint that shows the decision had to be made in accordance with a principle. But he does not, to my knowledge, provide a positive account of the authority of particularism, or an account of unprincipled ethics that would be convincing to someone who is not already suspicious of generalising principles. I myself agree with Dancy's intuitions and in the next chapter, I will put forward an argument for unprincipled morality (rather than one against the principled), but first I want to strengthen the case against generalisation in the moral domain by approaching the problem from a different starting point.

Gleeson (2007) maintains that although particularism is a good idea, Dancy's way of going about defending it is misguided. As we have seen, much of the force of the conclusion comes from the argument's reliance on the holism of reasons; once that is questioned, particularism is forced to give ground even if the opposing claim is weaker than wholesale atomism. Gleeson thinks that this problem can be sidestepped altogether, but to do that, Dancy's approach has to be abandoned in

[8] In which particularism is defined as the view that there are no moral principles, not that *if* there are some, they are unnecessary (2009).

[9] See "Moral Particularism" (2009) for a summary of these and some others.

favour of showing why it is that "even if reasons were constant and there was a set of rules accessible by us that fully codified moral cases, the individual case would retain primacy over those rules" (364). Going slightly further than Dancy, this claim is not that principles are unnecessary, but that they are *irrelevant* to the behaviour of a good moral agent – even if they exist, are known, and are not too demanding to follow, one does not fully exercise their capacity for moral decision making if they follow them "blindly" (which is to say, if they prioritize the rule over the situation at hand). Gleeson argues that correct moral behaviour requires "attention to the individuality of cases and of people present in those cases," which is manifested in "moral reactions" (369); these include compassion, remorse, indignation, admiration and so forth – commonly called moral sentiments – and the bottom line of the argument is that one cannot at the same time follow a principle *and* act because of a moral reaction. Either one follows a principle, in which case the moral reaction is redundant; or one reacts morally, in which case principles are a secondary consideration at most (371).

Despite being staunchly particularist, Gleeson is not as hostile to principles as Dancy – it could be that they exist, and it could even be that it is very good to know them sometimes; potentially, it is even impossible not to have any moral principles at all, but the point he advances is that the degree to which we take them into consideration when making a decision can never surpass that of the moral reaction an agent has *in the moment* to the particular situation they are faced with. His problem with rule-fetishism exposes the tension that exists between rules and a particular capacity we intuitively ascribe to a "moral agent": the capacity to apprehend the situation at hand and *respond* to it with respect to the features that make it unique.

Approaching the world armed with a code and the intention to measure each experience by how well it fits the rules disregards the possibility of encountering the unexpected and cripples the agent's ability to recognize the unexpected and treat it as such, as well as betrays an arrogance in thinking that all possible experiences are known well enough to evaluate ahead of time. A similar idea is articulated by McDowell when he issues a complaint against rationalizing morality in order to avoid a "vertigo" we feel upon realising that our actions are not guided by anything but "our shared forms of life" (1979, 339). He notes a profound insecurity in the state of being certain about what is right, but not being able to articulate one's thoughts any better than by telling the opponent "You simply aren't seeing it;" we want to get rid of it by positing a dilemma in which one horn is that a good deductive argument describing which concept is being used and how exists and we need only to find it, and the other that the problem did not have to do with an application of a concept at all, so there is an error in thinking that one is applying a concept correctly and the opponent is not (340). But the dilemma is false – it refuses to accept that it is possible to go on living with certainty in the absence of consistent concept application, and thus adds terror of the unknown (and the unknowable) to the present list of unsavoury motivations for codifying ethics.

The last point is not that following a code out of fear is wrong – or even that *making up* a code where there is not one, for whatever reason, is wrong. That would be begging the question – whence would their wrongness come from, if not from my assuming some principle about what is right? That is not what I mean. Instead, the problem lies with the fact that what we expect of rule-followers conflicts with what we normally expect of each other: that we will take responsibility for the decisions we make. Gleeson thinks that "[i]n morality, I cannot be excused from responsibility for my judgements and actions on the ground that I took the counsel of experts or

gurus. I may listen to another's advice and consider it, but I must accept it or disown it with a judgement I am answerable for… I am always responsible for whether the rule applies in any case" (371). Because each of us is their own highest authority in moral matters, consulting external sources on that topic is different from taking a doctor's advice on which medicine to take or the manufacturer's guide to putting together a new bookshelf in that "we can trust expert advice, but we must *assess* moral advice, and we are answerable for our assessment" (372); this is the case both when the moral instructions are coming from another person and when they were made up by oneself in the past. In this moment, I am fully responsible for the choice I am making – including the choice about which principles I am endorsing, however implicitly, *and* for what reasons. When I make a choice to act in a certain way (say, to lie to a friend), it is legitimate to ask me why I chose that action (I did it because the truth was painful for them to know, and I wanted to keep them from harm), question the reasoning that took me from the end goal to the method (why did I think that lying would not harm my friend, or would harm them less than telling the painful truth?), as well as question the legitimacy of my end goal (why did I think keeping my friend from harm was a good thing for me to do in this particular case?).

In each case, the one who is answering the question is me, and I am expected to be able to defend my choice as appropriate. If my friend is still unhappy with me at the point when the best I can do to explain myself is to admit, "I simply accepted this and didn't think about it further," they are likely to retort: "Well, you *should have*"; not because it is morally right to think deeply about my choices (it might well be), but because moral beings are beings that decide for themselves what actions to take – including the decision to accept an external authority and not deliberate independently in a given situation. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir writes: "It is

in this moment of justification – a moment which extends throughout his whole adult life – that the attitude of man is placed on a moral plane" (44). It is not a matter of whether I *should* (pace my friend's accusation) exercise this power. From the moment that I realise I have it, I cannot escape exercising it – the worst I can do is exercise it poorly, by failing to deliberate for myself in response to the situation at hand.

We started this chapter by considering that rule-based morality is potentially inconsistent with the way reasons normally behave. If moral principles determine which things are invariably good and which are bad, so that in our deliberation they always act respectively as reasons in favour and reasons against taking an action of which they are a feature, then we will have difficulty showing that there are any in a world where most things change the role they play in reasoning based on the circumstances surrounding them. However, this account relies too heavily on the premise about what reasons – moral reasons in particular – are like, and is vulnerable to some serious objections. Fortunately, the conclusion against rule-based morality can be reached by alternative means: on the one hand, Gleeson suggests that arguing about whether moral rules are possible or necessary is irrelevant on the grounds that moral agents have the capacity to apprehend and assess each situation with respect to its particular characteristics. When we use it, rules are unnecessary; when we do not, even if we are following rules, we are not acting like moral agents. On the other hand, placing trust in an external authority while failing to appreciate the particularities of each situation for ourselves is a decision we are as responsible for as we are for the decision not to consult a rule. Thus, moral authority ultimately always falls to each of us for themselves and for the moment in which the decision is being made.

Before continuing, I want to make clear the following point. In this chapter I have argued that morality cannot be based on a system of rules, in such a way that the rules would take precedence over the particularities of the situation in which they are to be applied. The idea is that there is no system of rules such that it could answer all of our questions regarding any situation we could possibly conceive of as a thought experiment or encounter in reality, and that even if there were, adhering to such a system would not square with what acting as a moral agent means. However, this does not imply that morality is completely incompatible with generalizations of all kinds. I would in fact step as far back as to say not only that it is *possible* for a person to have rules – even a system thereof – which bear a significant weight on how they apprehend the situation they are confronted with and what they understand to be the appropriate course of action under the circumstances, but also that all of us do in fact have them. Insofar as one wonders about what one should do at all – which is to say, deliberates about what action the circumstances entail and why – then drawing on the similarities and differences between the situation at hand and our other experiences seems inevitable.

It seems to me there are two ways in which this is the case: on the one hand, to learn about the world, we compare features of our experiences, and use the comparisons to justify our decisions to ourselves as well as to each other. This is so both to justify acting in the same way with respect to the same feature (arguing that, for example, lying is wrong in this case because it was wrong in other, relevantly similar cases as well), and acting differently with respect to the same feature (arguing that lying is not wrong in this case, even though it was wrong in other cases, because this case is relevantly different from the others). On the other hand, the fact that people come up with generalizations and use them to guide the behaviour of themselves as well as others means that

when one perceives a feature of a situation as relevant – such as lying – the rules associated with lying often automatically become relevant as well and factor in the decision-making process. So I am not denouncing the relevance of generalizing to morality altogether. I do not have an alternative method to suggest for rendering our moral responses comprehensible to ourselves. But I stand behind the conclusion that generalizations are always defeasible, and that prioritizing rules over situational features is a faulty approach to moral deliberation – one that both fails to use our moral capacities to their full extent, and one that unwarrantedly overestimates the degree to which the world is reducible to identically repeating patterns of circumstances.

Taking into account what we have seen so far, the next chapter will offer a positive argument in favour of a morality that respects both the individuality of each person and the particularity of each moment. While I hope to paint a convincing picture, the forthcoming idea is neither obvious nor immune to criticism, so I will follow it up by discussing some of the more pressing objections and suggesting some ways in which this line of thought might be developed further.

Chapter 4: An Argument from Who One Is

At this point, we have a rough idea of the main problems plaguing rule-based conceptions of morality. Although there is some conflict between the way the world seems to be and the attempt to approach it by means of generalisation, there seems to be a deeper and more pervasive kind of tension running between the nature of rule-following and the nature of human beings. We are creatures who value, prefer, decide, and bear responsibility; when we act, we are involved in our action in a way that no one else is, and we are not involved in the actions of other people in the same way. Rule-based moral systems with an emphasis on stepping back from oneself exclude most of human life from morality, sometimes by limiting its importance and sometimes by directly contradicting it. Saying that morality is, in fact, only a small part of our lives that cannot provide answers to every question – nor should we expect it to – is a move that can be made to combat such dilemmas. This is the argument Susan Wolf makes in "Morality and Partiality" (1992). But her solution condemns morality to only being relevant in situations of conflict, where the interests of the individual are incompatible with the interests of others, with the sole task to "set the minimum standard of tolerable behaviour" (258).

My conception of morality in this paper is much wider than this. If it is an arbiter of correct behaviour, it has this role in service of helping each of us achieve a good, fulfilling life. It seems fatalistic to me to assume that the best any of us can get is a life in which *most* of our wishes and desires agree with impartial, universal moral demands, but in any case of disagreement we will simply have to tolerate following rules we do not understand (in Gleeson's sense of moral understanding, which requires the appropriate moral response to begin with). Consider an

individual X, who lives in a society, has a certain personality, inclinations, interests, and desires. If we think about them from a third person point of view, then Wolf's position does not seem unreasonable – mainly in order to improve the conditions of the community of which X is part and the relationships in which they participate, it makes sense that they will sometimes be better off if they sacrifice their personal wants. If X is a kind of person whose interests and desires frequently conflict with what is best impersonally, then they will have to make such sacrifices frequently. Ultimately, if the goal of morality is social regulation and it is assumed that a well-regulated society benefits all of its members, even if they do not realise it themselves, we must conclude that X is benefitted and their life is improved for giving up on most of their interests and desires and tolerating a life of lesser fulfilment, even though they themselves do not have a moral understanding of why this is necessary.

But a completely different picture emerges if we consider the life of this individual from their own point of view. X is making decisions like a blind man trying to find his way through an obstacle course guided only by the verbal instructions of his friend from the side. He has no idea why he is turning left here and right there; he is told: "Stop now, or you will walk into a wall," but he does not know where the wall is, nor the fact that it is low enough that he would also avoid walking into it if he ran and jumped over it. X's peculiar condition does not prevent them from making their own decisions about what to do and why to do it – if they choose to follow external instructions, they are repeatedly making the decision *not* to consider their own motivations, to neglect their own way of being and hide behind the will of someone whose instructions they do not understand. In this way, they are robbed of a fundamental aspect of what makes them human: the freedom to decide for themselves in response to the situation they find themselves in.

Of course, there is the possibility that there are indeed strict moral rules – a single correct way of getting from the beginning of the obstacle course to the end – and X, lacking the capacity to know them, has no other option but to take the instructions of someone who has it. But the trouble with this view is that no such set of moral rules has been indisputably shown to exist, nor is it clear how it is possible for anyone to know that *they* are the person recognising what they are in a disagreement with someone else. Without this certainty, there is no way for any of *us* to know whether we are the blind man or the friend on the side lines, and no way for us to justify why *we* should be the one to give the instructions to our opponent and not the opposite. With a view like this, there must be a loser and a winner; the loser will have their capacity to make decisions on their own terms limited or altogether eliminated, and will therefore have to give up ownership over their life. That is a steep price to pay; especially given that in the world, moral disagreement is more pervasive than moral agreement. The view of morality as the judge of when the interests of the community beat the interests of the individual implies that moral conflicts can only be resolved by compromising the humanity of one of the parties. The argument that if a well-regulated society benefits all and the person will really be better off by having their humanity compromised begins to look a lot like a contradiction in X's case, who finds themselves having to step back most of the time. How can X's *human* life be made better by denying them their humanity for most of it?

This point is not original. Among others, Scheffler, Williams, de Beauvoir, Gleeson, McDowell (1978, 26), and Street have all made this observation, albeit in different words and to different ends. Each of these authors pointed out a different aspect of the human life that becomes compromised under impersonal, universalistic conceptions of morality: Williams discusses

"ground projects… which are closely related to [man's] existence and which to a significant degree give meaning to his life" (1981, 12); McDowell gives a conception of a person's "distinctive way of viewing particular situations," which cannot be separated into a universally comprehensible combination of the composition of the situation at hand plus a particular desire or set of desires they have (1979, 346); Scheffler talks about "our nature as valuing creatures" of which partial considerations (relationships, group memberships, personal projects, etc.) are an inevitable consequence (2010, 43); Street conceptualises "the practical point of view," which is something of a combination of the latter two in the sense that it describes a way that humans, being creatures who value, operate in the world: we take "at least some of the things in this world to be good or bad, better or worse, required or optional, worthy or worthless… We also have an understanding of the idea of *entailment* from within the standpoint of any given set of values… Even if we aren't clear yet on what it is for a set of values to be *correct*, we can nevertheless think about and discuss what *follows* from a given set of values in combination with the non-normative facts" (2010, 367). As we saw in Chapter 3, Gleeson and de Beauvoir judge that the capacity for moral response, independent deliberation and self-determination, and responsibility for one's own choices are inalienable aspects of what it means to be human. The imposition of universal claims, in the absence of additional assumptions about what all humans must be like, is a threat to all of these.

The other thing these authors have in common, which I am less pleased with, is that none of them deviate from discussing the person in question (moral agent) in the third person. "Man" has ground projects, values, is rational and capable of practical deliberation – which is to say, in an ethical thought example, anyone could take my place and engage in moral decision-making. Different philosophers have different views about the degree to which the idiosyncrasies of the person taking

up the position of the moral agent can/should be allowed to impact their deliberative process – but ultimately, *who* I am matters little to my moral engagement with the situation at hand. I think this is an oversight. Who the moral agent is is inseparable from the decision-making process, not only in that it informs it, but in that it *is created by it*. Each of us engages in the deliberative process differently and comes out the other end shaped by the decisions they have just made.

McDowell's view comes close to what I mean when he writes that "[a] conception of right conduct is grasped, as it were, from the inside out" (1979, 331) – each person has a "conception of how to live," which determines how they perceive the situation they are faced with and what conclusions about action will follow from how they see. He says: "If there is more than one concern which might impinge on the situation, there is more than one fact about the situation which the agent might, say, dwell on in such a way as to summon an appropriate concern into operation… A conception of how to live shows itself, when more than one concern might issue in action, in one's seeing, or being able to be brought to see, one fact rather than another as salient" (1979, 344). However, his view is that there is such a thing as a "virtuous person" whose grasp of the situation, mediated by a virtuous conception of how to live, is such that their conclusions will be virtuous actions – as opposed to us regular mortals, who have varied ways of seeing, fallible in a million different ways. I disagree, at least partly: I think there are many good conceptions of how to live – as many as there are people, in fact – and I further think that this is not a problem for morality, but a feature of human life that grounds morality to begin with. Let me explain.

Consider the question of who a person is. Each of us is importantly different from other people: we have traits of personality, appearance, behaviours, distinct ways of speaking, experiences, and

ways of thinking. We value different things to different degrees, respond to the same situations differently, define our relationships to one another differently, and so on. As a result, we select different goals for ourselves and come up with different ways of going about fulfilling them. Williams acknowledges this, but says that the projects which give an individual's life meaning do not *need* to be different from others' for them to give the individual a reason for living this life (1981, 15). This is true – it often happens that some of a person's features coincide with another's. But I am reasonably confident in stating that no two individuals on this earth are completely the same, and in situations where we find someone incredibly similar to ourselves, we look for differences to separate ourselves from the other person. One reason why this is so, Williams writes, is because in personal relationships, we value each other on the grounds of difference – difference is what makes it the case that no one of my friends is substitutable by another, not can I be equivalently replaced in the relationships I have. To be clear: there are of course situations in which one friend is as good as any other (to keep me company this afternoon, for example), but the fact is that spending time with friend A will make for a different, though not necessarily better or worse, experience than spending time with B would. Difference is also the reason why different people challenge us in different ways: where there is difference, there is a possibility of conflict, as well as conflict resolution, as well as the broadening of horizons and personal growth.

Another reason why who an individual is matters is because it makes a significant contribution to the decisions one makes, and because it is significantly impacted by the decisions one makes.[10]

[10] It may be the case that this is less true, or less important, for Robinson Crusoe living alone on a remote island – which is to say, a person without any relationships in which his differences would bring him valuable consequences. Two comments against this: first, people are always in relation to others – there is no taking an individual away from the community, even if the community existed only in the past, although it may be the case that prolonged alienation from a community weakens the role the relationships play in that person's sense of identity. Second, maybe the reason that Crusoe takes extra care to remember others, write a diary, justify his actions… is in

"What shall I do" is as much a question about *what* I shall do as it is about what *I* shall do. Choosing to do what one thinks needs to be done in spite of fear makes one courageous, choosing actions that minimize risk makes one cautious; looking back on one's life and finding out that one often loses control in arguments may prompt a decision to change this behaviour so as not to be that kind of person in the future. Considering what kind of person one wants to be and directing one's behaviour accordingly, as well as examining one's past behaviour to find out what kind of person one is one way (though certainly not the only way) of forming one's sense of who one is.

The behaviours in question may be more or less susceptible to conscious alteration – consider the "trivial" preferences we have for certain foods and hobbies; the different kinds and levels of attraction we have towards different people; and the different moral responses we have towards the situations we encounter. Perhaps they can be changed or ignored to some extent; but most of the time, they seem to develop outside of our control. We take notice of them and choose if and how we will incorporate them into the actions we take. The significance of this reveals itself in two obvious ways: one is the degree to which our knowing the preferences of a friend – and their knowing of ours – makes a relationship with this friend a close and important one. The other is the matter of which actions one *can* take and for which reasons, given the preferences they have and the strength of those preferences. Take someone with a terrible fear of public speaking: for this person to give a speech, they will have to think of strong reasons why *to* do it so as to overcome the obvious reason not to. Maybe they want to conquer their fear. Maybe giving this speech is

order to retain a sense of humanity. If this is not so, then who one is may be a less important factor than this essay believes it is. Nonetheless, on the contingent grounds that the world is the way that it is and most of us do live in societies, I think forming an identity and distinguishing oneself from others is a significant project we have continuously throughout our lives (note the recent trend of *articulating* that which makes us different, sometimes for political purposes and sometimes just to make sense of the way each of us is in the world).

necessary to advance a cause they support. Maybe they have been challenged to do it, and they refuse to admit defeat on the account of pride. This process will distinguish their experience from the experience of someone who does not mind the attention, even if they both decide to give a speech in the end; it will be shaped by what this person is already like, and how they have decided will contribute to how they see themselves and how they are seen by others in the future. In this way, who one is is to a significant extent made up of choices: choices of which action to take, and choices of the reasons why this action is preferable over another.[11]

Because of this, a sense of who a person is is an important component of their life. On the one hand, it distinguishes us from one another in relationships, so as to make each relationship unique and each of its participants irreplaceable. On the other hand, having a sense of identity greatly contributes to how we own our actions: what values we endorse, which behaviours we disown and desire to change or apologise for, and which behaviours we accept and defend as the proper course of action. To the extent that it is bound up with the way in which each of us exercises their capacity for deliberation and choice, it is an aspect of human life that acts both as a condition for its having meaning, and a tool by which meaning is given to its contents.

We are now in a position to ask the obvious question: what does morality have to do with this? Morality is the matter of how to act and for which reasons. Arguably, not all reasons for action are moral (consider: not speeding in order to avoid getting a ticket, or not speeding in order to avoid causing harm to pedestrians) – but acting for a non-moral reason, as opposed to a moral one, is a

[11] Not terribly different from McDowell's "way of seeing" and Street's "practical point of view" – only McDowell emphasises how the way of seeing is holistic and Street emphasises that all valuing beings share a similarity in that they have a practical point of view. Neither focuses on the differences, and neither talks about the significance that the differences in our points of view have in our lives.

decision that is not immune to moral evaluation; this includes the decision not to take moral factors into consideration at all. When I choose what I will do (give the speech), as well as why I will do it (firstly, because I want to be a courageous person, and facing my fears promotes this goal. Secondly, because making this speech is necessary to my passing the class I'm attending. Finally, because I have been made fun of for handling public performance poorly, and I must prove that person wrong), I am engaging in moral deliberation as well as in the formation of what kind of person I understand myself to be. The reverse is also true: engaging in moral deliberation makes use of who I am both explicitly (by weighing my preferences, characteristics, abilities, motivations and so forth) and implicitly (in the way that I apprehend and respond to the situation at hand), and forms my identity in the sense that the choices I make in the process of deliberation contribute to the kind of person I am.

If this is right, then any conception of morality as impersonal, general, or the same for everyone is in direct conflict with the idea that having a unique identity (that is, being different from other people in meaningful ways) is an important component of human life. To the extent that my being myself is a contributor of meaning to my life, my capacity to recognize various features of the situation as morally relevant, as well as the ways in which they are relevant and the extent to which they are, must be unique to myself. Of course, it is possible that some of the features of my "way of seeing" coincide with someone else's; it's also possible that we take the same reasons into account or arrive to the same conclusion. But I am reasonably confident in stating that precisely because no two individuals in this world are identical in all ways, no two processes of moral deliberation are identical. The idea that they ought to be – that morality is something all human beings are in one way or another the same in, and if there are differences, they must be reconcilable

– is problematic: morality contributes to a significant extent to who we are. Who a person is is a necessary component of a good human life for that person. Forcibly limiting the degree to which who one is is up to the decision of the individual in question is contradictory to creating conditions for a good human life. To the extent that the purpose of morality is to improve our lives, conceptualising it in any way other than deeply person-relative is self-contradictory.

In summary, in this chapter I discussed the way in which the uniqueness of morality to each individual person is a necessary component of the quality of their lives as human beings. However, within a picture of the world in which most moralities are at least slightly different from one another, conflict is not only inevitable, but also unresolvable. Furthermore, it seems that if each person gets to have their own idea of what should be done and why, there is a danger that morality is trivial – if anything goes, then how can one morally fail? In the chapter that follows, I will address these questions as well as some of the other objections in order to clarify and defend the idea presented in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Addressing Objections

The first obvious complaint that immediately comes to mind is how to maintain the relevance of any discussion about what is right on this view. If what is right is what makes the life of a human being good, but the good is different for each person, then is it not the case that anything goes? If moral choices help construct an idea of who one is as much as they result from it, how can one morally fail when deciding on an action? And how can we judge whether an act was right or not, either one's own or somebody else's?

To begin with, I want to assert that I do not think that "anything goes" is the correct way to describe my position. Leaving everyone else aside, my own moral responses to various situations make it clear to me that some actions are acceptable while some are not. Usually, in situations I encounter in day-to-day life, there are a number of different actions I might take; some seem admirable to me, some feel acutely problematic, and others feel "permissible" (in the sense that none of them appears particularly horrible or particularly impressive, so I could choose any of them and be unbothered by the decision). With or without postulating ideal knowledge of the situation – obviously, there might be factors I am missing or misinterpreting, false beliefs I might have about them and so forth – and also without defining the criteria of rightness I am using, it is nonetheless clear from within my perspective that some actions are right for me to take while others are not. Occasionally, I might reflect on my past actions with updated knowledge and recognise my actions as having been wrong: it is also possible that I recognise my past action as wrong but acknowledge that with the knowledge and dispositions I had at the time of taking that action, I could not have done better. Whether that changes my moral judgement of my action at the time depends on how

objective I see moral status as. Since I place the locus of morality on the individual human being's moral responses to the situation at hand as they apprehend it, I am inclined to believe that the best one could have done given their capabilities at the time is as much as can be asked of anyone – but I digress. Because of the vagueness I introduced into the decision-making process by removing universalizable principles and reducing the significance of moral rules, it is the case that in theory, anything *might* go if the conditions allow it, but it is not the case that everything always goes for anyone.

By "if the conditions allow it" I mean if the situation has the features that a given moral agent's conception of how to live (to borrow McDowell's term) will allow them to recognise as relevant and conclude that the action is the right thing to do. But what if the person is mistaken (for example, on McDowell's view, not all conceptions of how to live are made equal, and we have an Aristotelian sort of responsibility to "acquire the right habits," or to learn how to see the world virtuously)? There are multiple questions here: is it possible for us to have wrong conceptions of how to live (or, are all conceptions of how to live made equal)? If it is possible for us to morally fail, how is it possible? And, is it possible for us to be evil, which is to say, to choose actions which we recognise as wrong not out of weakness, but out of an intention to do the wrong thing?

I do not know if there is such a thing as the right conception of how to live. I do not even know how I would judge one conception of how to live as righter than another, except by using my own moral intuition. But my moral responses are a part of my own conception of how to live, intertwined with my desires, wishes, inclinations, upbringing, and other such factors, and can therefore not be trusted as measures of the quality of their own ground. Whatever moral

judgements I make (no matter if about actions, people's characters, or the values they choose to uphold and their reasons why) are confined by my own point of view. We can of course judge conceptions of how to live on other grounds: how conducive they are to living in a community, how likely they are to make us more productive, how likely they are to reduce conflict, how helpful they are in making oneself justifiable to others… But these criteria – while perfectly unobjectionable and certainly appropriate in some contexts – have nothing to do with moral rightness as such. Not before an individual apprehends them as such on the grounds of their own conception of how to live. If two individuals look at the same problem and judge it differently, then I do not see a convincing method of discerning which of the two is morally righter than the other, not have I read about one thus far.

This does not mean that moral failure is impossible. I do not want to make claims about what is good – the purpose of this paper is limited to explaining and defending the idea that morality importantly contributes to the distinctness of human beings, and its contribution is lost if we construe it as something universal or universalizable. However, I do think that the concepts of good and bad are meaningful, as are the concepts of right and wrong. What I have in mind when I say an action is right for the moral agent is that they considered the situation at hand, took into account what they recognised as relevant according to their way of seeing, and chose what to do freely and with full endorsement (some part of which is also "Yes, I want to be the kind of person who values, judges, and acts like this" – that is to say, who the moral agent is).

This has been articulated before in terms of authenticity and the promotion of freedom.[12] For example, in "Existentialism Is a Humanism" Sartre writes that "one can choose anything, as long as it involves free commitment" (51), giving the following example: two women make a choice such that one of them gives up her lover so that he might stay faithful to his fiancée, and the other pursues love above all things, even if it means sacrificing matters such as faithfulness, solidarity, or even her own life. Sartre thinks that what matters is not *what* they did so much as *why* they did it – there is a fundamental difference in a woman who pursues her lover because she values passion and is willing to do what it takes to live accordingly and a woman who does so to satisfy her carnal desires; likewise, between a woman who gives up her lover because she believes in self-sacrifice for the happiness of others, and one who gives him up out of resignation to her circumstances. According to him, moral judgement is not between moral good and moral evil, but only between authentic and inauthentic ways of being (49). Similarly, de Beauvoir elaborates on various ways in which a person can fail to make choices authentically: by giving up the possibility of free choice, by choosing not to face the world but to run from it, by pretending some values are absolute and therefore above the person's own capacity to decide, by failing to recognise that each action has "human meaning" and failing to find significance in other human beings (39-77).

A clear problem with this idea is its apparent inability to deal with the problem of morally abhorrent actions of other people. At the very least, it is uncomfortable to claim genocide, unjust war, murder, rape and similar actions (which is to say, actions that arouse strong moral disgust in most of us) are on some level "not wrong," or even to go as far as to say that they are "right" under some circumstances (for example, if they are authentic and free expressions of someone's being).

[12] See Sartre, de Beauvoir, also Taylor (*The Ethics of Authenticity*, 1991).

Intuitively, they *are* abhorrent, and unquestionably so. However, I have just said that when the goal is an objectively true judgement, my moral intuitions are not to be relied on, no matter their strength (in fact, given that people tend to have very strong moral intuitions about similar matters and still manage to polarize, I am inclined to think I have more reason to be wary of strong moral intuitions when it comes to judging and controlling the behaviour of others). This does not mean that they are mistaken – it simply limits what I believe we can reasonably apply them to. I can judge whether I would take a certain action if I were under the same circumstances, and in that sense, I can judge whether the action was right according to my conception of how to live. Importantly, I can also decide what I want to do in response to another person's action: to endorse it, keep my silence about it, take measures against it, or even try to ensure the person never repeats the action again – the options, as ever, are many. In this sense, another person's actions and reasoning (if available to me) are simply parts of the world which I observe in context and see as more or less relevant to my own future course of action. "Right" and "wrong" are therefore not at all trivial.

However, if it is the case that the actions of the individual can still be meaningfully right or wrong, only on a less generalisable scale, then the claim I cannot see a way to argue for is that someone's action was morally wrong regardless of whose action it was. Consider Street's (2010, 371) ideally coherent Caligula. He genuinely values torturing others, he has true beliefs about various non-normative facts, and he is making no logical mistake about what follows from his practical point of view: torturing others is right for him to do. Intuitively, this is troublesome, because our moral response to the idea of torturing (hopefully) disagrees with his. One possibility is to take the Kantian route and argue that to arrive to a conclusion like this, his reasoning must be incoherent,

even if non-obviously to outside observers and even if he himself does not or cannot realise it for whatever reason (371). But without positing the correct version of whatever we think Caligula is doing wrong – how to correctly morally deliberate, what is truly valuable, what Caligula really values (as opposed to what he thinks he values), etc. – there is no way to demonstrate Caligula's incoherence. The same can be said of a less stomach-turning example, like someone who enjoys counting blades of grass in their free time and has arrived at the conclusion that doing so is a good way for them to spend their time. Likewise, for a positively admirable example: a person who values kindness and generosity and has decided that volunteering at a soup kitchen is the right thing for them to do this weekend. Here is my suggestion: I think it may be possible for anyone to be making the wrong decision for themselves at any given time. Then, knowing what the right decision was, we could condemn or endorse their decision. But without this knowledge – which is the case most of the time – it seems perfectly possible that an action that feels repulsive to me is the right thing to do for someone else, and vice versa. How I react to it is another matter.

As with subjectivist positions, this does mean that two individuals coming up with opposing answers to whether a given action is the right thing to do in a particular situation is a possible outcome, and that neither of them is wrong – or, in other words, that statements inconsistent with one another can be true at the same time. It could be the case that one of them has false beliefs about themselves or the situation at hand, is misreading or concealing their moral response, or something else is interfering with their process of arriving at a conclusion; in this case, their moral disagreement might be resolved if the issue is found and corrected in discussion. However, it is also possible that the two individuals simply have different views, in which case their disagreement has no conclusive answer. What will be done might then be decided on the basis of some other

criterion, as I suggested before; regardless, I am willing to accept the consequence that some moral disagreements are unresolvable.

Finally, let us briefly discuss the question of the possibility of evil. Moral failure comes in three forms: making an error by falsely believing something is right when it is not; knowing something is right, but choosing to do something else out of weakness; or knowing something is wrong and doing it intentionally. Is it possible for a moral agent to choose to be evil – which is to say, to do something *because* it is reprehensible? If this is possible, then the problem of moral triviality will make a reappearance, but this time directed at the idea that *any way of being* goes (not just any action). In other words, what are we to say about someone who chooses to be evil?

I would respond to this question in the following way: when we knowingly do the wrong thing, we explain our choice either by expressing resignation ("I know it was wrong, but I couldn't resist"), or by providing a justification ("I know it was wrong, but it was necessary"). In the former case, the agent is not fully endorsing the decision they made – it is a failure, but it is not evil, since it was not chosen on purpose. In the latter case, the decision is fully endorsed; but it is not intentional evil, since it was not chosen *because* the subject saw the option as reprehensible. Without an impersonal concept of evil, what is reprehensible and what not is left up to the moral sentiments of the individual. While it may be possible to choose what is morally reprehensible to someone else (possibly even because it is morally reprehensible to someone else), the mere fact that the agent chose to act as they did shows that the agent found something appealing about the action. Since finding something morally reprehensible means a disinclination to do it, I do not think choosing evil in the sense of doing something for the reason that it is reprehensible is possible.

To the extent that this thesis is interested in reconciling morality with the deeply partial nature of human beings, there is another issue I must address. In "Morality and Partiality," Wolf provides an alternative answer to the dilemma, which she terms Moderate Impartialism. Recognizing the necessity for personal considerations in our lives, but not willing to give up objectively, absolutely binding moral requirements, she foregoes the project of constructing an uncontroversial sort of relativism and instead recommends limiting the role morality plays in our lives (256). To her, it is indubitable that there is a "degree to which one can expect people to integrate and practically express the fact that all humans are equally deserving" – but it is lesser than what impartialists normally suggest, and we may expect that they "might not hold its own against some other legitimately deep feature of that person's life" (256). In cases where personal commitments (such as love, for example) conflict with the demands of impartial morality, the choice is not between different kinds of moral demands – instead, the question is "whether to attend ultimately to moral concerns at all" (254). On Wolf's view, partialist considerations do not threaten the integrity of moral demands, because they are outside of their purview – morality's only job is to "set a minimum standard of tolerable behaviour" (258), not to dictate the minute details of every decision one makes. Her position considers morality to be impartial, but limited in scope; I am proposing an all-encompassing picture of morality, and so I must show why it is preferable to Wolf's solution.

The biggest problem I see with Wolf's position is that as long as morality is still a matter of which action to choose, it is not clear how we should judge the action of choosing against morality in instances of conflict. If moral evaluation still applies, then not attending to moral considerations amounts to a disregard for the good at best, if not outright evil (this would depend on how one defines intentionally selecting a behaviour that goes against the demands of morality). In this case,

moral judgement is either harsher than our intuitions normally suggest, since it would hold any instance of preferential treatment of personal projects and relationships neglectful or evil; or, moral judgement is much less weighty than our intuitions normally suggest, since it *might* be the case that one-s partialist choice is morally problematic, but acting in a morally problematic way is not terribly dire (provided that the other option was "a legitimately deep feature" of the person's life, though what precisely qualifies as such remains mysterious).

Alternatively, moral judgement might not apply to that choice. Perhaps it is the case that sometimes, moral concerns are relevant features of the situation, and other times they are simply not. But then we would be hard-pressed to understand how morality is still about what we should do (in general), and what we should do in cases where the usual rules about what we should do cease to apply. I would instead prefer to maintain a picture of morality that covers all human actions, as well as refrain from fragmenting aspects of our decision-making needlessly. For one, seeing the matter this way respects the fact that human life is a unity, and does not force us to choose between living life as it is and being moral in situations where the conflict makes itself known. Furthermore, in such cases, Wolf believes we ought to conscientiously deliberate in these cases to determine how harshly to condemn – if at all – those who opt against impartial moral demands. In this, we are in agreement – I think we should *always* deliberate conscientiously. However, I do not think that the deliberation involves calculating when, and to which degree, moral and non-moral features of the situation count as relevant, nor do I assume limited standards for what counts as a person's well-being (which in turn loosely determine when we might be excused for ignoring morality and when not).

To conclude, I would like to return to the subject of moral intuition. Earlier, I said that our moral sentiments tell us what is right and wrong for us to do, and in doing so I assumed that they are reliable, even if not infallible; specifically, they are at least reliably telling us that there are meaningful differences between the actions we might choose. Questioning this assumption is necessary. Why should we listen to them? How can we be sure that they are providing us with the correct information? These questions are epistemological in nature. In this paper, I have presumed to take moral intuition for granted, because it is the only source of information about what is right that we have; but the matter of how any one of us can know what is right for them on the account I have given, as well as how the problems of knowing and understanding our morality interact with the element of *creating* something new (and therefore unknown) by way of making moral choices are interesting and important questions to pursue in the future.

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