Murdoch, Practical Reasoning, and Particularism

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1. Particularism is a contemporary movement in moral philosophy that it is hard to know what to do with. On the one hand, it's hard to dismiss. Its ranks include respectable – even prominent – authors such as Jonathan Dancy, Margaret Little, John McDowell, David McNaughton and Richard Norman.[1] It purports to occupy one of the two extreme positions on the spectrum of views about the generality of reasons for action, and is worth a close look just for that. And it refuses to go away: particularism is the current incarnation of what used to be called "situationism" or "situation ethics", which means that it has been around for a while. Philosophical views that stick around usually have something to them, and one is ill-advised to write them off without further ado. On the other hand, much of what is said on its behalf is either difficult to believe, or looks to be a philosophical dead end. And the view is faced with objections and difficulties – *old* objections, which for the most part one can find fielded against situationism[2] – to which it seems to have no satisfactory response.

I want to suggest here that particularism would benefit from renewing its connection to the work of Iris Murdoch.[3] I am going to recommend Murdoch's understanding of practical reasoning as a useful philosophical frame for what I will claim is the most important shared element of the particularist family of positions. In doing so, I mean to be encouraging those who work in the philosophical subspecialty of practical reasoning to add Murdoch's take on it to the contemporary menu of competing accounts. That it is not already on the menu deserves at least brief explanation. The notion that practical reasoning and moral or ethical theory are two distinct topics for investigation, and that the former can be pursued more or less independently of the latter, is, in the philosophical community, of relatively recent currency (perhaps 1980 or so).[4] Murdoch's philosophically most productive period was probably the 1960s, a period that antedates this separation of subject matters, and so she is usually thought of as having been a powerful and insightful moral philosopher, but not as having

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articulated important opinions about how one ought more generally to make up one's mind about what to do. That is unfortunate: Murdoch's treatment of the subject is characteristically penetrating, and in part because she was not a member of the current generation of specialists in practical rationality, her understanding of practical reasoning can serve as a corrective to presumptions about the subject matter that are today pretty much common ground in the field.

2. If it is hard to find a crisp and uncontroversial statement of the particularist position, that is perhaps best explained by the most compelling and broadly shared moment in particularism being a *move* rather than a *claim.* Particularists will point out (call this the *defusing move*) that while a given consideration may count as a moral reason on one occasion, say for doing such-and-such, the very same consideration is on another occasion no reason for doing such-and-such, or even a reason precisely for *not* doing such-and-such. In an example of the phenomenon, not itself morally loaded, that Dancy borrows from Wilfred Thesiger, the hardships involved in crossing the desert on camelback are (part of) a reason to embark on the adventure – but only so long as there are no roads, "for to have done the journey on a camel when I could have done it in a car would have turned the venture into a stunt."[5] In a typical execution of the defusing move, the original consideration has not been *overridden* by another stronger reason; it is not that the charm and challenge of crossing the desert bedouin-style is trumped by some other weightier consideration, such as your ailing mother's threat to join the French Resistance while you are away. Rather, the reason behaves differently – for instance, it has a different "valence" – once the background has changed. Particularists are impressed by the apparently uniform availability of the defusing move; once you get the knack of it, you are likely to feel quite confident in your ability to produce a defusing circumstance for just about any putatively general consideration.[6] And so both proponents and opponents produce remarks like the following: "The leading thought behind particularism is... that the behaviour of a reason... in a new case cannot be predicted from its behaviour elsewhere." "Particularists hold that the very same properties may count morally in favour in some circumstances and against in other circumstances."[7] My sense of the territory is that characterizations of this kind are the least likely to provoke dissent, but are also less than a theoretical position. Instead, they function as expressions of confidence in the defusing move.

Particularists then do go on to provide a theoretical position, but one which is unsatisfyingly thin. To explain the success of the defusing move, they adduce the holism and context-sensitivity of reasons for action.[8] They proceed to draw lessons for our understanding of morality, and those lessons are to one or another degree antinomian: most radically, that morality has no place for rules; more modestly, that moral rules function merely as reminders, or as generalizations about the kinds of situations we tend to find ourselves in. So, for instance, one extreme version of particularism is described as holding that "[i]t is not that general principles are insufficient to guide us in our consideration of the particular case – they simply do not exist." McNaughton has it that a particularist "believes that we have to judge each particular moral decision on its individual merits; we

cannot appeal to general rules to make that decision for us." And Little tells us that "the real lesson of particularism is ... that there is reason to doubt the existence of *any* codifiable generalities linking moral and nonmoral properties."[9] (There is an interesting and plausible objection in this vicinity to other standard ethical views: perhaps utility, or universalizability, will be the significant consideration in a given choice, but it would be hubris to be sure that utility, or universalizability, will always be the only relevant consideration.) These ways of talking through the success of the defusing move look like they require a matching metaethical view, and so, again for instance, when Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit and Michael Smith attack particularism, they characterize it as "the view that the evaluative is shapeless with respect to the descriptive: there is no descriptive pattern unifying the class of right acts."[10]

For my own part, I find the fragments of theory that have accreted around the defusing move unsatisfying, and not nearly as convincing as the move itself. First, the gestures at holism and context do not appear as distinct components of an explanation; to say that holism is true of reasons for action is, in these discussions, just to say that how a reason works varies with context. They are not even properly an explanation, as opposed to a restatement or reification of the claim that the defusing move works. And in any case, appeals to context-dependence should set off alarm bells; they usually function philosophically as conversation-stoppers, and this subject area is no exception. They direct attention to surroundings that are arbitrarily various; variety of this kind resists accounts of how change in context effects a change in (here) the force of reasons; and so they bring one up short and leave one not knowing what to think about next.

Second, the antinomian moral conclusions fly in the face of the experience of moral argument. It is not just that they can make particularism seem like a moral theory for scoundrels (would *you* trust someone who had told you that he might treat his promise as a reason *not* to keep it?), or anyway render mysterious the social role of moral deliberation.[11] Assimilating rules of morality to the string that one ties around one's finger (one particularist attempt to make a place for them) makes it hard to see how the rule could be deployed as a premise in an argument, and we *do* use rules in this way.[12] The heuristic value of reminders is to call to mind the premises that one will actually use... at which point the reminders exit stage left.

Moreover, the other particularist spin on rules – treating them as summaries of rough local regularities – seems to me similarly not to match our practice. To adapt an example of Murdoch's, and one to which I will return:[13] when one learns a second language, one starts with the grammar. That grammar is used in activities as various as generating utterances, justifying one's choices of phrasing when they are challenged, and criticizing other people's prose. So the grammatical rules are not merely summaries of regularities, and they evidently do not capture merely local regularities: it is not as though we might discover a new *region* of English in which the grammar we have is entirely irrelevant. Nonetheless, mastery of a language is a very good illustration of the phenomenon of interest to particularism. As one's ear for the language improves, one finds that the defusing move can be applied to the grammar. It is not just that there is more to good style than grammar, so that stylistic sensibilities take up where the rules of grammar leave off; rather, style may require not just disregarding a grammatical rule on

some occasion, but even treating the ungrammaticality as a reason for doing it that way. (Think of the occasions on which you have had to explain to a copyeditor why you are going to stet out his correction of an ungrammatical but idiomatic passage.[14]) Here we have a family of cases of particularist reasoning in which the rules do real (and not merely summarizing) work, and so we need to find a way of understanding particularism that does not preclude rules from doing work of this kind.

Third, the metaethical remarks that accompany other particularist claims prompt metaphysical objections, and while I do not think those objections ought to detain us for long, they can be understood to express a worry that needs to be taken fully seriously. The prototypical objection is that our moral concepts must surely follow discernable, usable patterns in the way things are; the particularist seems to be denying this. The objection is, again prototypically, tied to metaphysical views about supervenience that require underlying patterns. For reasons I will get to shortly, I think that this second step is a mistake. The real worry here is that the particularist does seem to be abjuring the patterns, and it is the systematic way in which we navigate these patterns that gives content and body to our claim that what we have on hand is a *reason.* When the patterns are thought of as rules, the complaint brought to bear on the particularist insistence that one has a reason, but not a general one – not one that can be recast a rule – is that we do not know how to make reasons intelligible except through their generality.[15] Now, first, a particularist view would do best to avoid presenting a pretext for the specifically metaphysical objections. And second, the demand that we spell out what we mean by saying that something is a reason seems to me too deep to be addressed by a specifically ethical theory, and especially by one as currently resource-poor as particularism; it would again be best to find a version of the view that would allow the question to be postponed.[16]

I have been pressing toward the conclusion that the defusing move needs a better theoretical home than it has in most recent presentations of particularism. But before I claim to have gotten there, I had better have said something about the serviceability of the position that McDowell has been working up over the last few decades. That position is by now impressively well-conditioned, it has strongly influenced the current cadre of particularists, and so one might think that there was no need to look any further: McDowell is developing a contemporary rendering of Aristotle, and so particularism can be thought of as a kind of Aristotelian view. It will be a reminder of what is most distinctive about the defusing move (and so of just what we are trying to find an illuminating theoretical home for) to show how this identification can be resisted.[17]

The alternative that I want to be able to set aside is focussed on the notion that moral rules have exceptions that need to be managed on a case-by-case basis, or that moral considerations compete and can override one another, also in a way that requires case-by-case treatment. Aristotle's views, and for that matter McDowell's, are of course more complex than this, so (emulating a similar hedging move by Bernard Williams) I will call the alternative the sub-Aristotelian view.[18] On the sub-Aristotelian view, ethical reasoning can be thought of as proceeding via the medium of a practical syllogism. The major premise of the syllogism expresses a general ethical consideration (or, if you like, a rule), but

practical syllogisms are defeasible (that is, they can be defeated by competing considerations). For instance, my practical syllogism might proceed from the major premise that I ought to be frequenting restaurants that use organic ingredients, and the minor premise that Cafe Fanny uses organic ingredients, to the conclusion that I will frequent Cafe Fanny. But that practical inference might be derailed by the fact that I am also hunting for cafes with a lot of edge, and Fanny's edge has faded. McDowell has augmented this picture of defeasibility, in a way obviously congenial to particularists, by insisting that a defeated consideration may be not simply outweighed, but 'silenced', that is, made into no reason at all. If the use of organic ingredients has become *dowdy,* then they may no longer be properly treated as a (possibly outweighed but still) positive feature; rather, organic certification may now be in and of itself a liability.

The heart of the sub-Aristotelian view is its proposal for determining when a defeasible syllogism is in fact defeated: the *phronimos,* or practically intelligent person (who is also the virtuous person), is the reference point with respect to which defeasibility (and choice more generally) is to be managed. The right thing to do is what the *phronimos* would do (or anyway what the *phronimos* would advise you to do). The choices between competing practical considerations cannot be systematized, and so the best one can do is to rely on the sensitivities of the virtuous man, and his grasp of the not-fully-articulable ideal – *eudaemonia* or the well-lived life – that regulates his activity.[19]

But claiming the sub-Aristotelian position as a theoretical frame for the defusing move would be to give the move less than its due. For any consideration, our description of the defusing move has it, an occasion can be found on which that consideration will point in a completely different direction. And that goes for the consideration: this is what the *phronimos* would (have reason to) do. For instance, what is called for might be moral *weakness,* perhaps when your friend, in a series of akratic episodes, has made a mess of his life, and needs comfort and encouragement to put the pieces back together. The Aristotelian *phronimos* might well, in such a situation, be left helpless, his attempts at counselling being turned away with the resentful complaint that he just doesn't know what it's *like* not to be able to resist temptation, or to have done something really stupid.[20] As a morally frail person yourself, perhaps even as the graduate of a twelve-step program, you have reason to sit down for as long as it takes, and sympathetically tell your friend that you know what it's like; but you do not have reason to do as the *phronimos* would do, because the *phronimos* cannot come out with that reassurance convincingly.

A fallback position, already mentioned in passing, is to take the reference point to be what the *phronimos* would advise, rather than what he would do. This is only tempting as long as one has not thought about what it takes to give good advice. Allow that there is something to the Aristotelian idea that virtue is a mean between extremes. Along the spectrum whose extremes are complete obliviousness to others, and imaginative overinvolvement in others' lives, the virtuous person occupies a position that is a mean; he pays some attention to others, but he does not spend too much time living vicariously, imagining himself in others' shoes, finding out just how they are thinking of their situation, and so on. A good advisor, however, is someone who is good at adopting others' points of

view (if that were not the case, we would not have needed to move to the fallback position), and this is very much a skill that requires practice. So a good advisor is someone who spends much of his time and energy finding out about others' lives, imagining what he would do in their place, and so on. That is, a good advisor is far too close to the gossipy, nosy and meddlesome end of the spectrum to be anything like admirably virtuous, and so virtue should not be counted upon for good advice. Notice that the connection is not just a matter of how we go about our classifications: even if you start out with a virtuous self, overdoing your excursions into sympathetic imagination, especially when it is focussed on the troubled, is likely to make you less sure-footed than when you began.[21] Granted, the claim that the virtuous make bad advisors may seem to sit badly with the world of difference it can make to talk things out with someone whose judgement, level-headedness, integrity, and so on one admires. But talking things out is in these cases only rarely a matter of being told what to do. The helpful *phronimos* does not normally dispense instructions, and these are what the fallback sub-Aristotelian position requires.

The fallback position is unworkable, and while the pre-fallback sub-Aristotelian view may yet be workable when embedded in an Aristotelian moral theory, it is not a frame for the much more radical particularist defusing move. Apparently, Aristotelian virtue ethics and particularism occupy different locations in the space of moral theory, and the defusing move really does need a theoretical home all its own.

3. It is now time to start in on an admittedly somewhat lopsided sketch of what Murdoch has to say on the subject of practical reasoning. (Lopsided because, recall, Murdoch and her contemporaries did not distinguish her views about practical reasoning from her substantive moral views; since I am distinguishing them, I will have to take more than the usual liberties in my presentation.[22]) Most standard ways of seeing the problem space take practical reasoning to proceed from a description of a decision situation, one that is treated as simply given, to a practical conclusion: a decision, an intention to act, or anyway a realization as to what that action should be. But to Murdoch's way of thinking, the hard part of practical reasoning is getting the description of your situation right in the first place. You have to come to see your circumstances the right way, or, equivalently, to apply the right set of specialized terms, or, perhaps again equivalently, to employ the right family of metaphors; once that is taken care of, it will be obvious what to do. You might take someone to be aloof and distant, and so be rather standoffish yourself; once you come to see his manner as shy, it will be natural to be much more open towards him. It is redescribing his employer as recklessly and criminally endangering its workers, neighbors and clients that leads the whistleblower to step forward. It is opening up the question of whether someone is really your friend – whether he *could* really be your friend, given how he had been acting – that is the most important part of figuring out how to conduct one's future relations with him.[23]

Note that particularist defusing moves can normally be recast as Murdochian moves to improved descriptions, ones in which the defusing features play a pivotal role. That a company is your employer is a reason not to leak its confidential

documents to the press, but when its employees are being pressed to become complicit in its misdeeds, that you are an employee becomes precisely a reason to leak.

The idea that the real problem is getting the problem description right is pertinent not just to practical reasoning, but to theoretical reasoning as well. When they are in school, the tricky part is getting the logic or physics students to convert the story problem to the right set of formulae, and after they graduate, the even trickier part is getting them to convert the situation they are facing into the right story problem.[24] Now when one starts to think about what it takes to get the representations right in a strictly theoretical or factual domain, it is natural to start with problems in which the goal is given, and to understand the correctness of the representation in terms of its usefulness in attaining the given goal. Murdoch's recognition that getting the problem description right is just as much a difficulty in the practical case as in the theoretical case should make us more cautious here: in real-world cases, setting the goal is *part* of figuring out the description of the practical problem, and it cannot be taken as simply given.

Murdoch's insight here does not so much entail as presuppose particularism.[25] Suppose that the defusing move did not generally work. Then it would be possible to accumulate a checklist of the features of situations that operate as reasons for action. (Perhaps the list would never be completed, but we could expect that after a while it would, barring one's encountering genuinely novel circumstances, attain stability enough.) You could then construct a description of your decision situation more or less mechanically, by proceeding down the checklist and incorporating the features on the list that turn up in the decision situation into your description. And so, after some initial startup period (and after some practice with a possibly longish list), the process of arriving at the right description of one's problem would *not* be the difficult part of deliberation at all, which is to say that Murdoch's shift of focus only makes sense if the particularists are right about what I have suggested is the most important element of their view.[26]

The view against which Murdoch is moving will seem to its proponents to be metaphysically motivated: the description of the decision situation is a description of the *facts,* and so getting it right is a job for theoretical rather than practical reasoning. But that motivation begs the question, and Cora Diamond has reconstructed Murdoch's response: that insisting on the distinction between fact and value has to be understood as itself the expression of a substantive (and mistaken) evaluative position.[27] Once one is looking for it, the response is hard to miss: Murdoch throws down the gauntlet very early on in *The Sovereignty of Good*, by listing as among the facts to which her account will be responsible, "the fact that an unexamined life can be virtuous and the fact that love is a central concept in morals" (1f/299).

The problem of getting the right description is to see things as they really are, but "truth," "reality," and their paronyms, are, in Murdoch's way of using them, not to be captured by the idea of *accuracy,* of a man in a lab coat checking that his measurements correspond to the dimensions of the objects on his workbench. Murdoch, best known as a novelist, thinks of truth by way of novelistic truthfulness: "Truth is not a simple or easy concept. Critical terminology imputes falsehood to an artist by using terms such as fantastic, sentimental, self-indulgent,

banal, grotesque, tendentious, unclarified, wilfully obscure and so on."[28] Elsewhere she warns her readers of the "[p]hilosophical difficulties [that] may arise if we try to give any single organized background sense to the normative word 'reality'".[29] When the point is to see your way through a *practical* problem – to take a very simple example, the problem subjects were given in Maier's memorable study – it may be accurate, but irrelevant, to view a pair of pliers as a gripping tool: to bring one hanging cord within reach of the other, you will have to make a pendulum out of it, and to do that you will have to see the pliers as a weight.[30]

Put this way, it is obvious that getting a description right is not normally a matter of getting the *metaphysically* right description. The metaphysical objections I gestured at earlier took it for granted that one description of a problem situation (the "factual") was privileged in a way that made further descriptions (the "evaluative") acceptable only if they stood in some specified relation (e.g., reduction or supervenience) to the privileged ones. But as far as Murdoch is concerned, the alleged metaphysical privilege of the 'factual' description is just beside the point.[31] Descriptive privilege for the factual, in practical reasoning, would have to be the conclusion of a *practical* or *moral* – not metaphysical – train of thought, and while I can see how there are special circumstances under which the morally or practically right thing to do is to distinguish questions of fact from further practical questions, I do not know what the argument for always so doing would be.[32] The truism that you need to keep an open mind while looking for the description that will let you make headway on a practical problem has nothing to do with – and does not entail – theses regarding the 'shapelessness' of the evaluative with respect to the descriptive.

The cases that are the most natural examples of Murdoch's treatment are typically a bit to one side of the contemporary particularist's favorite examples. Perhaps that it is plagiarism is a reason to send it on to the Honor Council. The particularist applying the defusing move looks for circumstances where its being plagiarism is precisely a reason not to pursue the matter, whereas the Murdochian looks for a way to dislodge the description. (When Borges imagines someone intentionally writing a novel that is word-for-word identical with Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, that is no longer plagiarism, the official definition notwithstanding.) I think we should not be put off by the way the illustrations diverge; it suffices that applications of the defusing move can be redescribed as Murdochian redescription.

4. Murdoch has a number of claims to make about the process of improving one's description of one's circumstances, and I want to sketch some of these in a manner that shows their hospitality to particularism. I do not exactly want to argue for them, but rather to indicate how the different pieces of the view fall into place when one is looking at the other pieces.[33] (I do think that, even when motivated, a number of her claims are quite implausible, and I will register my dissent from time to time.) The next piece of the puzzle that I want to take up is her frequent suggestion that, with the right description in place, your practical reasoning is *done*: "true vision occasions right conduct" (66/353). You are to arm yourself with descriptions that in an actual choice situation will have direct practical import; in her characterization, "the agent... will be saying 'This is A B C

D' (normative-descriptive words), and action will follow naturally".[34] While I am inclined to think that here she is overstating her point, we can say something about what would make such a claim seem attractive.

Of those situations in which one seems to have on hand a description that makes practical demands, but where one still does not know what to do, many are cases in which the relevant considerations conflict or compete. "Generalists" (a particularist label for their opponents) might approach such a problem by asking which consideration was most weighty (which had greater antecedent force), but a particularist should not expect that there is a procedure that will take as inputs the weights of the considerations and produce an answer as output. After all, the defusing move works on just about anything, so sometimes, that a consideration is weighty speaks for it, but there will be other times – e.g., times that call for frivolity or superciliousness – when it speaks against.[35] So the evaluatively-loaded descriptions of the situations will have to *themselves* fit together in a way that resolves the practical problem, without the intervention of a weighing mechanism. (Murdoch's example of this is the unity of the virtues: while it might *seem* that one needs to choose between doing the brave thing, and doing the honest thing, perceptive redescription will conveniently show that only the honest thing *is* the brave thing, and so that the conflict is merely apparent.[36]) But if conflicts must be resolved by unifying redescription, then successful description will itself have to carry one on to the ensuing action. For when there is deliberative distance between a description and an ensuing action, there are always further and conflicting considerations to intervene.

The upshot for our purposes is that Murdoch's way of framing the defusing move avoids some of the excesses of antinomianism. First, if accepting a description *D* shows the action *a* to be appropriate, without further intervening deliberative steps, then we have a rule that takes one from *D* to *a*. And this will allow a particularist to sidestep the objection that we cannot make sense of reasons without allowing for their generality. For on the Murdochian picture, *whenever D* is the appropriate description, *a* properly follows. But (and this is why a particularist can allow himself that last claim) none of the work is being done by such rules, because one cannot determine whether *D is* the appropriate description of a given situation simply by ticking off the features mentioned in *D*.

Second, the Murdochian picture can allow substantive rules – e.g., rules of grammar – to play a guiding rather than merely heuristic role, while nonetheless making room for the defusing move. When the appropriate description has it that this is an occasion to apply the rule (as when writing English prose is an occasion to apply the rules of English grammar), then the rule functions as my reason for writing it *this* way. But when the appropriate redescription highlights the idiomatic register in which I must write on this occasion, the rule now functions as a reason *not* to write it this way.

5. Murdoch commits herself to two further, related claims. One is that the process of substituting better descriptions never ends; there is always more work to be done on, as she says, coming closer to seeing things as they really are. Second, doing so is seeing them more and more idiosyncratically; progress in

moral reasoning is progress away from the shared public world and into private vision and, eventually, mutual unintelligibility: "since we are human historical individuals the movement of understanding is onward into increasing privacy."[37] When one's descriptive apparatus moves further and further away from the shared common conceptual world, a successful deliberator will sooner or later reach the point where others simply cannot understand his reasons (or, what is the same thing, his characterizations of choice situations). That point can perhaps be postponed by making one's unprecedented descriptions available to others as best one can, by for instance embedding them in fiction that conveys their content and potential relevance, and perhaps this is one explanation for Murdoch's taking the art of the novel so seriously. But it will sooner or later be reached and moved beyond, if the deliberative enterprise is on track. Now there are stronger and weaker ways of reading such a claim, but the fact that Murdoch spends much of her essay on "The Idea of Perfection" arguing against Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument is convincing evidence that (what I will call) the idiosyncracy claim is meant to bear a robust construction.[38]

Once again, we can motivate this part of her view by appealing to others. Allow that conflicting considerations are negotiated by redescription. There are always further potential conflicts on the horizon, and so there is always room for further redescription. We can think of the limit in which all the demands introduced by our conflicting "normative-descriptive" terms have been resolved, and all our evaluations unified, as our apprehending an infinitely thick or fractal concept, the Good, and so we might think of Murdoch's picture of the Good as a kind of Kantian regulative ideal.[39] Convincing unifying redescriptions of this kind tend to be ingenious, clever, and surprising; they turn on highlighting some feature of a situation that one had been overlooking, and showing how it tells when it is placed next to some other overlooked feature on the other side of the situation. (Murdoch insists that the Good is enormously hard to see, and the best reason in the vicinity for that claim is that the evaluative unifications are unobvious.) They are also path-dependent: what next description will be appropriate is partly a matter of the currently available descriptions that give rise to the conflict, and these in turn have resulted from descriptions one had been working with previously. The unobviousness of each move, together with path-dependence of this kind, will promote idiosyncrasy.

I am not entirely sure how Murdochian the connection I am drawing here is. Murdoch does sketch (but only sketch) an argument for the idiosyncrasy claim. When ideal or limit concepts are in play (as they typically are in the moral domain), application of the concept cannot be anchored to a public standard. This is partly because the uninstantiated ideal limit cannot be exhibited as a reference point, and this in turn is partly because of the ways in which application of these concepts is a function of one's personal history.[40] One's history is in part a history of one's redescriptive resolutions of conflicting considerations, and since the conceptual and more generally descriptive repertoire in terms of which one sees a new conflict is a function of that history, our gesture at an argument is at any rate compatible with what Murdoch says about her reasons for idiosyncrasy.

The claim that different persons will properly work with idiosyncratic descriptive tools that they do not share with others must be distinguished from

the claim that occasions for practical deliberation will require one-use, throwaway concepts, that is, ways of seeing appropriate to a single occasion. To return to an example of which I have already made some use, at the early stages of mastering a language, the action-guiding descriptions can be shared as widely as you like, and they figure into rules to which the speaker or writer must conform. (E.g., the grammatical concept "split infinitive", which launches the rule "Don't split infinitives.") As one's command of the language grows, however, and one becomes a better and more autonomous prose stylist, the crisply formulable rules are no longer binding (a good stylist can decide when to split infinitives), the practical guidelines to which one responds are better thought of as embodied in descriptions rather than rules, and as a strong writer develops an ear for the language and his own writing voice, the descriptions that serve him in this capacity will be – while fully responsible to the demands of the language – peculiar to him alone (and quite possibly intelligible to him alone). Nonetheless, because a writer may choose to maintain a consistent voice, the descriptions he deploys for this purpose will for the most part lend themselves to repeated use.

Having made the distinction, a particularist may well wonder, first, why he should take Murdoch's idiosyncrasy claim on board, or even whether it is of a piece with the defusing move (rather than just an extraneous helping of relativism). Now I am not myself insisting on the idiosyncrasy claim; I have tried to motivate it, but I haven't produced anything like an argument that would make its conclusion impossible to evade, even if one already accepted much of the rest of Murdoch's view. Still, I think the idiosyncrasy claim is worth particularist attention, and let me try to say why.

If the defusing move did not normally work, then Murdoch's views about idiosyncrasy would not be sustainable; the relevant reasons, when you are deliberating, would after all be the reasons that are relevant elsewhere to others. So one can see the idiosyncrasy claim as a view about what patterns are to be discerned in successful applications of the defusing move. Idiosyncrasy doesn't purport to give necessary or sufficient conditions for the effectiveness of the move, but it does have it that one important type of shift in context that can alter the force of a reason is, especially in the moral domain, the shift to a different individual with a different deliberative history.

Recall the complaint that particularist gestures at context function as conversation-stoppers. If that complaint is to be addressed, particularists need to be looking for patterns with roughly the level of traction that the idiosyncrasy claim purports to have. So what I am pressing is not the demand that particularists take the idiosyncrasy claim on board, but that they use it as a model for working up other, similarly-shaped claims that they *are* willing to take on board.[41]

6. When theoretical reasoning is faced with one or another conundrum, it may refrain from drawing a conclusion on the grounds that the evidence at hand is insufficient.[42] But when practical reasoning is faced with a decision, a decision must be made, because doing nothing, it is often remarked, is a decision too. (At any rate, doing nothing is a choice in a far more robust sense than skeptical epoche is a belief.) This asymmetry between the practical and theoretical realms gets expressed in standard pictures of practical reasoning as the notion that, in any

decision situation, practical reasoning correctly performed *must* be able to produce an answer to the question: what shall I do?

Murdoch disagrees. As in the theoretical domain, you may not have available premises sufficient for deriving an answer to your question. To be sure, you may (have to) decide to do one thing or another; but in such a case, you will not be doing it because you have decisive reasons. To conclude, from the fact that you must make a choice, that you have grounds adequate for making one choice in particular (or that it doesn't much matter which choice you make), is like concluding, from the fact that your plan absolutely *must* work, that it *will* work. That is, it is allowing emotional convenience to obscure the obvious, or, as Murdoch would put it, it is letting the self – the "fat relentless ego" (52/342) – get in the way of seeing what is really there. The state of being inadequately prepared for the decision one is facing has a phenomenological character, a sense of the choice being up to one's arbitrary will. Or rather, to put it the other way around, the freedom celebrated by moral philosophers of such diverse stripes as Hare and Sartre is merely what it is like to be put on the spot without the deliberative resources needed to make an intelligent choice.

Because Murdoch thinks that the most important part of the equipment one needs is a suitable description of – or way of seeing – one's situation, those resources include descriptive apparatus that highlights its practically relevant aspects, and include the ability in practice to deploy that apparatus. (I mean that if you do not take, say, the concept of a bicycle to include the ability to recognize passing bicycles, then you need not just the concept, but that ability too.) It should not be assumed that either the acquisition or the application of such a descriptive epithet is immediate. For example, as philosophy teachers, we try to teach our students to have on hand – and to be able correctly to recognize occasions for – labels like: an evasive moment in an argument, or a vicious circularity, or an insufficiently motivated position. It may take years for a student to develop this kind of competence ... and even once this happens, he may exhibit a peculiar blindness when it comes to recognizing occasions for their application in his own work.

Part of the reason that augmenting one's stock of (e.g.) concepts is so time-consuming is the one that Murdoch emphasizes: it is often a process that requires getting past an emotional stake one has in seeing things some other way. Murdoch in fact holds that the main and perhaps the only real obstacle to deliberative progress is the pull of fantasy, that is, the self's desire to avert its gaze from what is "really there" in front of one. ("[C]onsciousness is ... normally ... a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain" (79/364); the production of great art is a model for practical deliberation, because beauty distracts us from fantasy and allows us to see what is "really there".) I will later try to say what I think is right about this claim; but for now, Murdoch's manner of speaking notwithstanding, it is obvious enough that resistance is by no means the only reason augmenting and deploying one's descriptive repertoire takes time. Consider Douglas Coupland, a recent example of someone who made a career of finding names for very familiar, but until then unlabeled, bits of nineties experience.[43] His success would be inexplicable if anyone could just come up with apt descriptions at the drop of a hat. Coming by the terms needed for adequately

describing our world is hard enough for finding *le mot juste* a handful of times to make a bestseller (or a single telling concept, an academic's career), and for inventing a word to occasionally be an important political achievement.

So if you are to face decisions in which you are equipped to act for your reasons, you must do your homework ahead of time; if you wait until it is time to choose before you start thinking about what to do, too much of the time it will be too late. But if Murdoch is right about the immense difficulty of progressing to a more adequate set of practically orienting descriptions, simply starting early is not going to be enough. We have just supplemented her reason for that claim, the inertia of a frame of mind that is emotionally easy on one, with the point that it's hard to think of specially apt concepts, and the more straightforward consideration of the two shows that, even with a good deal of lead time, you will have a scanty collection of practical guides if you have to fabricate all of them by yourself. You will do much, much better if you can help yourself to the products of others' labor – as in pretty much every other part of life. But for the concepts developed by others to be usable by you, they will have to be common rather than idiosyncratic concepts.

I think there is a real difficulty for the view here. It is first of all a practical rather than a theoretical difficulty, and it is a difficulty for particularism whether or not Murdoch's full theoretical frame is being taken on. On the one hand, the lead time required to develop the means of seeing one's situation properly means that one has to prepare for deliberation ahead of time. The optimal way to do that is to acquire generic, all-purpose deliberative resources from others (because the results of one's own endeavors will simply be too sparse to suffice). A particularist reading of the moral realm, however, is constructed around an awareness of the limitations of generic deliberative resources. If the particularist reading is right, then, much of the time we are bound to deliberate poorly.

The idiosyncrasy claim provides a further reason for thinking that the way one sees things must be enough to determine, all by itself, what one is to do. If further inference is required to arrive at decision, then one's description will only be useful if it deploys terms and concepts that engage one's other inferential resources; like apt descriptions, these are also hard to come by in a timely way on one's own, and so most of them are inevitably community property. For instance, the description of a potential business partner as dishonest and unreliable is useful because one has handy a tried and tested rule of thumb to the effect that one had better not enter into close working relationships with dishonest and unreliable people. But highly idiosyncratic descriptions will not interlock in this way with other inferential resources. In Murdoch's novel *The Italian Girl*, Edmund, its narrator and protagonist, describes a stage in arriving at a decision to offer Maggie, the Italian servant of the title, a ride to Italy, and himself in the bargain:

> I could not remember that I had looked at anyone in quite that way before: when one is all vision and the other face enters into one's own. I was aware too of a bodily feeling which was not exactly desire but was rather something to do with time, a sense of the present being infinitely large. (1967, p. 168)

It is a plausible illustration of what idiosyncrasy in perception is supposed to come to, and it is plausible that only such a form of words might capture the content of one's perception on some occasion. The problem is that one is unlikely to have

available rules, or even rules of thumb, like: when one is aware of a bodily feeling that is not desire but rather to do with time, etc., offer her a ride to Italy. So applications of highly idiosyncratic concepts will only be useful if they can do their work on their own, without the contribution of other interlocking pieces of intellectual machinery.

But this is not a plausible position at which to have ended up. To point out that one has to have done one's homework if one is going to be sufficiently well-prepared to think about one's situation is not to have shown that one must be so well-prepared that one does not even have to think. Even if our aim is to reach a state in which the gap between seeing and acting has been eliminated, it ought to be acknowledged that the aim is rarely attained; most of the time, we are still going to have to think about what to do, and so the resources we lay by for a rainy day should prepare us to do our thinking, which is to say they should be sufficiently standardized to interlock with other concepts that we have.

7. Practical reasoning is reasoning directed toward deciding what to do, and accordingly there is a long line of schematizations of practical reasoning that designate as the final step a decision, or the forming of an intention, or even an action. That connection has recently been brought into the foreground by a perceptive group of moral philosophers who hope to read off the shape of practical deliberation from the shape of the actions that are its product.[44] Now when one sees practical reasoning in this way, it is natural to see episodes of practical reasoning as themselves actions: instances of the action-type "deciding what to do" that consequently conclude successfully in actual decision.[45] Murdoch's understanding of practical reasoning does not, however, share this area of common ground in the contemporary debate.

Let us continue to identify practical reasoning as ultimately done with a view to action.[46] As Murdoch has noticed, however, most of it must be done far ahead of time, while it is too early to have any very definite circumstances for action in mind. It follows that episodes of practical reasoning often do not, even when they are properly executed, terminate in decisions or actions. Rather, when successful they eventuate in the production of cognitive resources: metaphors or concepts or ways of seeing situations that have practical force once they are brought to bear on appropriate situations.[47]

But it is also overstating matters to say that on Murdoch's view exercises in practical deliberation *terminate;* recall that she holds that there is always further room for improvement in one's practical vision. One may leave off working on some set of "normative-descriptive" epithets for a while, in the way that one might take a break from washing the dishes; but one is never *done* with them (or should never be done with them), just as in some households one is never done with the dishes. Even when an occasion for action that deploys the concepts comes and goes, that need not mean that one is done with the job; because the kind of practical resources one is developing may be useful later, there will often be a point to trying to see a past choice better than one had managed to at the time. (And of course there may be a moral or ethical point, even if there is no future-directed reason to keep improving the descriptive tool.)

This means that, while the point of this kind of deliberative activity may still be to advance the cause of well-chosen action, because there is no visible point of closure towards which it can be oriented, the kinds of control structures that govern actions will not be appropriate for regulating it. Vogler has emphasized that because actions come with a built-in end or termination point, to which the action's previous stages are means or steps, one can check the practical rationality of a step by checking to see whether it is a step towards the termination point. (So, for instance, if the termination point has already been reached when the step is taken, as when you have already found your keys, but keep on looking for them, then your further looking is not rational but compulsive.) Since there is no end of this kind in view in much Murdochian deliberation, the stages of deliberation cannot be referred to an end in this way to see if they are practically rational.

I earlier worried that the particularist gesture at the dependence of reasons on context had the effect of bringing discussion up short, and I have been trying to suggest that we will do better by reimporting Murdoch into that discussion. The hard part, once again, of figuring out what to do is supposed to be getting the description of your situation right; so what we need to think about next is how you ought to go about getting the right description. This might sound like a proposal for a manual that would instruct us in producing practically relevant portrayals of one's circumstances (think of something along the lines of the journalist's "Five W's", only more so). A particularist will not find such a project promising at first glance, and now that we have reopened the question of the kind of control structure the descriptive phase of practical deliberation has to have, it will seem even less promising at second glance. Manuals work best when they are explaining how to achieve some fairly definite end.

Murdoch has it, we saw, that the primary obstacle to seeing matters as they really are is being distracted by oneself: by the desire to be vindicated, by comforting fantasies, and the like. Her prescription is to redirect one's attention away from the self, and she holds that this can be done only incrementally, and that it will normally require external aids. (She recommends great art, nature, and, possibly, prayer.) This diagnosis, I argued, is difficult to accept as stated; the distractions of the self are some among many other obstacles, though I am willing to believe that in the moral domain they are especially important. But there is something that Murdoch is getting right about practical reasoning, and I would like to conclude by trying to say what that is.

Getting one's descriptions right – seeing things in the right way – is most importantly a matter of what one notices.[48] And so the task here really is that of directing or redirecting one's attention. Now while there is some degree to which one can force one's attention this way or that, and so to which attending or noticing can figure as stages in a plan, to a great extent attention resists voluntary direction. You can't keep your eyes from sliding off the pages of some books; you suddenly realize that, despite your firmest intentions, you cannot remember the last ten or so minutes of a talk that you are now willing to describe as tedious; you are unable not to notice an interlocutor's verbal tics. Attention follows responses like interest or curiosity, in something like the way that the growth of plants follows their responses to light.

Let me press the analogy just a bit further. Plants solve practical problems, but

they do not typically (there are occasional exceptions, as in the carnivorous plants) *act.* Agency involves a kind of coordination that requires centralized command, but plants produce outcomes (such as efficient configurations of leaves) without coordination of this kind.[49] (When one root encounters a concentration of nutrients, and so branches, there is no central nervous system deciding whether this root should branch, or some other.) And since actions require a high degree of coordination of this kind, plants do not produce actions. When a plant grows toward the light, there is very often no determinate end point against which the previous stages of growth can be positioned as steps in a plan. (Rather, the plant will continue growing as long as the light attracts it – sometimes to its detriment, as when a tree breaks under its own weight).[50] Our practical vocabulary is specialized around agency, but we need to come to recognize this as a practical hinderance: not all practical problems are solved by *doing* something.

The thought that human beings engage in, or are the locus of, activity that is less than action is not unfamiliar. Our bodies grow, digest, and all the rest of it, and the notion of "subpersonal cognitive processes" has been fairly well assimilated into the current picture of human psychology. But we have not yet managed to reject a view, perhaps inherited from as far back as Aristotle, of where these processes fit into the organization of the person – a view that is more an expression of pre-Copernican evaluative bias than it is an honest description of what we are really like. On this view, some creatures have merely vegetative souls; these solve their practical problems through devices like phototropism. Creatures with animal souls – that is, creatures that solve their practical problems by acting on the basis of what they perceive – have, as it were, a vegetative substratum, but this is subservient to the governing animal organization of such a creature. Creatures with rational souls – human beings – have vegetative and animal substrata in turn, but these lower layers serve the higher rational organization, and in particular the animal (viz., perceptual and active) aspects of human activity are directed by the highest and autonomous layer, the person's rational agency.

What Murdoch has right is that, in human beings, agency and the actions it produces are themselves directed by processes that resemble, in the terms of the Aristotelian picture, activity of the vegetative part of the soul.[51] The agential structure of persons is better thought of not as the governing top layer, but as one of the middle layers in a sandwich. This is why the stages of practical deliberation that Murdoch is focussing on do not look like actions oriented towards definite termination points.

The aspects of rationality that we most value turn out to belong to what we have the unjustifiable habit of regarding as a "lower" part of the soul. That idea is likely to generate a certain amount of resistance. First, it will be objected, plants grow toward the light *blindly;* how can a process of that sort count as rational – and, a particularist will add, how can we expect it to be more flexible than the rules he is rejecting? Second, the compelling force of rational inference is lacking: if it is all noticing and attention, the practical reasoning cannot lie in arriving at the description of one's problem, because there is – as Jonathan Dancy vividly put it to me – no *therefore* in mental movements of this kind.

But, on the first count, humans do differ from plants in that we can to some extent train the responses that guide our attention (and so our ability to notice

what we need to). Taking the response of interest as representative, along with a nearby example, recall that what it is to become a philosopher is in part to acquire a sense of what is philosophically interesting; if things are going well, what one finds interesting will change not only as one comes to understand the field better, but as the field itself changes. It is their mutability, their ability to track or underwrite assessments as content-rich as "interesting", and the traction they allow for criticism that makes the responses that direct our attention less hidebound than the unvarying reasons that so frustrated the particularist. So if the hardest part of thinking through our practical problems is arriving at the right way of seeing them, the next thing to think about is how to modify and adjust the responses that determine our attention, so that we will be able to notice what needs to be noticed. That is itself a practical problem, and if Murdoch is right, we will have to address it situation by situation, starting off by trying to describe what the impulses that direct our attention are responses to, and how well they are doing their job.

On the second count: I don't have a satisfactory account of the force of a "therefore," and while sometimes that does not preclude arguing for its presence, I'm not going to attempt that here. Instead, by way of suggesting that we should be less certain about the alleged contrast than the objection has it, I want to point out that what looks like a *symptom* of this kind of compellingness *is* present. That one cannot believe at will is best explained by the fact that beliefs stand in inferential relations to other beliefs, and that we also cannot notice at will, and have a great deal of difficulty paying attention at will, may likewise be best accounted for by something of a piece with the force of (uncontroversially rational) inference.

8. I have been advancing a series of suggestions about how to proceed in the development of an area of moral theory. I pointed out that the sub-Aristotelian position is a poor fit for particularism, and that particularism needs a better theoretical home if it is not to function as a philosophical conversation-stopper. I introduced Murdoch's idea that the early-on descriptive phase of practical reasoning should be the focus of our attention, because that is where all the hard deliberative work has to get done. This does seem to me to be a promising way to think about the defusing move, which I suggested was the heart of particularism. However, I tried to show how pressure develops in Murdoch's view (and possibly more generally, in views of this kind) to connect description directly with action, at the expense of subsequent deliberation. I inspected Murdoch's notion that successfully executed redescription will tend to be idiosyncratic; while I am not entirely convinced, I think that particularists ought to be entertaining claims with roughly this look and feel. I have just been asking you to notice how Murdoch's understanding of practical reasoning is tied to a nonstandard picture of the place of agency in the person. And I hope that the way I have laid matters out makes the idea of pairing particularism with Murdoch's take on practical reasoning attractive. But the argumentatively-inclined reader may be thinking that we have had far too much in the way of suggestion, and not nearly enough in the way of argument. So this would be an appropriate place to remind him that, on the account of practical deliberation that we find in Murdoch, this is just what deliberation with a practical point is supposed to be like.

Notes

[1] Dancy, 1993, pp. 55-119; Dancy, 1985; Little, 2000; Little, 2001 (but see note 19, below); McDowell, 1998, esp. ch. 3; McNaughton, 1989, esp. p. 62 and ch. 13; Norman, 1997, esp. pp. 122 ff. It's not clear that McDowell self-identifies with the movement, but the movement does seem to identify with him; I will return to the question of the fit between them below.

[2] See, for instance, Kolnai, 1970.

[3] As it happens, there is a history of influence to be recovered: McDowell is (modulo the qualification mentioned in note 1) probably the most influential of the contemporary particularists; other particularists have been strongly influenced by him, and McDowell was himself influenced by Murdoch. Most particularists are either not aware of or do not devote much attention to the connection; it is indicative of how little that a recent anthology titled *Moral Particularism* contains only one reference to Murdoch, and that reference gets the title of her best-known philosophical publication wrong: Hooker and Little, 2000, p. 292n. For traces of the pattern of influence, see Dancy, 1993, pp. ix, xii; McDowell, 1998, ch. 3, notes 35-37; McNaughton, 1989, p. ix.

[4] Of course, the idea itself has been around for a long time; decision theorists have taken it for granted since, anyway, the 1940s, and (as Michael Thompson has reminded me) G. E. M. Anscombe famously made a point of choosing examples of reasons for action that went against the moral grain. Note that the distinction I am invoking here is not to be confused with that between ethics and metaethics, which was quite popular for much of the twentieth century; if this latter distinction can be sustained, both substantive theories of practical reasoning (in particular, those that specify the forms that practical inference takes) and substantive moral theory will come down on the same side of it.

[5] Dancy, 2000, p. 144, quoting from Thesiger, 1959; he produces the example in the course of a discussion of the Sure-Thing Principle, and does not seem to think of it as an illustration of the defusing move. Dancy, 1999, p. 144, acknowledges that particularism has had to get by without having a "canonical expression".

[6] To be sure, not everyone agrees that the defusing move always works. For instance, Brad Hooker is willing to insist that pleasure, at any rate when it's not a sadist's pleasure, is always a "moral plus" (2000, p. 8), and David Bakhurst, even while agreeing that it is not always in the same way a reason for action, likewise holds that "[s]uffering is enduringly significant... [and] not something that... [a morally sensitive] agent could leave out of a moral description" (2000, p. 173). A similarly hedged resistance can be found in Brännmark, 1999. But disagreement of this kind is, on the occasions I have run into it, premature. To continue with pleasure and suffering, variations on the camelback adventure will serve as defusing surrounds; or again, climbing a mountain might be motivated by the extreme limits to which one will pushed, i.e., by the pain and suffering it will involve. When someone chooses to undergo real suffering on his way to the next peak or oasis, the suffering may well *not* belong in a morally oriented description of the situation.

[7] Dancy, 1993, p. 60; Hooker, 2000, p. 6.

[8] Dancy, 1993, pp. 60-62; Dancy, 2000.

[9] McNaughton and Rawling, 2000, p. 257 (the view they are describing here is not their own); McNaughton, 1989, p. 190; Little, 2000, p. 288; Little also adopts the generalization explanation of rules. The reminder view of rules can be found in Dancy, 1993, p. 67; he gives a related account of the moral uses of imagined situations at Dancy, 1985, 150f. See also McDowell, 1998, pp. 57f, on what he subsequently calls the "thesis of uncodifiability", and the quoted characterization of particularism at Dancy, 1985, p. 149.

[10] Jackson *et al.*, 2000, p. 99; compare Dancy, 1993, pp. 73-79.

[11] For the objection, see Hooker, 2000, pp. 16ff.

[12] Dancy, at any rate, has committed himself to taking considerations of this kind seriously: he writes that "[o]ur duty as philosophers of ethics is to make sense of the discoverable patterns of moral reasoning; if we cannot do this it is a fault on our side, a fault in the philosophy rather than in the reasoning" (1985, pp. 149f).

[13] 89f/373: Murdoch's *Sovereignty of Good* (1970) is perhaps the most widely available of her philosophical works, but *Existentialists and Mystics* (1998) stands a good chance of becoming the canonical collection of her non-fiction. (It is not to be treated as a critical edition; for instance, her important paper, "On Vision and Choice in Morality" has been abridged so as to remove its original

concessions to Aristotelian Society format.) The essays in *Sovereignty* appear in *Existentialists* as well. Accordingly, slashed cites in the text will give first the page in *Sovereignty,* followed by the page in *Existentialists;* unslashed cites give the page in *Existentialists.*

[14] Compare MacNaughton, 1989, p. 203, on rules of style.

[15] For this last claim, see Raz, 2000, pp. 66f.

[16] Distinguish reasons whose force is general, but which are not governed by the Principle of Sufficient Reason (that is, reasons that are good enough this time, but which won't always be good enough), from kleenex reasons (use them once and throw them away). The former are probably best taken up under the heading of Aristotelian moral theory; particularism might look like an occasion to work on the more radical option, but I don't see that it is nearly ready for a challenge of this magnitude.

[17] See Irwin, 2000, for some objections to attributing particularism to Aristotle.

[18] Williams, 2001, p. 78; when particularists themselves face off against a view with the features I have just mentioned, they sometimes take Ross as their stalking horse.

[19] For a particularist gesture at the sub-Aristotelian position, see Dancy's "account of the person on whom we can rely to make sound moral judgements" (1993, at p. 64). Little, in correspondence, has described her current position in a way that comes out close to the sub-Aristotelian view in some but not all respects. Perhaps compatibly, MacNaughton, 1989, pp. 203-205, expresses his qualms about using the professional ethicist (who is to be distinguished from the *phronimos*) as a moral reference point.

[20] The point is related to one made by Williams against Aristotelian alternatives to his "internalism" (1995). Because your differences from the *phronimos* can give you reasons for action, what the *phronimos* has reason to do may not be what you have reason to do: the virtuous person is temperate and so has no need to lock his liquor cabinet, but if you are an alcoholic, you may have all the reason in the world to lock it up and throw away the key. (Perhaps if we mute Aristotle's insistence that the *phronimos* have been well brought up we can allow for one who remembers, e.g., an akratic past. But we obviously cannot have a *phronimos* who has lived through all the possible fallings-away from virtue.) The counterexamples exploit what Shope (1978) has labelled the "conditional fallacy".

[21] Three remarks. First, the effect should be familiar from the identity crises suffered by senior-year applicants for fellowships abroad – the upshot of having worked up four or five rather different projects and accompanying interview personalities. Second, all this is of course not to suggest that meddlesomeness is *enough* to make one a good advisor. There is also, just for instance, the ability (the advice columnists' stock-in-trade) to be completely matter-of-fact about *anything,* which is likewise probably not the way a virtuous person comports himself. And third, perhaps there are people one could legitimately call virtuous advisors, but these would be people who possessed the advising virtues, not people who were both virtuous and advisors. (The mistake involved in conflating these has been well-described by Geach, 1956; I'm grateful to Lauren Tillinghast for allowing me to read an unpublished manuscript discussing Geach's argument.)

[22] Murdoch herself tends to think of the background to her ethical views as philosophy of mind or moral psychology; see 4/301f.

[23] These examples are due to Lori Alward and Amy Johnson.

[24] Psychologists and cognitive scientists have found these issues of interest for much of the last century; see, e.g., Duncker, 1945, or, more recently, Chi, *et al.*, 1981.

[25] She does explicitly endorse views of a piece with contemporary particularism at 85 ff.

[26] The checklist metaphor, differently deployed, crops up in discussions of particularism, including Dancy, 1985, p. 150; MacNaughton, 1989, p. 62; and Little, 2000, p. 287.

[27] Diamond, 1996.

[28] Murdoch, 1992, p. 86. The volume I have taken this passage from is disorganized in the extreme, and it is hard not to attribute the state it is in to the illness from which Murdoch eventually died. (See Bayley, 1999, Bayley, 2000, for her husband's account of the final stages of Murdoch's battle with Alzheimer's.) Nonetheless, I think that standalone remarks can be culled from the Gifford Lectures that do illuminate her considered views.

[29] 40/332; compare 37/329, 64/352.

[30] Maier, 1931.

[31] It is here that keeping track of particularism's historical debt to Murdoch could especially have prevented wasted motion. Jackson, Pettit and Smith, for instance, begin their discussion of

particularism by introducing "the distinction between, on the one hand, the descriptive, non-evaluative, factual, natural, etc. and, on the other, the evaluative, ethical, normative, moral etc." as a distinction without which the view they oppose cannot be so much as stated. (2000, p. 81). But perhaps they would have been less confident on this point had they identified Murdoch as a member of the particularist tradition. Murdoch was, after all, thought of until recently by philosophers in the analytic tradition primarily as the source of the view that what are now called "thick ethical concepts" can be used as an objection to the fact-value distinction. (The term was made familiar by Geertz, 1973, ch. 1, who in turn attributes it to Ryle; I'm grateful to Gopal Sreenivasan for helping me follow the citation trail. See Millgram, 1995, for the way in which Murdoch's ideas were adapted by writers such as McDowell, Putnam and Williams.)

I don't, however, want to suggest that the analytic appropriation of Murdoch was faithful to her views. As she was appropriated, the objection was supposed to be that concepts such as "devious," "sleazy," "cute," and so on have both evaluative or prescriptive and factual or descriptive aspects, but that they cannot be factored into separate evaluative and descriptive components; the conclusion that was supposed to follow was that the fact-value distinction is impossible to sustain. But there is, as we might expect, no argument to that effect in Murdoch's own discussion; her claim is rather that it is *inadvisable* to sustain the distinction.

[32] I'm grateful to Carla Bagnoli for discussion on this point. Murdoch herself seems to think that there might be arguments for sometimes but not always doing do; she describes the demand as part of "a Liberal ideal" (84).

There is a further way to see how the allegedly metaphysical distinction is beside the point. Return to the grammar example, and call *grammatical particularism* the thesis that the defusing move works *within* the grammar of a language. In a language of which grammatical particularism was true, that a noun was masculine, say, would be a reason for using the masculine article... except that there would be a not-fully-systematizable array of contexts in which it was a reason for using the feminine or neuter article. (If the defusing contexts are really unsystematizable, they cannot be judged grammatical or ungrammatical by appeal to a non-trivial rule, but we can suppose that native speakers classify them as acceptable and unacceptable.) We can imagine languages of which grammatical particularism is true; I sometimes suspect that it is almost true of French and English. It is evidently possible to modify arguments against particularism of the type advanced by Jackson, *et al.*, 2000, to conclude that grammatical particularism cannot be correct: that there must be codifiable rules that determine some patterns of the linguistic elements (such as words, phonemes, or letters) to be the grammatically correct constructions.

Now notice that when the metaphysical or metaethical contrast between "evaluative" and "descriptive" is drawn, the elements that the grammar governs – words, sentences, and even letters – are not so much as identifiable using only those features that those who draw the distinction could defend placing on its descriptive side. This strongly suggests that the concerns regarding particularism do not at bottom have anything to do with the contrast between evaluative and descriptive, and that arguments that so present them are their less than faithful expressions.

[33] Murdoch does not present anything like a standardly-shaped argument for them herself. In Millgram, 1998, I outlined and assessed what I took to be Murdoch's strategy for supporting her theses, that of using her own novels as arguments for her view. I am now less certain that I correctly understood her intentions. As we will see, on Murdoch's account, moral progress is a matter of gradually redirecting one's attention; this happens incrementally, and can be assisted, but not compelled, by providing better objects on which to fix one's attention. So we should not expect an *argument,* even a novelistic argument, that is intended to force an abrupt turn in one's moral life; at most we will be provided with, or reminded of, other things to think about, and terms to think about them in, and it is likely that this is the way she intends *Sovereignty* to operate.

[34] 42/333; actually, she seems to be suggesting not just that one need not do further practical reasoning, but that one *cannot.* She writes: "One is often compelled almost automatically by what one *can* see" (37/329). She speaks repeatedly of "a world which is *compulsively* present to the will"; "we cannot suddenly alter what we can see and ergo what we desire and are compelled by" (39/330f); "[m]an ... is a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees ..." (40/332, her emphases throughout).

I indicated earlier that the uptake of Murdoch's work among analytic philosophers was focussed on the deployment of a special class of ("thick ethical") *concepts.* But this was perhaps misleading, since analytic philosophers are educated to think of concepts as functions from objects to truth-values, and

Murdoch's "normative epithets" (18/313) have not merely truth-values, but actions, as their outputs. As we will see, they also, and most importantly, have the task of directing one's attention in one direction or another; that is, instead of taking objects as inputs, they pick out and delineate objects for consideration. Their inputs include not merely already well-defined objects, but imprecisely marked-out contexts of application, and those contexts include the histories of their users. (26/319, 33/325) Not surprisingly, Murdoch herself is much more ginger about the term than the philosophers who have appropriated her; with some exceptions, she avoids "concept" in favor of less philosophically loaded vocabulary, such as "specialized normative words" (22/317), "normative-descriptive words" (31/324), and so on. I will do the same (like her, with exceptions).

[35] Alternatively, one will not be in a position to say, before arriving at one's answer, what the weights are. Compare McNaughton, 1989, pp. 199 f.

[36] 57f/346f; 95/378. To forestall confusion, let me contrast the differing roles the unity of virtue plays in Murdoch and in McDowell. In Murdoch, unity of the virtues is a paradigmatic instance of how disparate objects of choice can be seen in a way that resolves conflict. In McDowell, however, unity of the virtues is a way of talking about how this kind of resolution of competing considerations into decision goes ahead in the agent. And his way of talking about the final evaluative unification of apparently conflicting objects of choice takes the label "eudaemonia" – the Aristotelian notion of the well-lived life – rather than (as in Murdoch, who reads more Plato than Aristotle) the Good.

[37] 29/322, and compare 33/326: "Reasons are not necessarily, and *qua* reasons, public." This may be Murdoch's view of specifically moral thought, rather than a rendering of practical deliberation more generally; certainly she allows that many concepts whose structure is simple and public – "red light" and "green light", for example – are fine as they are.

[38] 11ff/307ff; I am not claiming that Murdoch has the (very controversial) Private Language Argument right, and so I don't need to take a stand myself on what the Argument is or how it works. What matters for the point at hand is its reception in the 1960s: Murdoch is arguing against the claim that the private is logically parasitic on the public, and so that thoughts whose contents are in principle incommunicable cannot be made sense of. This was understood at the time as a claim about the metaphysics of mind.

For obvious reasons, one should not expect convincing and worked-out examples of robustly idiosyncratic reasons (though I will present a surrogate for one below). Difficulties of this general flavor are typical of particularism; compare Lippert-Rasmussen's complaint that Dancy is not in a position to treat his imagined cases as arguments for his view (1999, p. 106n).

[39] See 42/333. I don't see how a particularist could have a guarantee that such evaluatively unifying redescriptions will always be available; an argument to that effect would have to turn on some feature of situations that was guaranteed always to be present and always to be practically relevant, but the central motivating thought of particularism is that there can be no such feature. Murdoch seems to acknowledge this when she says that while "[t]he search for unity is deeply natural ... [it] may be capable of producing nothing but a variety of illusions." (76/362)

[40] 28ff/321ff, and especially the following remark: "... if M [a mother-in-law in a famous example] says D [her daughter-in-law] is 'common'... this use of it can only be fully understood if we know not only D but M" (33/325).

[41] Earlier on, I quickly rehearsed a complaint fielded against particularism, that the aspects of morality that have to do with social control are not accommodated by antinomianism, and you may be wondering why Murdoch's view is supposed to do any better on that score. I'm not sure that Murdoch would insist that it does; she acknowledges "the *moral* dangers of... specialised and esoteric vision and language" (43/334), and ends up saying merely that "we know roughly how to deal with these dangers and part of the moral life is dealing with them" (91f). Possibly the analogy with mastery of a language lends some credibility to this posture.

[42] Of course, in-principle sufficiency is not all there is to it: the theoretical reasoner may fail to see *how* the evidence is sufficient. The science student may know full well that the questions in the problem set have solutions, but nonetheless refrain from turning answers in because he cannot tell what the supplied information is sufficient *for*.

[43] See especially his breakout novel, *Generation X* (1991), which has the dubious distinction of having become a culture icon almost entirely on the basis of its title and marginalia.

[44] Vogler, forthcoming, argues for the primacy of instrumental reasoning on the grounds that actions are instrumentally structured. The product of successful practical reasoning is action, and consequently practical reasoning must trace the means-end outline of the action it is generating;

other forms of practical rationality are optional, but this one is not. Vogler regards her view as descended from Anscombe and, indirectly, Aquinas; for related work, see Thompson, in preparation. Schapiro, 2001, suggestively argues that actions are moves in a practice, and I take it that the suggestion is that practical reasoning will have to be something like reasoning about what move to make in a game (and so will accordingly conform to something like Kant's Categorical Imperative). Korsgaard, 1999, develops an argument for similarly Kantian conclusions turning on what it takes to attribute actions to agents.

[45] Vogler, 2001, p. 461, makes this upshot explicit in the course of developing an argument, one which she attributes to Anscombe, against "inferentialist" approaches to practical reasoning. Inferentialism is roughly the view that practical reasoning is just generic reasoning with a special subject matter, and that practical reasoning can accordingly be understood on the model of theoretical reasoning, by paying special attention to the inference rules that are appropriate to and distinctive of that subject matter.

I think however that the criticism Vogler develops misses the mark, because inferentialists share, albeit implicitly, the view of practical reasoning as itself action, the action of rationally deciding what to do. This kind of action will admit of being planned; the plan will show it as proceeding in stepwise fashion, and the inferentialist is focussed on the question of what the allowable steps in such a plan might be – that is, what inference rules, or approximations to them, might be deployed.

[46] The reader might reasonably wonder if Murdoch herself would concede that much; she makes much of the idea that moral progress is valuable even when it has no consequences for action at all. (Compare 3/301, 17/312, and her essay on "Vision and Choice in Morality", 76-98.) But since, as I have remarked, she does not distinguish her substantive moral theory from her account of practical reasoning, it is hard to know what aspect of her view to pin this idea to.

[47] Vogler points out elsewhere (2000) that the development of such cognitive resources (her own example is writing a cookbook) cannot simply be assumed without further ado to be a stage in what I am inclined to think of as the normal and central case, practical reasoning interrupted or divvied up between persons. "Once the book is done," she reminds us, "it can be read for pure entertainment and the author need never again cook another French meal (this could be why he writes the book – in order to be done with French food forever)." But it is important that (to switch to an adjacent example) when a manufacturer cans garbanzos, it is taking over a phase of my own food preparation, viz., saving me the trouble of boiling them myself; that is the point of providing the ready-made ingredient, even if the manufacturer does not know of me personally, or of my cooking plans, or even whether that particular can is slated to be used as food or an impromptu doorstop.

[48] For examples in a non-moral subject area, see Duncker, 1945, esp. chs. 7-8.

[49] An important account of agency as a response to the need for coordination is worked out in Korsgaard, 1996.

[50] Having said that, let me qualify it. A good deal of plant activity is characterized by the stepwise progress toward a termination point that is central to Vogler's account of action. Even when it is not governed by a central command center, we find a plant, say, first blooming, then bearing fruit, then shedding its leaves, and then hunkering down for the winter.

[51] This idea is not unique to Murdoch – for instance, Bratman takes the disposition to reconsider one's plans on some occasions but not on others to be more or less of this type (1987). But the amount of emphasis Murdoch places on it is distinctive.

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