A QUIETIST PARTICULARISM

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I : REASONS, ENABLERS, AND INTENSIFIERS

Particularism should contrast with generalism. And yet it will emerge that it is a kind of generality that makes plausible the holism about reasons for action that is Jonathan Dancy's starting-point: he holds that a fact that gives one a reason to φ – or, as he likes to put it, *favours* one's φing – in certain situations may fail to give one a reason to φ – or even (reversing its valence) give one a reason not to φ – in others. Dancy takes this to ground a scepticism about the role of principles in moral thinking. Variable valence, where it obtains, excludes any universal principles, even if these are not prescriptive or proscriptive, defining ways of acting that are always right or wrong, but *pro tanto*, identifying ways of acting that are always good or bad in a way. It may be that there is still an important role to be played by prima facie principles that hold only presumptively, since they fail to apply in certain circumstances.

There are varieties of holism, modest or immodest. The claim may just be that variable valence is not excluded by the very concept of a reason. That would still be significant, but would leave open that certain facts about actions may have a content of such a kind that they cannot but yield a reason for or against, whatever the context; such reasons would be invariable. Thus perhaps there is always something to be said against 'the causing of gratuitous pain on unwilling victims' (Dancy, 2004: 77), or torture, or cruelty. It would then be pertinent to consider what kinds of reason may be invariable, how often they apply, and what strength attaches to them.

A perspicuous form of words for ascribing to an agent a reason for acting is this: 'The fact that *p*, taken in context, gives *A* a reason to φ.'[1] The prevalence of variable valence is not to be gauged independently of a distinction that Dancy draws between a fact's being a *reason*, and its being a *condition* of another fact's being a reason. Most obviously, there are what I call 'basic enablers'.[2] The clearest example is the agent's ability. *A*'s ability to φ evidently gives him no reason to φ; rather, in its absence nothing is a reason for him to φ. Conversely, there are basic disablers: if *A* is unable to φ, facts that would otherwise be reasons for him to φ are no such reasons. Dancy writes (2004: 40), 'In the sort of sense that "ought" implies "can", we might also suppose that "has a reason" implies "can" – that one cannot have a reason to do an action that one is (in the relevant sense) incapable of doing. I have, perhaps, a reason to run as fast as I can but no reason to run faster than that.'[3]

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[1] I shall also speak of a fact's *being* a reason, or *counting as* a reason, for *A* to φ. When I ascribe a variable valence to a reason, what I have in mind is a fact that, in different contexts, may be a reason to φ, or no reason to φ, or even a reason not to φ.

[2] See Price (2008: 165, n. 38). Being persuaded by Bernard Williams that 'a statement about *A*'s reasons' must be 'a distinctive kind of statement about, distinctively, *A*' (1995: 194), I there add as a second basic enabler that the reason must, in some appropriate manner, be accessible to the agent: he must be able to appreciate it, or to benefit from advice that pays regard to it, or to come, if only after conversion by experience, to an appreciation of it; see Price (2008: ch. 4 § 2), and cf. Väyrynen (2006: 715).

[3] It might be said against this that one can regret being unable to φ; but how can I regret this if I cannot regret not φ'ing, and how can I regret that if I have no reason to φ? But I can regret not φ'ing when it would be really good to φ, even if an inability to φ robs me of what would otherwise be reasons for me to φ.

One might reply that, whereas *A*'s ability to φ is not itself a reason for him to φ, it is a component of any reason that he has to φ. But it would be cumbrous to claim that the content of every practical reason contains a 'can', and more intuitive to hold that the predicate 'has a reason' entails 'can'. We can say that most reasons for *A* to φ are more precisely reasons for him to φ *if he can*.[4] Suppose that the fact that *p* is a reason for *A* to φ if he can. This leaves open whether he can φ. However, if we add to *p* that he can φ, then the fact that *p* becomes a reason for him to φ *simpliciter*.[5]

Basic enablers and disablers at once generate a universal variabilism that is too weak to be interesting: *any* consideration that would otherwise count as a reason may fail to do so simply through the absence of a basic enabler (or, equivalently, the presence of a basic disabler). More interesting, therefore, are any variable enablers (or disablers) that are only relevant to certain acts, in certain contexts. Dancy offers this example: someone's having stolen a book disables his having lent it to me from counting as a reason for me to return it to him, though this would normally have been a good reason (1993: 60). It is not that, in a commoner case, his *not* having stolen it is either a reason, or even part of a reason, to return it. What makes it plausible, at least within our social world, that his not being a thief constitutes rather the absence of a disabler than either a reason, or part of a reason, is two things: the improbability of his being a thief, and the innumerability of other circumstances, probable or improbable, whose presence would also be disabling. For it would be an impossible task to specify all of these in order to incorporate their absence within the statement of an invariable reason.

However, such considerations are variable and sensitive to contingency. If I live in a community where books are commonly stolen, but other relevant complications are rare, I might well identify as my reason for returning a book the more complex fact that it has been lent to me by an honest man. This might also be my reason for returning a book to one man, who is honest, rather than returning a different book to another who did steal it, when I am willing to do either but lack time to do both. More recently, Dancy has virtually conceded this (2007: 87-8): a consideration that only *enables* a reason for φ'ing may itself count as a reason for, or favour, what he calls 'a rather peculiar object', φ'ing but not χ'ing (when these differ in respect of that consideration). Yet there is nothing peculiar about the act of φ'ing *rather than* χ'ing; certainly this may be a conscious object of choice, as when I decide to φ, but not because I prefer φ'ing to not φ'ing in the abstract, but because, in context, I have just two options, φ'ing and χ'ing, of which I prefer the first to the second.[6]

Dancy also distinguishes from reasons what he calls 'intensifiers'. He gives this example (2004: 41-2):

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[4] Analogously, perhaps every intention to φ is really an intention to φ *deo volente.* But would that be more plausible than a claim that every belief that *A* is going to φ is really a belief that he is going to φ *deo volente*? Rather than suppose that such a caveat qualifies the *contents* of all our intentions and predictions, we should take it to qualify our *confidence* in them.

[5] A reason *for which an agent acts* has an additional enabler, which is his belief that the fact in question obtains. It is rarely that this belief is itself a reason for action.

[6] Much is uncertain about how freely to admit, and how best to treat, complex act-descriptions. It appears arbitrary of Mark Schroeder (2004) to permit an agential 'ought' within the disjunctive '*A* ought to φ or to χ', but not within the conditional '*A* ought to φ if *p*' (where 'ought' has wide, and 'if' narrow, scope). Surely, if an act cannot be conditional, it cannot be disjunctive either (not that I take either to be definable by the other). It is equally true that I can't φ or χ without doing one or the other, and that I can't φ if *p* unless *p* is true and I φ. And yet what we count as 'reasons for action' can apply both to φ'ing or χ'ing, and to φ'ing if *p*. 'The fact that *p* is a reason for me to φ rather than to χ' appears equivalent in effect to 'The fact that *p* is a reason for me to φ if I am going to φ or χ.' While the logical form of neither is transparent, it would seem, in either case, that the reason needs to be relativized to the pair of alternatives, φ'ing or χ'ing.

(1) *B* is in trouble and needs help.
(2) *A* is the only other person around.
So, (3) *A* helps *B*.

He takes (1) to be already a reason for (3), and denies that (2) is 'another reason, on top of the first one'. Rather, he takes (2) 'to intensify the reason' given by (1). (2) makes the reason given by (1) 'stronger'; we should not suppose that it is 'part of a larger reason which includes [*B*'s] need for help'. He writes, 'The tendency to agglomerate favourer and intensifier is much less strong than the tendency to agglomerate favourer and enabler.' If this is true, it is because favourers *require* the presence of enablers, but only *invite* the presence of intensifiers. It is hard to see that this prohibits agglomeration: if '*B* is in trouble and needs help' is already a reason for *A* to act (which entails that *A* is able to help), why shouldn't '*B* is in trouble and needs help that only *A* can give' count as a stronger reason for *A* to act – one that might override, where (1) on its own would not, a significant counter-reason (such as *A*'s having a really pressing engagement)? However, even if we *may* say that, we can also capture the case by saying that, in certain circumstances, it is only in the presence of (2) that (1) gives *A* sufficient reason for (3).

More significant, but not an objection to Dancy, is that a consideration that only intensifies a reason for (3) may be essential to a reason for something different but related. Suppose that *B* is only one of two people whom *A* is in a position to help, but that the other person can be helped (and, let us suppose, will be helped) by someone else if not by *A*. Here (2), which intensified a reason for (3), becomes a necessary part of reason for the following, which is more complex:

So, (4) *A* helps *B* rather than *C*.

Hence we capture a distinction if we say (with Dancy) that (2) intensifies (1) as a reason for (3), but goes to constitute a more complex reason for (4).

What also stands is that, if (2) intensifies (1) as a reason for (3), (2) cannot serve as a reason for (3) on its own. Contrast a separate reason such as this:

(5) *A* has promised to help *B* (whether he is in need or not).

Here, (1) and (5) stand to (3) as distinct reasons, whose double presence counts for more than the presence of either of them taken on its own. However, conjoining (1) and (5) in order to form a single, complex reason would not be intelligible.[7]

Such variations are intriguing. What is most important, I think, is that Dancy's policy of setting aside certain considerations as enabling or intensifying a reason, rather than being themselves a reason, or even part of a reason, has the effect of ruling out what would otherwise be further specifications of reasons.[8] A corollary is to leave what

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[7] There are doubtless other possibilities. Suppose that (6) *A* has promised to help if (1) holds. Clearly (6) is not a reason for (3) that is additional to (1), since (1) is a condition of (6)'s applying. Yet (6) gives a reason for (3) that is additional to the considerations of benevolence that were doubtless implicit in Dancy's appeal to (1) as a reason for (3). (6) relates to (1) rather as an intensifier; but that may not be the *mot juste* when different kinds of consideration are in question.

[8] Dancy (2004: 96) rightly distinguishes a fact's being a reason, and what (if anything) *explains* its being a reason, or even *guarantees* that it is a reason. Reasons are typically things *for* which an agent acts, and which he can state if he is asked for a reason. Our concept of practical reasons is one of facts of such a kind that agents (and not just theorists) can typically *act on* them, and *avow* them as their reasons. (This implies not that agents are always aware of their reasons, but that their not being so is a *failure*. This would be the contingent product of a lack of clear-headedness or of self-knowledge, and not the inevitable result of what is unsurveyably complex or unfathomably profound.) A complete explanation that

is itself a reason more general, and less specific. This may be important for the variable valences, and (we may now add) degrees of valence, emphasized by the holist. If we were to build the presence of enablers, the absence of disablers, the presence of intensifiers, and (we may add) the absence of attenuators into the very content of a reason, it would become less plausible that *further* information may always cancel, reverse, intensify, or attenuate a given reason. Why should we suppose that our practical sensibilities are so indefinitely fine-grained that a further specification of the circumstances can always make a difference? Rather, variations in valence are a result of a certain generality in the contents of a reason. In this respect, 'variabilism' may be an apter label than 'particularism': it is the typical *generality* of the facts that give reasons that make them liable to vary, in different contexts, between favouring or not favouring or disfavouring, and to variable degrees, the very same act.[9]

II : 'ONE THOUGHT TOO MANY'

A need to distinguish reasons from considerations that connect with reasons but are not themselves reasons is also illustrated, I believe, by some reflections of Bernard Williams that have become celebrated under the label 'one thought too many'. Williams (1981a: 18) takes over from Charles Fried the following case: a man can save one, but not both, of two persons in equal peril, and one is them is his wife. If he is to save his wife, does this demand an ethical justification? (We can imagine that the other person is also someone's wife, and, say, with more or younger children.) Williams resists 'the idea that moral principle can legitimate his preference, yielding the conclusion that in situations of this kind it is at least all right (morally permissible) to save one's wife'. He objects to it as follows (ibid.):

> This construction provides the agent with one thought too many: it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife, not that it was his wife and that in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one's wife.

There is something right about this; but it needs care to identify Williams's target.

It is evident, at least in context, that he is rejecting any demand for a *moral* justification – in some sense of the term 'moral'. One way of reading the passage is as an appeal to romance: perhaps 'It's my wife' here has the same force as 'It's the love of my life.' (If so, one should permit a similar appeal to Tristan on behalf of Isolde, though she was Marke's wife.) For the really romantic, it may then even be inessential that *he* is also the love of *her* life. On reflection, that would be rather shocking. Doesn't it make a difference that she is his *wife*? And a wife, though ideally the love of

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specified everything whose presence or absence affects the valence of a certain reason in a given context would not be stating what could count as a reason *for* an agent.

Thus, while there is much that is perceptive in Raz (1999: §§ 3-4), we should not be persuaded of a recurrent mismatch between agents' *reasons* and their *understanding* of them, if this signifies a grasp of *what they are* (cf. Raz, 236). It is a different question whether theory may be able to supply grounding explanations of *why* (and *when*) *they are reasons*; I shall express some scepticism in § 3 below.

[9] This is clearly grasped by Raz (1999: 235): 'Reasons ... are general, according to Dancy. They are features of situations, or of actions, which can be instantiated on an indefinite number of occasions ... There can be a rival particularist thesis. It can be illustrated by thinking of both swift and opaque actions. In both cases it is natural, when asked for one's reasons, to point to the situation as a whole: "in these circumstances that was the right thing to do." The situation in all its concreteness is what one reacted to.' To which I would reply that this is not to identify a reason for action that is indefinitely specific, but to be unable to articulate reasons whose content could only be general.

her husband's life, may not be: should his commitment be contingent upon the state of his feelings? (If Isolde had ceased to be the love of Marke's life – and Wagner's Marke appears to be more pained by his friend's betrayal than by his wife's – would that have left Marke free to save whomever he fancied?) In fact, there is no ground to read Williams so. No doubt he leaves the husband's motivations unspecified. Very likely (as Susan Wolf has suggested to me) they were overdetermined. We may suppose that his wife was indeed the love of his life; in any case, she was the recipient of his marriage vows.[10] In the absence of any contrary indication, we may take him to be motivated by both considerations. We might then say that his motivation was partly moral, and partly romantic. And yet we should surely allow that a commitment to another person whom one both knows and loves intimately, even without any exchange of vows, could only be viewed as ethically indifferent on a puritanical conception of the ethical. Of course, we are free (as Williams was) to associate a more specific conception of the *moral* with certain features of our ethics, and not the most appealing ones. But fidelity is surely an ethical virtue, though its sphere is not restricted to the connubial (or otherwise explicitly obligatory).[11]

What we should rather notice is Williams's refusal to appeal to 'moral principle'.[12] Indicative is an extended earlier passage which I can only quote in part (1981a: 16):

> Someone might be concerned about the interests of someone else, and even about carrying out promises he made to that person, while not very concerned about these things with other persons ... [To some extent] the lover's relations will be examples of moral relations, or at least resemble them, but this does not have to be because they are *applications to this case* of relations which the lover, *qua* moral person, more generally enters into.

Crucial then is not whether the husband saves his wife for an ethical reason (even for one arising from a promise), but whether he derives this from a general principle that applies in a multitude of cases. It is this derivation that Williams will reject (two pages later) as 'one thought too many'. His agent's reasons must count as ethical on any adequate conception of the ethical; but they are essentially particular. His focal concern is what he *owes to her*, or has otherwise, in his heart of hearts, *to do for her*. And this, surely, is what is essential for the virtue of fidelity. What one friend owes another is not a high, general valuation of the opportunities and obligations of friendship. The proof of friendship is an ability to detect the facts that give one reason to act on a friend's behalf, and a willingness to respond generously to them.[13]

Such commitments might well be called 'particularist'. They differ from the general commitment that we may take to be implicit in Dancy's example where (I take it) *some woman or other* 'is in trouble and needs help' (2004: 41). If *A* turns out to be a dependable friend of B though an undependable friend of C, and an unjust and unkind agent in many other contexts, this is likely to be through contingencies (which are also

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[10] As the bridegroom is asked in the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, 'Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?' An appeal to an exchange of vows imports a regard for *duties*. But that shouldn't be taken as equivalent to an embrace of Kantianism, or deontology, or any other structuring of ethics. If the particularist is unable to take duties on board, his barque must lack ballast.

[11] Thus we should not assimilate what Williams is saying here to what he is willing to say elsewhere (famously in the case of Gauguin, 1981b: 23-4) about the possible subordination of ethical to other considerations.

[12] I heard Dancy make just the point that follows in an illuminating discussion (at which Susan Wolf and Miranda Fricker were also present) that has nourished what I say here.

[13] There is room here for *good* acrasia; see McIntyre (1993). Perhaps the best agents are unconflicted, and respond to reasons that they acknowledge as sufficient. But one can show virtue by acting on the right reasons, even without *taking* them to be reasons.

restrictions) that save his friendship for *B* from being put to the test. If friendship is a field of choice for the exercise of many of the virtues, this is not because *there* we are more likely to respect what we recognize as our general obligations, but because an alertness to reasons there can fuel an alertness to similar reasons elsewhere. We learn to be kind to those who *need* our kindness through habits of kindness to those to whom we *want* to be kind.

Yet there are limits to the partialities of friendship. Williams well notes (1981a: 17) that it is not that 'if there is some friendship with which his life is much involved, then a man must prefer any possible demand of that over other, impartial, moral demands'. He comments, 'That would be absurd, and also a pathological kind of friendship, since both parties exist in the world and it is part of the sense of their friendship that it exists in the world.' We need to capture a duality of concern: what I do for my friend I do as owed *to him*, but what is owed to him cannot be identified in isolation from what I owe *to others.* 'It's my wife' is a sufficient reason for saving her rather than another (when I can save one but not both); it wouldn't be a good reason for giving her a job rather than another (when a public appointment is in my power). We surely want the thought 'It is impermissible' to play an *inhibiting* role, even if there is a *motivating* role that we don't want to be played by the thought 'It is permissible.' Whatever we may say about the predicate 'is a reason', we should grant that the predicate 'is (im)permissible' naturally attaches to *kinds* of act. And what here 'wears the trousers' (as J. L. Austin used to say) is surely the *impermissible*: the permissible is simply that which, though being of a general kind that is liable to be impermissible, isn't. It is not plausible to say, in the appointment case, that the agent intuits the absence of a reason – though any reason he has otherwise to forward his wife's prospects is indeed silenced. Nor is it simply that he detects a moral obstacle *in this particular case*. Rather, he is inhibited, if he is inhibited (as within some cultures husbands and fathers are not), by a general consideration: acting *in such a way* is nepotism, and so a form of injustice. Such a constraint is not just a presumption: it rules out even *considering* certain situations in certain ways. (It operates rather as blinkers than as spectacles.) Principles have distinctive and useful roles to play, whose distinctiveness and utility are obscured if we suppose that *every* reason depends upon a principle.[14]

There is no need to extend our conception of what can constitute a reason, or an enabler, or an intensifier: in each case, it is a fact. Yet what explains why a fact plays this role in a context varies. This can be illustrated by comparing Dancy's example of whether to return a book that was stolen with my example of whether to appoint a candidate who is one's wife. In one context, what would otherwise define an act as just (that it would be returning what one has borrowed) has its valence neutralized by a further consideration (that the lender had no right to it); in another context, what would otherwise give one a reason (that this would be helping one's wife) has its valence reversed by a further consideration (it is a public appointment). In the book case, what looked like making an act just fails to do so: to return a book to the lender is usually to return it to the rightful owner, but not in this instance; so it will not achieve the agent's presumed purpose. (However, if his aim is to return it to someone who wants it back, or needs it more than he does, this may be achievable by returning it.) In the job case, what looked like an act of helping one's wife may indeed be so, but is excluded by

[14] Cf. Dr Johnson on contexts where men need general principles as inhibiting constraints (Boswell, i. 443-4): 'We can have no dependance upon that instinctive, that constitutional goodness which is not founded upon principle. I grant you that such a man may be a very amiable member of society. I can conceive him placed in such a situation that he is not much tempted to deviate from what is right; and as every man prefers virtue, when there is not some strong incitement to transgress its precepts, I can conceive him doing nothing wrong. But if such a man stood in need of money, I should not like to trust him; and I should certainly not trust him with young ladies, for *there* there is always temptation.'

justice: it is not permissible to help one's wife in such a way, even when it would succeed. In the one case, a particular end would be frustrated (since justice is not done); in the other, a general constraint would be flouted (for what is done is an injustice).

All these cases exemplify that reasons often have a wide degree of generality: returning what one has borrowed, and helping one's wife, are characterizations that apply to a wide range of acts, though whether they connect with a reason in any particular case is sensitive to circumstance. General principles may be citable in support, or devisable in thought, but with varying ease and point. When I return a book to its rightful owner, I achieve something worthwhile in a manner I wouldn't know precisely how to generalize. 'Return what one borrows' is a good general rule, but too indiscriminate and imprecise to define how and when one should act in a particular case. 'Respect ownership' is hardly deniable (unless one holds that property is theft); but it is one thing to accept it, and another to understand what it *is* to respect ownership. Such rules can still be useful as prompts, alerting us, as occasion arises, to the presence of a reason for doing *this now*. Yet they do not *ground* such reasons: it is not that we have to *test* a reason by trying to universalize it in order to be certain of its reality.[15] By contrast, when I decline to appoint my own wife to a job, I am inhibited from achieving something desirable (her having the job) by the general principle that public appointments be made impartially. Here the rule is active: it excludes from my range of options one that would otherwise appeal.[16]

Two lessons emerge even from these cursory reflections upon a few cases. The first is that we do justice to Williams's intuition of 'one thought too many' not by setting aside any thought that 'in situations of this kind it is at least all right (morally permissible) to save one's wife' as wholly out of place, but by taking it to constitute not one of the agent's reasons for action (or even part of a reason), but rather as a consideration that excludes the presence of a disabler (that is, of there being a feature of the situation that precludes him from putting his wife first).[17] The second lesson is that what explains the absence of a disabler can be the inapplicability of any general prohibition. If this is right, it must hold, in other cases, that it is the applicability of such a prohibition that makes some feature of the situation a disabler. We must therefore avoid two opposed mistakes: one is to intrude disablers, or their grounds, into the content of reasons; the other is to exclude disablers from being grounded, in certain cases, upon general constraints.

III : REASONS AND GROUNDINGS

One stimulus to particularism was the thesis of the *uncodifiability* of the virtues. According to this, we cannot hope to define adequately in concrete terms what it is, say, to be brave. For one thing, there are too many and too varied ways of being brave, each corresponding to some different figuration of danger. Besides that, we find that, if we

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[15] Cf. Dworkin (1995: § 5). Entirely different is the role of universalization in Kant and R. M. Hare: it starts from a mere maxim (Kant) or preference (Hare), which needs to be tested by universalizing before – as we may put it – an ethical reason emerges. Dancy rather starts from the recognition of a value (or disvalue) in context. There is no question that values can be universalized: if φ'ing has a certain value in this situation, it must have the same value in any situation identical in kind. Universalizability is here a corollary, and not a test.

[16] Thus I take Robert Nozick's 'side-constraints' (1974: 28-35) to be essentially general in form. (It is another question whether they are universal, i.e. exceptionless.)

[17] By contrast, suppose that one is the captain of the ship, and can only save one's wife by directing a lifeboat towards one group at risk of drowning rather than another. This would seem to be a ground for a randomizing procedure, such as spinning a coin, that would otherwise count as heartless or neglectful.

take what is generally a way of being brave, capturable in a simple and unitary phrase, it ceases to be brave in certain contexts, and may even become cowardly. (Thus it could show cowardice to keep one's place in the face of the enemy, and thereby fail to perform a tactical retreat.) This aspect of uncodifiability is an analogue of the thesis that, applied to reasons for action, I have termed variabilism.

A good test case is lying and truth-telling. Truthfulness perhaps hardly lends itself to actual reversal: is there any situation in which it is actually *un*truthful to tell the truth? There is plausibly too tight a connection between the virtue and a certain highly general mode of action. And yet a kind of variabilism seems integral to the very content of the virtue. Here, at least, a promising view seems to be one that has been worked out by Mark Lance and Maggie Little (2007). The default is that it is untruthful, and so bad in a way, to tell a lie. One tradition has even maintained that it is *always wrong* to do so. This may be doubly too strong: we may rather hold that there is *standardly something very bad* in telling a lie; for on occasion this may be bad but the lesser of evils, and still more rarely it may not be bad at all.[18] Even so, I take this default to be distinctive in having the generality, and some of the proscriptive force, of a side-constraint (like that on showing partiality in a public appointment): it does not merely generalize about the presence of a major disvalue, but actively rules out what might otherwise be options. Contexts in which the default holds are privileged, not simply in that they are statistically the most common, but in that they are central at once to our practices of assertion, and to our morality.[19] From other contexts, the default is not simply absent; rather, it takes effect either as a vestigial presumption, or by indirection. Thus, even within 'Diplomacy', tactical lying in the course of the game is possible only because a weak presumption against lying remains. (Without that presumption, how could anyone be taken in? How, indeed, could there be even a pretence of *diplomacy*?) When a prisoner is being interrogated by an invading enemy, the absence of any possibility of cooperation within an accepted framework and towards an agreed end (of the kind that makes the defendant in a criminal trial still *one of us*, even if he has stepped out of line) permits him faultlessly to mirror, in the mismatch of his answers to the questions, the mismatch between his licit purposes and the illicit purposes of his interrogators. Here a contortion of what commonly counts as truthfulness is imposed by necessity.[20]

Yet there may be alternatives. Pekka Väyrynen has attempted, in an impressively sustained series of papers, to impose an intelligible and well-motivated framework.[21] He takes principles such as 'Stand your ground in battle' or 'Do not lie' and notes that, as we ordinarily mean them, they are *not* equivalent to the universal and unacceptable rules '*Always* stand your ground in battle' or '*Never* tell a lie.' Rather, when we subscribe to such rules we do so with an implicit hedge. He supposes that such rules, and also weaker statements about an agent's having a reason to act, or not to act, in a certain way, rest upon an implicit *normative basis*, a phrase that he defines as follows (2009: 96): 'By "the normative basis", I mean that factor (property, relation, condition) because of which the fact is a reason for (or against) performing the action, and which

[18] For a few references, see Price (2008: 172, n. 50).

[19] This *duality* of centrality may not be universal. Take another default: that pain is bad. This admits of exceptions – though fewer than is sometimes argued (see Price, 2008: 181-3). Is this central to our concept of pain? Possibly it is, at least aetiologically, for Wittgensteinian reasons: the primitive expressions of pain, out of which the language of pain develops, express at once that pain is present, and that it is unwelcome. However, it is plainer, and sufficient, that the default disvalue of pain, and its converse the default value of pleasure, are central *to our conceptions of human values.*

[20] I discuss the importance of defaults (which Dancy (2007) concedes), and the valence of thick terms connoting the virtuous or vicious, in Price (2008: 167-80). On an agent's need, evident to Aristotle, for *standing concerns*, ethical and other, see Price (2005: § 5).

[21] I am further indebted to him for friendly responses to a draft of this paper (two of which I shall quote).

thereby explains why it is that kind of a reason in this instance.' He justifies a confidence in the existence of normative bases as follows (ibid.): 'Justification in ethics would threaten to be arbitrary unless at least generally there were an explanation of why something is a moral reason for (or against) something when it is, and why it isn't a moral reason for (or against) something when it isn't.' Hedging a principle denies it application in cases where its underlying rationale fails to hold.

Thus, in the case of lying, Väyrynen conceives two 'toy theories', as he calls them, about why we generally have reason not to lie. Theory 1 says this: 'An action's being a lie is a reason against it when, and because, lying contributes to undermining such beneficial social practices as trusting other people's word' (97). Theory 2 says this: 'An action's being a lie is a reason against it when, and because the addressee is owed the truth (or has a right to it, or lying violates her autonomy, or the like).' These theories will agree that we generally have reason not to lie, but disagree about *why* we do, and hence about *when* we do not. Väyrynen supposes that any such practice must have a *single* basis, though he allows that what is superficially a single practice might conceivably divide into a pair of practices: $promising_1$ might be grounded by a principle 'It would be irrational to break, for no good reason, a voluntarily undertaken commitment', but $promising_2$ by a principle 'The promisee has some such right as to determine that one do what one promised or to receive the fruits of the promise' (112). If so, something would have to make it clear which kind of promising was going on. (Which is evidently false of us.)[22]

An intuitive aspect of his view is that he allows us to treat a normative basis not as a more basic reason, but as 'a condition for other things to be reasons' (101). Hence my reason for not asserting something may simply be that it would be a lie. This need not be denied by a theorist who underpins a general prohibition on lying by appeal to Kant's categorical imperative, or to contractualism (101-2). We remain free to count as the agent's reason some fact that he could well cite himself, even if a theorist would ground his reason through the unfamiliar elaboration of a philosophical grounding.

Väyrynen allows that on occasion a fact may fail to function as a reason *even though* the normative basis is instantiated. He writes (100),

> Suppose … that the normative basis of an action's being a lie as a reason not to do it is that being lied to undermines one's autonomy. Cases seem nonetheless possible where being lied to would undermine one's autonomy and yet the fact that the action would be a lie is no reason not to do it. One might sometimes deserve to be deceived in this way.

He can concede this by permitting an element of contextuality: in different conversational contexts, an explanation of why an agent has a reason may cite a grounding that is more *proximate*, or more *fundamental*. It may suffice for some present purpose to cite a grounding that is not defeated in context, which is proximate to the act-type and familiar to the hearer, without one's needing to plumb the depths of explanation and cite a grounding remoter from the act-type, and less familiar to the hearer, that allows of no exceptions. However, it remains a concern whether Väyrynen can hope to fill out his normative bases without the use of concepts that are as liable to variable valence in *this* role as particularists would take them to be in within reasons. Where he cannot, variable valence has still to be grounded.

Also significant about his concession is that it appeals to what intuitively are two different groundings: autonomy, and desert. Any claim that there must always be a

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[22] However, in reply to me Våyrynen allows for a double grounding: a lie may be wrong because it is socially harmful, or because it undermines autonomy. If so, a lie that is perfectly alright must be subject to neither complaint.

unique normative basis for any invocation of a hedged principle becomes stipulative if we are instructed to put diverse groundings together within a single *tutti frutti* concoction. (In this case, Väyrynen might well have said that, if I deserve to be deceived, deceit does *not* undermine my autonomy. But we are likely enough to need recourse to groundings, conjunctive or disjunctive, that are disparate and not of a piece.)

Väyrynen concedes that our grasp of normative bases is often imperfect: 'More typically our conception of what moral concerns or ideals underlie the principles we accept is inchoate or incomplete' (119). He accommodates this with two 'even if's (119-20):

> Firstly, even if my grasp of the normative basis designated by a hedged principle … is incomplete, this isn't a kind of incompleteness which would leave the proposition expressed by the principle incomplete or indeterminate. The incompleteness lies mainly in one's grasp of what property realizes a normative role which is itself reasonably determinate. Secondly, even if my grasp of what property realizes the relevant normative role is inchoate or incomplete, it may still have enough content reliably to guide my judgments, at least within a certain range of cases.

This attempts to make the best of a mismatch between the understanding of agents, which is taken to be limited, and the reality of normative relations, which is taken to be determinate. The two are linked in that agents are supposed to be guided by an inchoate grasp of a systematic reality. This can only be speculative until it is explained how agents achieve what is best interpreted as an imperfect mastery of a structured theory. Otherwise, there would seem to be no a priori reason to expect that what appeals to *one* theorist as a rational morality should be able to explain *any* agent's grasp of moral reasons. (Even if *I* happen to be that theorist, what would justify me in claiming for my theory such an explanatory role? It looks presumptuous.[23]) The data on which this conception draws might be interpreted quite differently as evidencing not a nascent and splintered sense of what itself is determinate and unified, but varying degrees of capacity to detect and balance a multitude of practical considerations.

Though neither is intended to be more than illustrative, Väyrynen's two 'toy theories' are well contrasted in that the first is consequentialist, attending to bad effects that come of lying, the second deontological, focusing upon bad aspects that are integral to lying. Each is problematic. Theory 1 would not explain our conceiving of lying as typically being *inherently* bad. Acting in a way that undermines a beneficial social practice is bad for its consequences; and then it isn't clear that anything would be amiss if the liar *also* acted in such a way as to preclude any undermining. (He might *make* an example of himself before his lie could *set* an example). Yet we would rather suppose that rendering a lie innocuous makes things less bad without making them perfectly alright.[24] Theory 2 seems more apt in attempting to capture something bad that typically inheres in lying. Väyrynen writes of 'failing to exhibit the kind of concern or respect which persons merit' (2008: 87). Yet this reads rather as an umbrella that covers a range of considerations than as an explanation that grounds them. To the extent that we do share a conception of what it is to *respect* a person, it is rather

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[23] I am reminded of Hare's engaging but surely eccentric confidence that he could identify what early Christians *really* believed by appeal to his own philosophy of religion. One wonders whether Väyrynen supposes his normative bases to be perennial, or products of history. To the extent that they are the second, we cannot expect them to be fully transparent to philosophy.

[24] To say this is not to dismiss general reflections upon the utility of truthfulness. So Dr Johnson: 'Society is held together by communication and information; and I remember this remark of Sir Thomas Brown's, "Do the devils lie? No; for then Hell could not subsist"' (Boswell, 1887: iii. 293, cf. 228-30). However, such thoughts do not define the badness of lying in such a manner as to identify the exceptional cases (if any) where lying is not wrong, and perhaps not bad at all.

derivative from, than explanatory of, a sense of such things as how bad it is to lie.[25] If we are persuaded to qualify this, allowing that, on rare occasions, it may be not only permissible but perfectly alright to tell a lie, this is likely to come of an attention to special factors whose relevance is no more explicable by some *prior* conception of proper respect than is the general badness of lying.[26]

Notoriously resistant to a grounding explanation is the wrongness of murder. Väyrynen offers the following (2009: 98): 'Accounts of why killing a person is wrong (or there is a moral reason not to do so, or the like) include that it *frustrates the victim's prudential interests*, that it *deprives the victim of future experiences that it would be valuable for her to have*, that it *manifests ill will*, and so on.' Perhaps any of these is less off-target that G. E. Moore's concern that 'if it [murder] were a common practice, the feeling of insecurity, thus caused, would absorb much time, which might be spent to better purpose' (1903: 156-7). Yet it is disconcerting that Väyrynen presents not less than three groundings, with an indefinite offer of more ('and so on'). And that they are no stronger.[27] (The first two apply to dying in general, and the last applies to many regrettable but non-criminal acts and omissions.[28]) And yet that it is generally very bad, and indeed wrong, to kill a fellow human being is unquestionable – as it might not be if this really *depended* upon a 'normative basis' that had still to be identified.

A more realistic picture is that certain rules (and other things, such as values, and paradigms) *stand firm for us*. Though they are not of a kind to *look* fundamental to a philosophical theorist, ever in search of the abstract and universal and potentially axiomatic, they belong to the framework of our practical thinking. Though firm, they are not grounded; for we could not think of any grounding of which we are more certain than we are certain of these.[29] Plausible examples are indeed 'It is bad to lie (mostly)', and 'It is bad to kill a fellow human being (mostly).' *Given* these as defaults – *initially*, no doubt, as principles without exception, even if we replace 'bad' by 'wrong' – we begin to grasp some necessary conditions of social life. Each is like a ripple that spreads across a pond, or a magnet that influences the fields of other magnets in its vicinity.

Though such rules are ungrounded, it confirms them indirectly that they come to be of a piece with more sophisticated obligations and permissions that help to structure a

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[25] So Arrington (2002: 280): 'All one can say [to defend the assertion that lying is wrong] is that lying to others is treating them with disrespect, but this comes to little more than treating them in ways in which one ought not – i.e. Lying is wrong.'

[26] The same problem arises with the concept of *well-being* that underlies the contrasted consequentialism of Theory 1. I doubt whether we have a sufficiently determinate conception of this that is *independent* of paradigmatic counsels of prudence; if so, the former cannot serve to ground the latter. Väyrynen writes (2006: 720) 'When *C* provides a prudential reason for doing something, this is because of some connection between *C* and the agent's well-being.' There may well be such a connection, but it is another question whether the nature of well-being *independently grounds* prudential reasons.

In other cases, an impact upon well-being is intrinsic to the act in question. Väyrynen (2008: 90) suggests that the wrongness of causing pain 'has got something to do with its making people worse off'. Which explains nothing. 'Being worse off' may be more general (in the sense of less specific) than suffering pain; but how could I grasp what it is for a human being to be worse off without *already* appreciating the typical intrinsic disvalue of pain? (It is not even the case that, when I learn more generally what it is to be 'worse off', I gain a *deeper* appreciation of that disvalue.)

[27] As one character says to another in Henry James's story 'Covering End', "It is when reasons are bad that one needs so many!"

[28] It is unamiable to display ill will; and yet Whistler's 'The Gentle Art of Making Enemies' displays a less black humour than would 'The Gentle Art of Murder'.

[29] Behind this, of course, lies Wittgenstein (1969). A succinct application of that to ethics is to be found (in German) in Müller (1997: §§ 3-5); see otherwise Arrington (2002: §§ 2-3). Müller remarks (454) that one could not seriously imagine *grounding* a disapproval of lying upon Kant's categorical imperative. If one really disapproved of it *because of* Kant's argument, this disapproval would have to be infected by any later doubts about that argument; which would be insane.

civilized social life. Not that they stand in need of confirmation: that could only arise if it dawned on us that we might dispense with them, and we wondered whether we would then be better or worse off. But to live with a principle is also to become at home with its connections and ramifications. One may doubt whether any principles or conceptions of values can become dominant within a society without connecting to *some* degree with confirming experience. However, inequalities of power or status may privilege the experiences of some unjustly over the experiences of others. And it is easier to confirm the existence of *a* reason to act in some way than of a *requirement* to act so. Societal change may bring it about, or make it clear, that some value or principle is unsustainable (cf. Price, 2000: 155-7). However, that lying and murder are generally very bad stands firm, though not *upon* any basis that grounds it.

It fits with this that the grounds of making an exception are various. In certain rare cases, principles that seemed firm come into conflict – either implying contradictory prescriptions (which is a danger with principles of 'right' and 'wrong), or at least producing problematic tensions (as can happen even with applications of 'good' and 'bad'). A notorious instance is Kant's case of a man who can only save his father's life by lying to a would-be murderer about his whereabouts. It can be argued that he shouldn't lie, since the responsibility is entirely the murderer's if the lie is false, but becomes in part the liar's if the lie turns out to correspond to the truth (so that he turns out an unwitting accomplice).[30] But it is also an intelligible view that, if murder is wrong, and *supremely* wrong, then it is wrong to abet murder, even by telling the truth. Whether, in accord with Väyrynen's various hypotheses, we are then to suppose that telling truths to murderers is not a beneficial social practice, or that the murderer's autonomy is not being undermined, or – as he also allows – that he deserves to be deceived, are questions, no one of them privileged, that can arise within attempts to think through the possible ramifications of permitting an exception in this case. As in many attempts to achieve reflective equilibrium, reflection may proceed in a number of directions. Some (like Kant and Dr Johnson) will exclude any exceptions. Others will admit an exception, and may then wonder what philosophical theories (relating to utility or autonomy or desert) this might feed into. Others again will be uncertain whether to admit an exception, and may then confirm or correct this uncertainty by general reflection. Others will wait to take one line or another until a particular case arises, with no sense that this either will either invite or demand generalization. Whether there is anything here to be *explained* philosophically is an open question. For many (perhaps most) of us, the situation is one not of sharing an intuition that calls for explanation and grounding, but of honestly not knowing what stance to take, and being very unsure what the implications would be of elaborating one in general terms. That there must be a *correct* line to follow, one that stretches out indefinitely but determinately, like an already laid but invisible railway-track, is a picture that lacks application.

IV : METAETHICAL MODESTY

Even a discussion as cursory as this raises general questions about the proper ambitions of ethical theory. In broad terms, there are two contrasted points of view. We may call

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[30] See Kant (1996:182-4) = AK 6:429-31. Cf. Dr Johnson, *Rasselas* (1759), ch. 34: 'When, in prospect of some good, whether natural or moral, we break the rules prescribed us, we withdraw from the direction of superiour wisdom, and take all consequences upon ourselves.' Johnson agreed with Kant (184) that a servant should not say that his master is 'not at home' to save him from being disturbed; Boswell cites this, and dissents (1887: i. 436).

one 'realist', the other 'non-realist'.[31] Of the moral philosopher the first requires immodesty, whereas the second permits modesty (though it does not entail it).

On a realist conception, the reason-relation, which holds between facts and acts, exists independently, not of course of the existence of free agents, but of their conceptions of it. About this, Dancy and Väyrynen appear to agree. Dancy calls his particularism 'a view in moral metaphysics' (2004: 140), while Väyrynen calls his generalism 'a metaphysical view concerning particular moral facts or truths' (2006: 708). Human beings may yet aspire to acquire some understanding of the reason-relation, and its instantiations, if Aristotle was right to remark, 'Everyone has a natural aptitude for grasping truth' (*Eudemian Ethics* I 6, 1216b30-1). It may be supposed that success is achieved or missed from occasion to occasion. As Dancy once wrote (1993: 64), 'To be consistently successful, we need to have a broad range of sensitivities, so that no relevant feature escapes us, and we do not mistake its relevance either. But that is all there is to say on the matter.' Or else, as Väyrynen supposes, success comes of a grasp, sufficient for the occasion, of underlying and unifying principles that explain what kinds of fact generally provide reasons, and when they occasionally fail to do so. Such principles would be at once justificatory and explanatory, and any theory of them faces two tasks. On the one hand, it must provide groundings of general reasons, and occasional exceptions, that yield determinate and consistent results (at least in cases where we take there to be ethically correct answers – for some cases may be really irresoluble, or insignificant). On the other, it must help explain the discriminations that we actually make, ascribing to different agents varying but always plausible degrees of understanding of an underlying rationale. In particular, it needs to have things to say about *how* this rationale is implicitly taught, imperfectly but recognizably, to new members of the moral community.[32]

On a non-realist conception, we are free to turn our back on hopes of a unified theory, and attend instead to all the actual ways in which a young agent is taught to do *this* rather than *that*, and learns to apply past lessons to new situations. As his experience expands and his judgement sharpens, he learns how to make new discriminations with varying degrees of confidence. When a framework proposition, constitutive of what counts as 'morality', yields a satisfactory assessment of what, in a particular case, is morally right or wrong, good or bad, this may count as knowledge. But most cases involve more than a simple application of commonly accepted rules (and we hesitate to count as 'knowledge' what comes of no more than that, since talk of knowledge in an ethical context connotes understanding). There are *innumerable* other ways in which we make decisions.[33] As soon as we begin to reflect upon unfamiliar

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[31] I do not use the term 'non-realism' to imply a general non-cognitivism. Rather, the contrast has something in common with that between Platonism and intuitionism in the philosophy of mathematics.

[32] Väyrynen comments as follows: 'Regarding toy theories. I have no adequate substantive first-order theories of the wrongness of killing or lying to offer. What I was after were simple theories to illustrate a structure. As simple theories, they are most probably quite clearly false; but greater complexity might not illustrate the structure as well. I'm inclined not to worry all that much about the substantive shortcomings of the simple candidate explanations which I use as illustrations. Nothing in that shows that something more adequate cannot be offered. That's the job for moral theorists.' Problematic here is a duality of role: adequate theories will have to be complex enough to track our best reflected judgements, and simple enough to have been plausibly internalized (if only imperfectly) by morally decent agents.

I take it that any morality has to be a popular morality, in the sense that ordinary people internalize it in ways broadly familiar to us. I doubt whether these could suffice even for an imperfect grasp of Väyrynen's normative bases. (Perhaps a population could be indoctrinated in an ethical theory like the North Koreans in the Juche Idea. It is worth wondering how much *less* than that could instil a shared set of normative bases.)

[33] Dworkin (1995) usefully sketches a wide range of different ways in which we convey moral instruction and make moral discriminations. One recurrent recourse is to prototypes: often 'the meaning of a concept is determined by a cognitive schema or image, and speakers determine whether some new instance falls

cases, we find ubiquitous what David Wiggins (2002: 124-32) has termed 'cognitive underdetermination'.[34] In very many cases we are far from being agreed which way to go. To the extent that we are aware of being fundamentally in agreement, we can speak of getting things right and wrong, and can apply concepts, thick or thin, in accordance with what can count as their meanings or senses.[35] Yet even here we often take chances, applying a term in a way that retrospectively may count as correct if and only if others come to accept it. We can think of ourselves as *constructing* at once our abstract concept of a reason for action, and our concrete conceptions of reasons – so long as there is no implication of the Bauhaus rather than of the improvised, intuitive, and often provisional. Ethical construction is essentially the work of amateurs, who derive what confidence they can not from claims to expertise, but from feelings of solidarity and hopes of consensus.[36]

Much that I have been saying is intended, and may (I hope) be accepted, by Dancy as the support of an ally, despite certain qualifications.[37] However, the particularism (or variabilism) that I have learnt from him is metaphysically quietist: it tries to capture general features of our ways of thinking and speaking that are not justifiable, as it were, from *outside* (or, indeed, from *above*, within a different and idealizing constructivism, as aspirations towards some ideal of rationality). Tactically, my view is convenient: if we really thought, like the realist, that the moral world has its contours fixed independently of our ability to map them, it would hard to be sure that Väyrynen's programme might not reveal its true topography, little though it connects with any common cognitive capacities of ours. The non-realist is immune to the fantasy of a fixed ethical world waiting to be captured by ethical systematization. A quietist particularism that discards any metaphysical or rationalist ambitions, and is content to analyse the actual ways in which we think without taking these to reflect either some

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under the concept by judging the degree to which the new instance matches the prototypical schema or image' (§ 7). Väyrynen (2008: 96) cites empirical data that 'seem to suggest that moral judgments are typically caused by psychologically immediate unreflective evaluations (often fuelled by stereotypes or emotional reactions)'.

[34] Rather as pacifists (as Elizabeth Anscombe complained) risk suggesting, by their rejection of any *justum in bello*, that ways of waging war of all of a piece, so non-cognitivists risk suggesting, by their rejection of ethical knowledge as such, that moralists are always at the same distance from truth. What makes ethical thinking vulnerable is rather how quickly, once we have left the beaten track, we find ourselves without clear paths to follow. Ethical conflict is too often the product of an unhappy combination of underdetermination and bad manners.

[35] Yet the phenomena resist regimentation. What I once wrote of the thick aesthetic concept of *elegance* also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to thick ethical concepts (2000 : 143): 'Mastering the concept is a matter of degree; for there is no clear line to be drawn, and indeed no real distinction to be made, between understanding the concept and internalising a culture, nor between linguistic competence and stylistic sensitivity.' This gives Simon Blackburn some ground for scepticism about the reality of such concepts, and the availability of value-terms with a sense sufficiently determinate to yield an open-ended range of true and false applications. However, such indeterminacy is not distinctive of the aesthetic and ethical: compare terms that describe individuals in ways that are not overtly evaluative and yet can only acquire determinacy in context, e.g. 'intelligent', 'nervous', 'emotional', 'cautious'.

[36] Väyrynen replies in a way that I think illumines what is at issue between us: 'Reasons can depend for their existence on principles, and be explained by such, even if we'd prefer a moral agent's psychology to be such that the recognition or representation of a reason doesn't depend on a recognition or representation of a principle (given the availability of other kinds of sensitivity to principles). As I read your discussion, it concerns the structure of a virtuous agent's psychology rather than the metaphysics of reasons.' I do not believe that there *is* a metaphysics of reasons (nor that the recognition of reasons always depends upon a sensitivity to principles).

[37] In fact, in the discussion of 'one thought too many' to which I have already alluded (n. 12) Dancy was willing to accept my suggestion that what, in *other* cases, inhibits the agent from displaying partiality may well be a general constraint.

pre-existent reality or some rational ideal, may be more secure, in its very modesty, against the over-reachings of generalist theorizing.

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