2020

Making Moral Judgment More Responsive Via Constraints on Moral Beliefs, Principles, and Convictions

David Bukenhofer

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/3855

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 2020 David Bukenhofer
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

MAKING MORAL JUDGMENTS MORE RESPONSIVE VIA CONSTRAINTS ON
MORAL BELIEFS, PRINCIPLES, AND CONVICTIONS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY

DAVID BUKENHOFER

CHICAGO, IL

DECEMBER 2020
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my committee members, each of whom contributed tirelessly to this project. Thomas Carson provided valuable input during the proposal phase, and the final chapter, which concerns situationism, reflects his input. Harry Gensler, S.J., reviewed several drafts and pointed out numerous areas requiring further clarity. Kristen Irwin invested considerable time discussing the project with me, especially in its earlier phases. Her comments and input were invaluable. James Murphy, S.J., provided detailed feedback on several occasions. Finally, Paul Moser was never too busy to offer input. He answered endless e-mails promptly and without complaint.

The philosophy department at Loyola cultivates a strong community of graduate students and my studies were marked by a rewarding acquaintance with many of them. I especially valued the insights and friendship of Corbin Casarez, David Atenasio, Clinton Neptune, and Allan Breedlove. I cannot name everyone, but I also fondly recall time spent with Peter Rosa, Jason Stigliano, Marcella Linn, Thomas Bretz, Justin Nordin, Sarah Babbitt, Robert Duncan, Jean Clifford, Giancarlo Tarantino, Anthony Cooper, and Michael Gutierrez, as well as several of the Jesuit scholastics from 2012-2013.

Other friends offered valuable input, advice, and feedback as well: Matthew McNatt, J.M. Jennings, Rick Williams, Lee Webb, and John Roselle. Stephen Ellis from the University of Oklahoma took time to discuss Chapter Five with me. I am grateful for all their assistance.

Above all else, my family has been unfailingly supportive. My parents and sister cheered me on for years. My uncle Joe and my mother offered helpful suggestions for
Chapter Three. My uncle Tony discussed graduate school with me at the onset of my studies, encouraging me to focus on the field of ethics. My step-children encouraged me and my toddler son insisted on letting him have a turn at the keyboard. My wife Caitlin exhibited heroic patience while I worked on this project and I find it hard to imagine how I would have finished without her support. She deserves tremendous credit for encouraging me during the many evenings I spent in my office working on this manuscript.
To Caitlin
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: PIANALTO’S CONSTRAINTS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: LIMITING EXPERIENCES AS CONSTRAINTS</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: MORAL CHALLENGES AS CONSTRAINTS</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: CONSCIENCE AS A CONSTRAINT</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE: SITUATIONISM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCE LIST</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Key definitions 11-12

Table 2. Conscience as the “Moral Sense” 98

Table 3. Conscience as a “sense of duty” 99
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Experience and the Formation of Moral Belief 4
Figure 2. Moral Judgment 8
Figure 3. Moral Opposition 50
ABSTRACT

A moral judgment is the conclusion of a psychological *process*, and a moral belief is the cognitive *content* resulting from it. Some experiences constrain the moral beliefs, principles, and convictions from which moral judgments are causally formed. If these experiences are associated with an underlying belief, principle, or conviction, they add context to it.

Acquiring new contextual information through experience prompts reflection, which leads to the development of new morally relevant reasons. I hold that moral beliefs, principles, and convictions typically are involved in the formation of moral judgments, and that moral judgments typically are formed on the basis of moral reasons. I also hold that a moral judgment is improved if it is formed after consideration of additional morally relevant reasons.

Following Matthew Pianalto’s work, I identify the constraining activities of *reflection* and *discourse* as a baseline for improving one’s moral judgment. These activities help make one’s judgment more responsive to circumstances and less prone to cognitive vices such as fanaticism and dogmatism. I expand upon this baseline by including experiences of human limitation, a special type of experience I label as a “moral challenge,” and experiences of conscience. These three categories of experience differ significantly, but they are all in their own way unpleasant. They are each given due consideration because experiences are no less valuable as constraints on account of being unpleasant.
CHAPTER ONE
PIANALTO’S CONSTRAINTS

The topic of moral judgment continues to earn considerable attention from philosophers. Much of the discussion concerns either the nature of moral judgments or how to improve them through better moral reasoning. In this dissertation I am concerned with improving moral judgments in the sense of making them more responsive, which I construe as both greater reception of and reaction to morally relevant reasons. One underappreciated means for making one’s moral judgments more responsive is through constraining the moral beliefs, principles, and convictions from which they are causally formed. Constraint occurs when a moral belief is reflected upon, though ‘constraint’ may also refer to activities that provoke or support reflection. (I sometimes will use the terms ‘moral belief’ or ‘moral beliefs’ as a stand-in for moral principles and moral convictions as well.)

In this chapter, I begin by endorsing the position that one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions can be constrained through the application of constraints such as reflection, discourse, and a disposition of humility. However, I press beyond this baseline by concluding that while these activities are valuable as constraints, additional value is available from more demanding constraints.

Moral judgment

In the simplest sense, moral judgments are assessments; they are conclusions regarding some designated entity’s moral status. Garrett Cullity offers the following clarification: “The term ‘moral judgement’ can refer to an activity, a state, a state-content, a capacity or a virtue. The activity of moral judgement is that of thinking about whether
something has a moral attribute. The thing assessed might be an action, person, institution or state of affairs, and the attribute might either be general (such as rightness or badness) or specific (such as loyalty or injustice). If I engage in this activity and make up my mind, then the result will be the formation of a psychological state: the state of judging that the thing has the attribute.”

As observed here, the term ‘moral judgment’ (or ‘moral judgement’) can refer to the psychological process of assessment or the propositional content of the assessment, among other options. From Cullity’s list, I will restrict my use of the term to refer to an activity—a psychological process—and I will consider persons, ideas, statements, actions, etc., all as candidates for assessment.

For a few examples of statements expressing moral judgments, consider the following:

- **Telling that lie was morally wrong.**
- **Tom did the right thing.**
- **We should feed these hungry children.**

The first statement is a declaration that a specific action is morally wrong; the second assesses Tom’s action in a specific circumstance; the third states an action understood to be morally obligatory. In each case, the statement expresses a conclusion regarding the moral status of some specific issue, activity, etc. This propositional content is the result of a psychological process, and even though it also could be referred to as a ‘judgment,’ I will exercise care to keep the two distinct. Cullity expands on the difference between them: “The state should then be distinguished from its content: what is judged by me, rather than my judging it. My psychological state of judging that human trafficking is wrong is a feature of

---

me with a duration and location that depend on me. But the content of that state—the wrongness of human trafficking itself—is not a feature of me.”

Of course, a distinction exists between a moral judgment and other judgments, but deciding how to draw it is not simple. For practical purposes, I follow Kevin Kinghorn’s claim that there is no non-arbitrary line to draw between issues that are of moral significance to one and those that do not. Kinghorn links common use of the term ‘moral’ to what is “judged to be really important to the flourishing of someone’s life.” According to this view, what is considered moral depends on subjective assessment—though, of course, the subjectivity here need not exclude attempts to inform one’s assessment through objective considerations. While Kinghorn understands terms such as ‘goodness’ to be fixed to experiences of flourishing, he does not attempt to treat the origin of a term’s meaning as determinative of underlying reality. In other words, whatever moral goodness actually is, no assumption exists that ordinary language use reflects it with perfect accuracy. Rather, it just is the case that what one might consider “really important” will differ from another. Thus, a concept such as ‘moral goodness’ is “fuzzy-edged,” and cannot be distinguished from ‘goodness’ in a non-arbitrary manner. I have no ambition to add anything to existing questions here and will be satisfied with Kinghorn’s usage as a working definition.

---

2 Cullity, “Moral Judgement.”

3 Kevin Kinghorn, A Framework For the Good (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 34–35.

4 I hold that all determinations about moral status, such as, for example, deciding that an experience of flourishing is good, ultimately are predicated on experience. Figure 1, on the following page, illustrates the relationship between experience and the formation of psychological/dispositional states.

5 Kinghorn, Framework, 4.

6 Additionally, because what I have to say about moral judgment is descriptive about the process, I have reasons to remain neutral with respect to the content of moral judgments. For commentary on this methodological approach, see section entitled ‘What Is This Thing Called Morality?’ from Hanno Sauer, Moral Judgments as Educated Intuitions (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 16–19.
Three phases of moral judgment

Distinguishing between the different phases of the psychological process of moral judgment will help identify what it is about judgment that is of present interest. Christian Miller separates the process into three distinct phases: (1) causal antecedents, (2) the act of judgment, and (3) after-the-fact first-person explanation of the judgment. Stage One encompasses all factors contributing to the formation of a moral judgment. Miller lists three descriptive questions associated with this stage:

- **Question One:** Is conscious moral reasoning typically involved in the formation of a moral judgment?
- **Question Two:** Are moral principles typically involved in the formation of a moral judgment?

---

• **Question Three**: Are moral judgments typically formed on the basis of moral reasons? I will not assess the descriptive aspect of these questions. That is, I will not be concerned with exploring or establishing how often—whether “typically” or otherwise—reasons and principles (or rules) are involved in the formation of a moral judgment. I do not intend to explain how or why this is the case, and my answers to these questions rest on assumptions about the relevant empirical facts.

**Three views on the psychology of moral judgment**

Miller lists three views pertaining to the psychology of moral judgment, each categorized according to their answers to the questions associated with Stage One and Stage Three. Traditional rationalism (TR) answers ‘yes’ to all three questions, while social intuitionism (SI) answers ‘no.’ A more recent view, morphological rationalism (MR), developed by Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, answers ‘no’ to Question One but ‘yes’ to Questions Two and Three.

Paying attention to Question Two will clarify the relationship between moral beliefs, principles, and convictions. A principle is a generalization, and a moral principle, Miller writes, “can also be understood broadly here as principles connecting some nonmoral facts, states of affairs, or reasons, with some moral evaluation like goodness, rightness, or virtue.” For examples, he lists ‘Abortion is wrong’ and ‘If it would cause a lot of pain, then don’t do it,’ among others. I answer Question Two affirmatively: I believe that moral principles

---


9 On (SI)’s answer to Question Three, Christian Miller adds: “Here it is a bit less clear what SI has to say, as I am not aware of any passages in which [Jonathan] Haidt and company address this issue directly. But a natural reading of their work suggests that the answer will be “no” as well. If one assumes that forming moral judgments on the basis of moral reasons requires conscious reasoning, and if conscious reasoning is rare prior to judgment formation, then so too will the causal work of moral reasons be rare.” Miller, “Rationalism and Intuitionism,” 335.

10 Miller, “Rationalism and Intuitionism,” p. 331.
typically are involved in moral judgments.\textsuperscript{11} (Though, again, I do not speculate on what fixes the threshold for ‘typically.’) The answer to the second question is important because it assumes a causal relationship between one’s moral convictions and the formation of moral judgment. A \textit{moral conviction} is a special type of moral belief (see the following section), and if moral principles typically are involved in the formation of a moral judgment—as an affirmative response to the second question indicates—then moral beliefs will be, too. After all, a moral belief is closely related to a moral principle in that the latter implies the former, even if there is no conscious awareness of having the relevant moral belief. Affirming the moral principle that ‘theft is morally wrong,’ for example, implies a belief about the moral status of theft. It is possible to imagine having moral beliefs that have not been generalized into a moral principle; on the definitions I am using for these terms, though, it makes little sense to suppose one has a moral principle with no underlying moral belief(s) about the relevant matter.

The veracity of Questions One and Two is challenged by (SI) theorists. As mentioned, the affirmation of conscious moral reasoning and the causal involvement of moral principles in the formation of moral judgments is a central feature of (TR). However, doubts about these tenets led social psychologists and philosophers to develop (SI) as a replacement. Generally, I agree with the empirical challenge posed to (TR) on Question One. However, one need not answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to both questions: it is possible to \textit{deny} that conscious moral reasoning typically is involved in the formation of a moral judgment while at the same time \textit{affirm} that moral beliefs and principles exert causal influence on judgments. This is the stance taken by

\textsuperscript{11} My responses to the other questions are less relevant to the present point, but in agreement with (MR) I answer ‘no’ to Question One and ‘yes’ to Question Three.
proponents of (MR). I agree with them in this regard, though I do not remark on the details in this dissertation.12

Miller’s three-part conception of the psychological process of moral judgment helps clarify which part is the most relevant for present purposes (see Figure 2 on the following page). Having indicated my intent to focus on concerns about the causal antecedents considered in Stage One, I will remain agnostic regarding the nature of moral judgment,13 which is associated with Stage Two.14 As a result, my comments about the causality involved in Stage One of Miller’s scheme apply whether moral judgments are truth evaluable or not.15


13 I follow Christian Miller on this approach. He explains: “We can be neutral on the nature of moral judgments, and in particular whether cognitivism, noncognitivism, or some hybrid position is correct. For our purposes we can simply understand moral judgments as the agent’s determination of the moral status of some object of evaluation. The moral status could involve axiology (goodness, badness, etc.), deontology (rightness, wrongness, obligatory, etc.), or character (virtuous, honest, cruel, etc.). The objects of evaluation could range over people (“Stalin was cruel”), actions (“What John Smith did was morally wrong”), and outcomes (“The consequences of his decision were awful”), among other things.” Miller, “Rationalism and Intuitionism,” 331–332.

14 There are no questions associated with Stage Two. Miller’s fourth question, associated with Stage Three, is “When people give sincere explanations for why they formed their moral judgments, are those explanations typically accurate?” As it pertains to an agent’s subsequent explanation for his or her judgment, it falls outside of the scope of this essay.

Moral convictions and moral judgments

Because of the close relationship between moral belief and moral principle, rationalists about moral judgment (both traditional and morphological) are committed implicitly to the claim that moral beliefs antecedently play a causal role in the formation of moral judgments. If this claim is true, then it is also the case that moral convictions are causally involved. Moral convictions are, to repeat, a special type of moral belief. Matthew Pianalto specifies two uses for the term. First, as a subject term, “convictions are those moral beliefs that flow from, or reflect, a person’s central commitments and ideals—those which play a central role in a person’s reflection, decision-making, and activity (at least insofar as the person is not akratic).”  

This use reflects a belief’s centrality, meaning that dislodging it likely would overturn related moral beliefs. In this sense, moral conviction will be partly constitutive of a person’s identity: people derive considerable personal meaning, for example, for opposing various forms of injustice. Second, “[t]aken as a mode, conviction refers to strength of belief. At the upper limit, to believe with conviction is to believe with subjective

---

certainty—often, this just is what we mean when we say that a person believes with conviction."\textsuperscript{17} Taken together, then, the usages identified here reflect two distinctive features of moral convictions: they are epistemically central and firmly held. Wright, Cullum, and Schwab distinguish these features as \textit{cognitive} and \textit{affective}: in contrast to other beliefs, moral convictions both have “stronger emotional backing” and are “experienced by people as objective and self-evident .... grounded by universal, unalterable facts that transcend personal and social boundaries.”\textsuperscript{18}

To illustrate the difference between a moral belief and a moral conviction, consider an example provided by Miller: “A local man has admitted to punishing his 8-year-old son by holding him underwater until he started to turn blue in the face. The man, 40-year-old John Smith, says that he needed to punish his son to teach him a lesson for not finishing all the food on his plate at dinner. The boy is being treated at a nearby hospital for asphyxiation, and his condition is critical at the present time.”\textsuperscript{19} For many of us, dwelling on this scenario stirs an emotional response, a reaction that neatly illustrates the two dimensions of moral conviction. The affective response is grounded in the cognitive dimension: the centrality of at least two general moral principles that many of us possess. First, many ascribe to a principle similar to “any punishment should be proportional to a given violation.” Another widely held principle at issue here is the difference between adults and children, and the responsibility

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Miller, “Rationalism and Intuitionism,” 329.
\end{itemize}
that such a difference confers on the former. These two principles, it seems safe to venture, are not peripheral for those that hold them. Sensing them being trespassed provokes an emotional reaction, especially so on account of the example’s vividness. The parental action described here will strike many as a grossly aggressive response to an action which is not obviously a moral wrongdoing in the first place. Indeed, recalling Kinghorn’s notion of morality being “fuzzy-edged,” some readers will struggle to see how not eating everything on one’s plate is a moral consideration at all. Contrasted with John Smith’s actions, his son seems to be ‘guilty’ only of not being hungry enough. In any case, the variables of the example can be changed so that the relevant moral considerations are both less cognitively central and less affective. Consider, for example, if John Smith merely had informed his son that he would not be eligible to eat dessert after dinner.

**Moral reasons and moral reasoning**

Moral beliefs, moral convictions, and moral principles can each serve as a basis from which one draws moral reasons, which are causal intermediaries for moral judgments. Miller defines moral reasons as “morally relevant considerations that count in favor of a particular action or type of action.” Recall that moral principles are a type of generalized moral belief that one uses as a basis for evaluating activities, states, events, etc. If I hold the principle, for example, that ‘if something will cause a lot of pain, then don’t do it,’ I am disposed to recognize that John Smith’s actions violate my principle. Thus, I gain a moral reason as a basis for action. Moral reasoning, of course, is the process of reasoning about a moral issue, event, state, etc., to arrive at a conclusion. Leland Saunders explains that: “moral reasoning is the capacity that enables us, for example, to consciously weigh various moral considerations

---

20 Miller, “Rationalism and Intuitionism,” 331.

21 Miller is careful to point out that moral reasons are subjective and motivating, not necessarily normative. That is, a moral reason is one that seems like a good reason to me. That is, I consider the reason good enough; it does not have to meet any other standard. Miller, “Rationalism and Intuitionism,” 331.
to come to an all-things-considered conclusion regarding what should or should not be done. It enables us to consciously apply moral principles to new or novel situations to come to a conclusion about what should be done.”

Table 1. Key Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Assent:</strong> to assent is to affirm a proposition; it is a psychological act that takes place at a point in time. (Paul Moser, <em>Knowledge and Evidence</em> (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 15.).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Believe:</strong> to believe a proposition is to assent to it at a particular point in time and then adopt a disposition such that one would assent again should one be prompted to (Moser, <em>Knowledge</em>, 18). See also Moser, <em>Knowledge</em>, 15 ff., for discussion of the three possibilities for how one may be related to a considered proposition (i.e., disbelief, withholding, and assent).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Refer to Figure 1, page 4.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral judgment:</strong> a psychological process in which one arrives at a conclusion about some designated entity’s moral status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral belief:</strong> the cognitive content of one’s believing state that is the result of a moral judgment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral principle:</strong> a principle is a generalization, and a moral principle, according to Christian Miller, “[connects] some nonmoral facts, states of affairs, or reasons, with some moral evaluation like goodness, rightness, or virtue” (Miller, “Rationalism and Intuitionism,” 331).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral conviction:</strong> a belief that is held firmly (in a modal sense) and is epistemically central to one’s overall belief structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral reason:</strong> According to Christian Miller, moral reasons are “…morally relevant considerations that count in favor of a particular action or type of action” (Miller, “Rationalism and Intuitionism,” 331).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(These five definitions are drawn from the present chapter.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

22 Leland Saunders, “What is moral reasoning?” *Philosophical Psychology* 28, no. 1 (2015): 10–11, [https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2013.801007](https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2013.801007). He adds (10): “The claim that moral reasoning as a capacity is conscious and deliberate does not imply that every and all of the psychological processes that subserve moral reasoning are conscious and deliberate, nor that every individual psychological process that suberves moral reasoning is consciously accessible. The capacity, as a whole, can have these qualities without attributing them to each and every subserving psychological process.”
**Moral opposition:** intentionally countervailing action taken by another person motivated by a contrary moral belief, principle, or judgment.

(Refer to Chapter Three. See Figure 3, page 50.)

Saunders’s definition suggests that moral reasoning typically occurs consciously. However, my prior affirmation that moral reasoning typically takes place subconsciously aligns me with (MR), as formulated by Horgan and Timmons. They write:

> We label our version ‘morphological’ because according to it, the information contained in moral principles is embodied in the standing structure of a typical individual’s cognitive system, and this morphologically embodied information plays a causal role in the generation of particular moral judgments. The manner in which the principles play this role is via ‘proceduralization’—such principles operate automatically. To be guided by a moral principle, one need not think about or otherwise ‘call up’ the principle. On the view we propose, then, moral principles do not need to be occurrently ‘represented’ (either consciously or unconsciously) by the system in order to be playing the relevant causal role.

Though I agree with the claim that moral reasoning “typically” takes place subconsciously, my intent is not to defend (MR). I remain neutral as to how, precisely, moral principles and moral reasons are causally efficacious at the subconscious level, just as I am noncommittal about their efficacy at the conscious level. I maintain that they are efficacious, though, and I mention (MR) to situate my view alongside current options.

**Morally relevant reasons**

Constraining one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions provides one with additional morally relevant reasons, the consideration of which determines whether a moral judgment is improved. As noted, I understand ‘improve’ in this context to refer to making moral judgments more responsive to the morally relevant features of one’s circumstances.

---

23 It is not clear if Horgan and Timmons use ‘unconscious’ and ‘subconscious’ synonymously, though whether they do does not bear on my claims in this chapter.

That is, through experience, morally relevant reasons are developed from constraints placed upon one’s moral beliefs, principles, and judgments. An agent who includes these reasons (which, again, typically occurs subconsciously) into the process of forming a moral judgment thereby reacts to them. Responsiveness to morally relevant reasons, then, is a matter of both receiving and reacting to them.  

I will take up the topic of responsiveness to reason in greater detail in Chapter Five, but for now, I stipulate that a moral judgment—understood as a psychological process—is more responsive if and only if it is formed after the reception of and reaction to new morally relevant reasons. Such reasons are considered (subconsciously or not) along with the totality of all other morally relevant reasons one has. It is from these frameworks of information that moral judgments are causally formed and sustained.

New reasons that are considered need not be understood as relevant. Moral relevance is a relational concept, and whatever new reason is included in the causal process of judgment formation need not be consciously understood as relevant by the agent. Indeed, it is useful here to distinguish between reasons that are relevant and reasons that are understood as relevant. Moreover, a relevance relation is not necessarily binary, splitting into either ‘relevant’ or ‘not relevant.’ Relevance exists in degrees and can change rapidly along with changes in circumstance.

As a practical matter, the agent must decide for himself what information is relevant and to what degree, even if most of these decisions are subconscious. Including new morally relevant reasons in the causal process of a moral judgment improves it even if one

---

25 See the section “Reasons-responsiveness and moral responsibility” in Chapter Five.

does not recognize such reasons as relevant. For example, if I am a shop owner and I hold the moral principle that ‘stealing is morally wrong,’ it is relevant that my policy of not allowing customers to steal causes some of them to suffer. The fact of their suffering bears on my principle, even if not enough to cause me to adjust it. Even if I do not make the cognitive connection between the fact of their suffering and my principle, including this reason in my judgment improves it. After all, it is a fact that their suffering is in part caused by a policy I have in place because of a principle I hold. In this case, I have both received a morally relevant reason from experience and responded to it by declining to change the store policy. (Assume that the policy is in place because of the principle I hold.)

Additional observations on moral reasoning and responsiveness

In this section, I will present three observations. The first two are intended to clarify what occurs during the process of moral reasoning. The third distinguishes between personal responsibility and responsiveness to reasons. First, considering new morally relevant information will not necessarily result in changing one’s mind about a moral conviction. A conviction is constrained by the application of insight (i.e., new morally relevant information) received from participation in reflection and discourse with a humble disposition. However, changing one’s mind about a particular conviction, perhaps by either dismissing or adjusting

27 This is a stipulation about what it means for a moral judgment to improve. A moral reason will be relative to what one deems ‘moral,’ bearing in mind Kinghorn’s description of the “fuzzy-edged” nature of the concept of ‘moral goodness.’ Still, even if one’s concept of ‘moral goodness’ is fuzzy-edged, it does not follow that moral goodness itself also is. Accordingly, I hold that moral judgments are not improved with the inclusion of morally irrelevant reasons, even if one believes them to be relevant. In any case, I will not attempt to define moral relevance. For commentary, see: Section 2.3 “Sorting Out Which Considerations Are Most Relevant,” of Richardson, “Moral Reasoning,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and Donald Emmons, “Moral Relevance,” *Ethics* 77, no. 3 (1967): 224–228, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/2379690](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2379690). See also Robert Frazier, “Moral Relevance and Ceteris Paribus Principles,” *Ratio* 8, no. 2 (1995): 113–125, [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9329.1995.tb00074.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9329.1995.tb00074.x). Frazier defines moral relevance as follows: “a property is morally relevant just in case (i) it is possible that it occur in isolation and (ii) it must determine the moral status of any action in which it is isolated” (127).

28 Because it is designed to emphasize the receptivity component, this example does not capture the full sense of what it means to react to a morally relevant reason. Again, see the section “Reasons-responsiveness and moral responsibility” in Chapter Five. Especially, see the discussion pertaining to the modal dimension of reactivity in connection with the four given features of a reasons-responsive theory.
it, is not a perfectly reliable indicator that new relevant information has been considered.\(^\text{29}\) It may be unusual, but is possible to conceive of convictions that have been dismissed or acquired without the consideration of additional morally relevant information. I may change my mind about a moral issue on account of an irrational association I hold between it and some non-moral thing. For example, I may, for no good reason, decide that theft is morally permissible because several of my office co-workers have an abundance of dust motes on their desks. This change would not meet my definition of responsiveness since the information that triggered it is not relevant.

Second, some might worry about the causal efficacy of conscious reasoning grafted into the causal chain of a subconscious process. Discourse takes place consciously, so it might be the case that there is a causal disconnect between the conscious and subconscious aspects of the process of judgment formation. As noted in this essay, I agree with morphological rationalists that moral beliefs and principles typically are included subconsciously in the causal chain leading to moral judgment. However, this worry is misplaced. There is little reason to suspect that conscious and subconscious moral reasoning cannot interact or that one would somehow exclude the other from the subsequent formation of moral judgments. Even traditional rationalists, who respond to Question One by affirming that conscious moral reasoning typically is involved in the formation of a moral judgment, will have nothing to object to here. Traditional rationalists do not deny that subconscious moral reasoning takes place, nor do they deny that subconscious reasoning can occur with information acquired consciously; they hold, rather, that conscious moral reasoning typically is involved in the formation of moral judgments.

\(^{29}\) Again, see Chapter Three for more on types of changes that occur with one’s moral beliefs.
A more pertinent concern would be *when* such reasoning occurred—more specifically, how recently. A related phenomenon, known as the *recency bias*, describes how various factors pertaining to when information is gathered have a measurable impact on moral judgments. Whether moral reasoning is susceptible to a similar phenomenon is of interest but falls outside of the scope of this dissertation.³⁰

Third, responsiveness in this context is not necessarily an admirable personal quality. Consider something similar to Keith Lehrer’s “Mr. Truetemp” thought experiment. Lehrer has us imagine an individual with a rather unique cognitive ability, endowed by a cranial implant that provides him with generally accurate information about the current temperature.³¹ Suppose that this this scenario is adjusted so that the individual is receiving morally relevant input from a council of morally wise sages observing him from a distance. They consider his circumstances in real time and submit the information to him through a transmitter. This process allows him to develop morally relevant reasons, which causally influence his moral judgments. The device implanted in his cranium is so sophisticated that it feeds information to his brain subtly enough that he does not notice it, either in terms of the content of the information or the experience of receiving it. For all he knows (or cares) the information being fed to him is the result of his own inquiry and reflection. The sages are prudent enough to not provide him with information that would be noticeably detract from his own moral preferences. The key issue is that he regularly receives additional morally relevant information unknowingly. So, “Mr. Truecontext” would be making *causally* responsive

---


judgments, but his improved moral judgment is not the result of his own personally responsible behavior.

**Pianalto’s account**

Since moral beliefs provide the basis for drawing moral reasons, particularly strong moral beliefs, i.e., moral convictions, will provide more compelling reasons for one. Stated differently, if moral beliefs and principles are causally involved in the formation of moral judgments, then there is warrant to infer that the most cognitively central and firmly held of these will exert causal influence with some degree of proportionality. As explained above, moral convictions are beliefs that do not exist on the periphery of one’s worldview; they are central, and they are held firmly. If I believe with conviction, for example, that physically abusing other human beings is morally wrong, then this conviction will have a greater likelihood of affecting my judgment in cases which the physical well-being of others is at issue.

So far, I have described how improving moral judgments depends on constraining the moral beliefs, principles, and convictions from which they are formed. I have claimed that moral judgments typically involve moral reasoning, and to this I have added the claim that some moral beliefs exert a greater degree of causal influence upon one’s moral reasons. Accordingly, the next step to be taken in this chapter will be an investigation into how moral convictions are constrained. These observations will apply equally to both moral beliefs and moral principles. That is, what I endorse here for constraining moral convictions will also work for constraining moral beliefs and moral principles.

Matthew Pianalto provides the account for constraining moral convictions, and I endorse his general approach for doing so. For him, one’s moral convictions are rendered more responsible if they are less prone to driving one to “[succumb] to vices of moral
blindness: fanaticism, dogmatism and self-righteousness...”

The general idea is that having one’s convictions constrained amounts to regulating them: adjusting or dismissing untenable ones when presented with better alternatives. (Chapter Three adds more detail to these possibilities.) According to Pianalto, then, constraining convictions is a matter of participating in two activities, reflection and discourse, each conducted with a humble disposition.

Reflection functions as a first-line defense against small-mindedness. Considering one’s convictions from alternative perspectives ensures that they are not held without being subjected to at least an elementary review. Here, the idea is to identify unawareness or gaps in basic understanding. He writes: “To reflect on our convictions needn’t be construed as a negative process of doubt and destruction (pace [Bernard] Williams), but can be understood instead as a search for reasons which expand our understanding of ourselves, and the framework in which our convictions have their place.” Of course, there are limits to what this type of activity can deliver. The reflecting agent may overlook relevant information. Another possibility is the agent realizing something about himself or his circumstances that he would wish to remain hidden. With these limitations in mind, Pianalto adds a second activity.

Discourse is “not an entirely distinct requirement from that of reflection; rather engagement with others serves as an aid to personal reflection, and sometimes (or perhaps often) as a corrective.” Discussion with others involves probing inquiry and feedback that cannot be easily replicated through reflection. More likely, the extent of scrutiny involved

---

32 Pianalto, “Moral Conviction,” 381. It is worth noting that what Pianalto means by ‘responsible’ is not the same thing that I mean with ‘responsive.’ However, since both terms indicate a desirable result from being subjected to constraints, I will not bother with clarifying the differences.


during discourse will surpass what an agent would subject himself to voluntarily. So, while I am unlikely to be a sharp critic of myself, an interlocutor may not have such reservations. While discourse is closely related to reflection, it is distinguished by being both more incisive and insistent. The information available through this activity will be more extensive and the process likely will be more exacting and unpleasant.

Finally, humility in this context is a volitional disposition, a willingness not only to subject oneself to the constraints of review and discourse, but to take into consideration the differing perspectives available when doing so. It is a requirement that becomes increasingly necessary through sustained engagement in these activities. The connection is that uncomfortable and unpleasant personal insights presented to one are valuable only to the extent they are received. Some insights risk being dismissed by virtue of being too pointed. Accordingly, a willingness to accept the input of others, especially when it is unflattering or otherwise unwelcome, is a key personal disposition that contributes to the reception of feedback from others.

With Pianalto’s framework in place, it is worth observing that the fundamental constraining act on all moral beliefs, principles, and convictions is reflection.\textsuperscript{35} Above, I quoted the following from him: “[discourse is] not an entirely distinct requirement from that of reflection; rather engagement with others serves as an aid to personal reflection, and sometimes (or perhaps often) as a corrective.” Discourse is an aid for reflection, and this is also the case for the constraints to be discussed in subsequent chapters. Whatever other features are involved with those experiences, the agent must still consider how they bear on him.

\textsuperscript{35} This is the case as well for humility: we should surmise that achieving a humble disposition will require considerable reflection.
Finally, the constraints Pianalto advocates are useful for avoiding error because they revise the set of moral reasons available to one for making judgments. He writes: “[none] of these constraints on responsible conviction, even where they are met, guarantees that the surviving convictions will prove correct, but they signal what must be in place in order to mitigate the riskiness of conviction without making it impossible.”36 It appears, then, that his approach attempts only half of William James’s advice to believe truth and shun error.37 However, this is not a critique of Pianalto, and given the “fuzzy-edged” nature of what human beings deem to be moral, it may even be prudent. His approach represents a promising start; I hold that the key to developing a more extensive account of making judgments more responsive is by making the constraints more rigorous.38

Conclusion

Following up on the final point, the prospects for developing Pianalto’s account are good. Note especially that the constraints he discusses are intended only for avoiding gross error. Avoiding the pitfalls of “fanaticism, dogmatism and self-righteousness” is an excellent thing. The task before me in the next few chapters will be to develop an account of constraining moral beliefs, principles, and convictions that goes beyond avoiding these pitfalls. I hold that an application of additional constraints will yield greater responsiveness in one’s moral judgments and contribute to a greater ability both in avoiding cognitive vices and even in developing cognitive virtues. Chapter Two will consider limiting experiences, drawing from H. Richard Niebuhr’s work. Chapter Three will focus on what I describe as “moral challenges,” and Chapter Four will be devoted to the experiences of conscience.


This chapter considered two types of instrumental value. Throughout, I have assumed that the value of minimizing fanaticism, dogmatism, and self-righteousness is rather obvious: doing so would be valuable for society. However, I also attended to the value of constraining moral beliefs, principles, and convictions for the purpose of improving one’s moral judgments. Perhaps the social value inherent in Pianalo’s account made it easier to understand the motivations for subjecting oneself to the constraints of discourse and reflection. By contrast, the next three chapters focus solely on the value of experiences for constraining one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions. That is, I do not attempt to describe what cognitive virtues may be developed by a rigorous engagement with the constraints that I consider. This dissertation provides the foundation for developing this positive account but does not venture into it. My primary concern is to establish the connection between a broader range of constraints and improved moral judgments. In this, I have expressed optimism. Pianalto’s account is primed for development, and the next three chapters take up this task.
CHAPTER TWO
LIMITING EXPERIENCES AS CONSTRAINTS

The concept of limitation is a key feature of H. Richard Niebuhr’s ethics. He describes it as a path to religious repentance and unreserved devotion to God: “Limitation may be the beginning of metanoia; it may force a man from his egocentricity. Self-denial takes place where one is being limited. If limitations be accepted the revolution of understanding of the self as instrument of God and not as center of existence may take place. God, not the self, is the proper center of all things.” In this chapter, I make use of Niebuhr’s concept to help explain how moral beliefs, principles, and convictions are constrained.

Niebuhr views the experiences of limitation as part of a divine plan designed to get one to relinquish a selfish disposition in favor of identifying God as one’s central value. However, I do not attempt to make this connection. For the purposes of this chapter, I use the terms ‘limitation’ and ‘limiting experiences’ interchangeably and understand them as connoting a simple perception of an inability—even if the perception is false.

Availing myself to Niebuhr’s conceptual framework will require some preliminary explanation. Especially, what he means by ‘limitation’ will be clarified by a prior summary of his views on value and “fitting action.” In what follows, I will not be defending Niebuhr’s views per se, but rather extracting from them what I find to be useful in advancing my own proposal. In the previous chapter, I stated that a moral judgment is “… more responsive if and only if it is formed after the reception of and reaction to new morally relevant reasons. Such

---

1 James Fowler, To See the Kingdom (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1974), 190–192.

reasons are considered (subconsciously or not) along with the totality of all other morally relevant reasons one has.” In light of this, I claim that a noteworthy and underappreciated means for making one’s moral judgments more responsive is by enduring limiting experiences. That is, limiting experiences perform a function similar to reflection and discourse: as a type of constraint on one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions.

This chapter includes commentary on additional ways in which limiting experiences are valuable for constraining one’s moral convictions. First, I remark on the unpleasant character of limiting experiences are unpleasant. Niebuhr holds, roughly, that limiting experiences provoke reflection about one’s circumstances. In addition to this, I claim that in some cases limiting experiences will be severely unpleasant, a fact which may motivate the acquisition of additional morally relevant reasons. Second, I also note that limiting experiences help one foreclose some lower-priority possibilities when seeking additional morally relevant reasons. That is, when investigating one’s circumstances, determining the full range of morally relevant reasons will be difficult due to the sheer volume and dynamic complexity of available information. Gaining awareness of one’s limitations provides an incentive for prioritizing the constraint of one’s moral convictions over other moral beliefs.

Niebuhr’s ethics of responsiveness

It is helpful to think of Niebuhr both as a contextualist and an individualist who places special emphasis on motive.³ Context provides the structure within which actions are to be chosen, meaning, the significance of every moral action can only be grasped according to the setting where it is performed. C. David Grant states that for Niebuhr, “the task of the ethicist is to uncover the context of actions that lead to our responsive action.”⁴ With this insistence on the necessity of context, Niebuhr is reluctant to draw abstract moral judgments. He often

³ C. David Grant, God the Center of Value (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1984), 33.
⁴ Grant, Value, 31.
declined to offer his own judgment on contemporary affairs, notably on the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931.\(^5\) Indeed, the relevance of context to a given perspective is so important that he denies the possibility that a “dictionary” of moral judgments could exist and claims that “[no] man can tell other people what is right and wrong.”\(^6\)

Context includes not only present circumstances but antecedent action as well, which is especially useful for revealing motive. Despite the availability of at least some information about motives, however, forming a judgment about the actions of others should not be attempted. Niebuhr holds that doing so would require access to another’s dispositions as well, and no such access is available. Knowledge of such dispositions would be necessary because there is no abstract “right” or “good” action to take in a given circumstance. An action should not be chosen because of some supposed quality of goodness or rightness, but because of one’s motives and context. Thus, “only the individual agent will be able to make fully informed judgments concerning the motives from which that agent’s own action springs.”\(^7\)

Niebuhr’s antipathy to the presumption of objectivity in moral judgment is evident in his series of lectures posthumously published as *The Responsible Self*, in which he provides an outline for a more contextual and first-personal approach to determining moral action. Many views in normative ethics begin with an attempt to identify some notion of goodness or rightness and then assess ethical action in relation to what promotes these. Niebuhr believes these views to be inadequate to the inevitable complexities of life: “Teleologists usually deal with such emergencies by suspending their efforts to attain the sought-after goals and substituting an interim ethics. Deontologists usually suspend their laws until the crisis has


\(^7\) Grant, *Value*, 33.
passed. Yet neither theorist is able to incorporate these suspensions into the theories; they remain as addenda. Hence deontology and teleology are inadequate interpretive schemes in the face of unexpected crises. "Niebuhr points to what he calls “social emergencies” to illustrate the inadequacy of these approaches to normative ethics. Social emergencies are situations “in which a community has had to meet a challenge,” that “[thwarts] progress toward sought-after ends and defies subsumption under existing laws.” A social emergency reveals how the attempt to deductively identify moral right and wrong or good and evil is complicated by the inherent complexity of the situation in which one would make such an attempt. Part of this complexity surely is derived from the constant, ever-changing nature of circumstances; what is morally right in one moment may not always be.

Niebuhr highlights the difference between his view and these other, more standard approaches with a new metaphor for humanity’s ethical condition. Teleological views generally conceive of human beings as builders or makers, in which some good is identified and one does right by promoting it. On the other hand, deontological views correspond to an image of human beings as citizens, in which what is right is identified and one does good by acting rightly. In contrast to these views, Niebuhr opts for a different image altogether, in which ethical action is oriented toward neither the good nor the right. Rather, ethical action

---

8 Grant, *Value*, 73. References Chapter Two of H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Responsible Self” unpublished manuscript, 12–14. Note the parallel regarding complexity between this view and John Henry Newman’s, to be discussed in Chapter Four.


10 Richard Crouter notes the favor with which Niebuhr views a model of “fitting” or “kathêkontic” ethics—with respect to the complexity of real-life circumstances—compared to alternatives: “Niebuhr’s appeal to the Stoics is grounded in the belief that their theory is more adequate to the complexities of the human self than are some alternative philosophical models.” (Note: various authors render ‘kathêkontic’ differently; some include the diacritic mark above ‘e’ while others do not. I will standardize the spelling by rendering this word as ‘kathekontic’ from here on, though I mention Niebuhr’s own spelling as ‘cathekontic’. See n. 31, below.) Richard Crouter, “H. Richard Niebuhr and Stoicism,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1974): 129, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40000906. John Henry Newman identifies a similar problem with making moral judgments by applying first principles to concrete circumstances. See Chapter Four.
should be understood as a response to circumstance; as ethical beings, we are fundamentally responsive to our circumstances. One is acted upon, and one must respond; a human being is man-the-responder. Douglas Ottati explains that:

[the three images [noted by Niebuhr] support different approaches to ethics that can be distinguished because they construe the moral question differently. Thus, the image of man-the-maker highlights human purposiveness, and it ‘seeks to answer the question; “what shall I do?” by raising as the prior question: “what is my goal, ideal, or telos?”’ Man-the-citizen, the deontological image, encourages us ‘to answer the moral query by asking, first of all “what is the law and what is the first law of my life?”’ Responsibility, however, answers the moral question by asking, ‘what is going on?’

Despite the contrast with deontology and teleology, Niebuhr did not intend to offer his approach as a replacement. Instead, he intended to capture the ethos of historic Christian life and characterized his ethics of responsibility as “a key—not the key…” to it. Perhaps because he holds that fully informed moral judgments cannot be made about the actions of others, an overriding concern is for the situated individual to decide for himself when in similar circumstances. Ottati remarks that: “... the Niebuhr brothers agree that humans are agents with significant capacities to act who reason and interpret and who always are radically situated in the midst of relations, conditions, and realities, including the actions and interests of other agents. This point is, in fact, essential to both of their realisms. It supports an emphasis on the interpretation of circumstances as well as a bias against (naïve) idealism in both of their ethics.” As such, an essential component of Niebuhr’s approach to moral judgment is inviting the reader to consider his own situation and respond appropriately.


12 Niebuhr, Responsible Self, 65. Emphasis in original.

13 Grant, Value, 30.

In doing so, Niebuhr construes his “man-as-responder” metaphor in existential terms, describing human experience as one of being “thrown into” existence as agents who must respond in some way.\(^{15}\) Human beings exercised no choice to inaugurate their own existence. Yet circumstances demand decision; inaction is still a choice. Perhaps Niebuhr’s existential responsiveness contributes toward his inclination to interpret a situation from the most ultimate perspective humanly achievable. In any case, Niebuhr sees the scope of human response as extending far beyond immediate circumstances. As noted above, Niebuhr is a contextualist—but it would be a mistake to interpret as a type of subjective relativism his claim that nobody can tell others what to do. Ultimately, there is only one context: being itself, whom Niebuhr identifies as God.\(^{16}\)

A sense of the responsive character of moral action (which includes antecedent moral judgment) within circumstances is obtained through Niebuhr’s description of the process as being divided into four stages in *The Responsible Self*: “The idea of responsibility, then, may . . . be defined as the idea of an agent’s action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this in a continuing community of agents.”\(^{17}\) This responsive structure further precludes suspicions of subjective relativism attributable to Niebuhr’s view. It is true that Niebuhr deems relevant a subjective assessment of one’s circumstances for determining


\(^{16}\) Grant, *Value*, 31. I will comment more on why Niebuhr’s contextualism is not a type of relativism in the subsequent section.

\(^{17}\) Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 65. Quoted by Ottati, who characterizes this four-part structure as “response, interpretation, accountability, and social solidarity.” See Ottati, “Niebuhrian Legacy,” *Value*, 404. Grant provides the quote as well (*Value*, 81), but gives a slightly different characterization: “alteraction, attentive interpretation, the idea of the fitting, and accountability” (*Value*, 74). He also notes a slight discrepancy in the lists that Niebuhr himself gives. See Grant, *Value*, 148 n. 9. (‘Alteraction’ is the action of the other upon the individual.)
moral action; the individual’s motives are relevant as well. Additionally, it may be thought that if motives are at least partially subject to whim, then judgments about moral rightness and wrongness, or goodness and badness, appear determined at least in part by individual whim. Understood this way, perhaps one’s preferences and biases play a problematic causal role in determining how context is interpreted and moral action determined. However, one’s responsiveness to circumstance is not finally determined by subjective assessment. Continually posing to oneself the ‘what is going on?’ question revises one’s understanding of circumstances. So, the element of subjectivity present within Niebuhr’s construal of moral action cannot be separated from the circumstances to which one is responsive: being itself. Furthermore, the relevance of one’s motives does not imply that moral action is determined by arbitrary whim. After all, motives can be constrained, similar to how moral convictions are.

Niebuhr’s four-part structural description of responsiveness assumes situatedness within a community. For Niebuhr, both experiences of human limitation and input received from other individuals serve to check narrow and selfish motives. Niebuhr envisions a dynamic interaction between the individual and his or her circumstances, which include other persons. In this setting, the individual readily can seek and consider feedback from others regarding the ‘what is going on?’ question and integrate these new insights into responsive action.

Moral action within a given circumstance presupposes an ongoing “dialogue” of action and reaction with others. Context, then, includes not only past actions, but anticipated ones as well. Choosing to interpret circumstances solely according to one’s own preferences will not be a viable option for one; doing so ignores what is occurring, and likely would require eschewing the elements of accountability and social solidarity that comprise Niebuhr’s four-part framework. Acting in “expectation of response to his response” means
that interlocutors play an active role in critiquing and perhaps even resisting one’s self-serving and delusional assessments of circumstance.

Grant describes antecedent action as “fundamental to [Niebuhr’s] metaphor of man-the-answerer...”\(^{18}\) Furthermore, reaction to antecedent action occurs against the backdrop of *interpretation*. Niebuhr describes the latter as a “dialogue” between the mind and what is “objective to it.”\(^{19}\) The mind collects what the senses deliver to it, and then scrutinizes it for meaning and significance. Niebuhr writes: “Hence though our eyelids may react to the light with pure reflex, the self responds to it as *light*, as something interpreted, understood, related. But, more complexly, we interpret the things that force themselves upon us as parts of wholes, as related and as symbolic of larger meanings. And these large patterns of interpretation we employ seem to determine—though in no mechanical way—our responses to action upon us.”\(^{20}\) Attentive interpretation must consider as relevant context all antecedent action and potential future reaction. Otherwise, important features of present circumstances may be overlooked or downplayed.

In sum, moral action is not a choice to be made arbitrarily according to preference, or abstractly apart from circumstance. It is to be made by the individual in response to attentive interpretation to action within a circumstance. Niebuhr explains that the “decisive question” to be asked is not “What is the goal?” nor “What is the law?” but “What is happening?” and then “What is the fitting response to what is happening?”\(^{21}\) As noted, Niebuhr describes the human condition as one that we have been “thrown into.” That is, the fundamental

---

\(^{18}\) Grant, *Value*, 74.


\(^{21}\) Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 67. I render these questions as ‘what is going on?’ throughout this dissertation.
description of the human condition is as a reaction to one’s own existence, meaning, the totality of experiences from the beginning to the present moment. Asking questions about ‘what is going on?’ must be radically inclusive by not avoiding any consideration bearing on one’s judgments about moral action—even those pertaining to the fundamental nature of the human condition.

**Fitting action**

It is within Niebuhr’s four-part framework that his notion of *fitting action* is to be understood. A response must *fit* to an interpretation made about one’s circumstance. He insists that responsible action must “be suitable to, correspond to, fit into, the alteraction in such a way that the two form one whole.”22 The reaction to alteraction upon one is *fitting* to the extent that it is the most preferable option—where ‘preferred’ is determined according to context. Grant observes that “[f]ittingness for Niebuhr is an indefinable intuitive category. Its meaning is described ostensively in the examples he gives of it.”23 Among the best of these examples is that of the race car driver who must respond quickly to continuous and rapid oncoming stimuli. Lights and flags are not interpreted by the driver as meaningless colors and shapes; they have special significance within the context of an auto race. Action in this context would need to “fit” by making sense within its inherent structure. It would not fit, for example, if the driver, having noticed the racetrack veering to the left, made a sharp right turn at that juncture. The pavement is significant for one not just as path to view scenery idly, but as a necessary means to achieve a context-relevant goal.24 Ottati describes fitting action as follows:

---


23 Grant, *Value*, 76–77.

24 See Grant, *Value*, 79–81, for more on this example.
Responders [i.e., human beings] are not mere reactors. They draw upon interpretive, reflective, and imaginative capacities in order to devise a reading or an interpretation of the actions that impinge upon them, and they also draw upon these same capacities in order to envision subsequent replies to their own actions. These imaginative readings or interpretative visions, in turn, help to guide agents’ understandings of the appropriate or fitting actions they might take. So, for example, one nation responds to the actions of another in accord with its reading or interpretation of the circumstances, including the other’s intentions, and also in accord with its reading or interpretation of the other’s anticipated reply. That is to say responsible agents ‘place’ the actions which impinge upon them within an imaginative interpretation or vision of the context in which they occur and into which their replies may or may not ‘fit’. 25

Since context is directly relevant to what is fitting, a problem threatens with the issue of who or what determines context. If subjective whim does not, as noted earlier with respect to motive, then it is logical to ask what does. Niebuhr’s existential understanding of responsiveness requires that moral action be in accordance with the widest possible context. Responsiveness to a wider context will involve additional morally relevant information about present circumstances, whether that be antecedent actions, individual motives, etc. In short, ‘responsive’ for Niebuhr equates to ‘wider’ and ‘more inclusive.’ One should attempt to consider the widest context possible: a response to the most extensive set of morally relevant information feasibly available has a better chance of making available to one a greater range of morally relevant reasons. Thus, a response on the basis of a wider range of morally relevant information will be a more fitting one. However, merely obtaining a wider context will not suffice for responsiveness. Ascertaining a wider context must be paired with accurate interpretation. Ottati remarks that “Moreover, if persons and communities respond to actions and circumstances in accordance with their imaginative interpretations of their wider context, then false interpretations will support inappropriate responses. For example, Nation A’s response to the action of Nation B is informed by a misinterpretation of the political dynamics of the international community, Nation B’s capabilities as well as its intentions,

and so Nation A’s response is out of kilter with the wider circumstance. It doesn’t really
fit.”

Richard Crouter’s take on Niebuhr’s notion of fittingness aligns with Ottati’s
remarks. Importantly, though, Crouter does more to connect the notion of fitting action to
unselfishness. He writes:

“The fitting” points to a self-understanding that consists in openness to the world in
ways that are more comprehensive (and conversely, less exclusivistic) than ways that
are legislated by one’s own sense of moral ends (teleology) or by universal laws or
principles that presume to cover all the exigencies of moral life (deontology). In
[The Responsible Self] there are some twenty similar uses of the phrase “fits into”
something, each of which suggests a move to a larger context of self-awareness that is
less “egoistic” than that of the standard ethical patterns.

Crouter makes two points worth noting: one, he reinforces Niebuhr’s point that any approach
to moral judgment that identifies good or right prior to personal involvement in a given
circumstance is inadequate in that it excludes relevant information. However, it must be
noted that Niebuhr does not believe that any approach will be perfectly adequate. The key
difference with a responsive ethic is in the degree of openness to new information. Two, the
imperative to obtain a wider context requires a perspective that is less “egoistic.” Niebuhr
holds that asking oneself the ‘what is going on?’ question will result in seeing oneself being
displaced as the central concern of any moral assessment. That is, acquiring a wider context
invariably involves the inclusion of other individuals as valued others. Fitting action is in
many respects a matter of relating and context ultimately is relational in character. Indeed,
Crouter claims that for Niebuhr, relating is the “fundamental” moral act.

---


27 For commentary on the inadequacies of moral judgments made solely from principles, see Chapter Three,
“Variations of Relationalism and a Softening of Situationalism,” of Edward Long, A Survey of Recent Christian


correct, then it provides a viable response to the question about what determines which actions are fitting. He writes:

This passage [pertaining to “kathēkontic” ethics] suggests that an ethics of the fitting is bound only by universal relationships and especially by one’s primordial relation to being itself. The levels of response demanded of the moral agent are diverse to the point of being limitless (cf. Niebuhr, 1941:166–168). An ethics which can include the many levels of response in the moral life and encompass them in a primary relation is more adequate than the other types. Niebuhr’s ethical enterprise (cf. 1932:378–380) shifts our attention away from the principles and ends of moral action to man’s understanding of himself as a moral agent in a universal context.30

**Stoic roots of fitting action**

Niebuhr is indebted to Stoic ethics, not only for the category of “fitting,” but also for the content, which is “strikingly similar to his own.”31 A fuller understanding of what he has in mind by ‘fitting action’ is obtained by observing what the Stoics meant by kathēkonta.32 Virtue is understood by the Stoics as “the perfection of one’s reason,” which means that it has been “[brought] into a state of supreme order and consistency.”33 Nature also figures into the rational structure of fitting action. The Stoics envisioned a rationally ordered and deterministic cosmos (or nature), and action that fits within this structure must have a rational justification; every kathēkon must have a reason for performing it. “For both Niebuhr and the Stoics there is a structure in things, a kind of universal law; fitting action is action that conforms to that law and is consentaneous and congruous with it.”34 The threshold for justification, though, is quite high. Justification requires using perfected reasoning in the

---


34 Grant, *Value*, 80–81.
manner of a Sage, a Stoic category for those few who have become virtuous. The Sage is one “whose perfected rationality constitutes the highest development of human nature, and who is also in harmony with the cosmic nature that governs everything.”\textsuperscript{35} For the Stoics, then, an action is fitting if and only if it is in accordance to nature, which they conceived of as “providentially ordered according to a rational plan…”\textsuperscript{36}

For the Stoics, nature is not only rationally ordered, it is also the cosmically wide inclusive context into which a \textit{kathēkon} must fit. Perhaps this outlook was developed in response to the fall of the Greek \textit{polis}. Crouter, for example, alludes to this idea: “Unlike the politics of the Greeks which is tied up theoretically with the destiny of the city-state, Stoic ethics takes providence as its final frame of reference and in so doing shows an affinity with the biblical and Augustinian tradition of morals.”\textsuperscript{37} Others have pushed back forcefully against this claim.\textsuperscript{38} Whatever its origin, the context from which moral decisions are made stretches far beyond individual concern. On this, Niebuhr writes: “Stoic action is action in the universe; it is not dominated by the concerns of a single, individual life, nor yet by those of some special group. The Stoic is a citizen of the cosmos to whom nothing is foreign that is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Bett, “Stoic Ethics,” 544–545.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Bett, “Stoic Ethics,” 535.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Crouter, “Niebuhr and Stoicism,” 137.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Bett, for one, expresses his reservation as follows:
\begin{quote}
It has often been said that the ethical ideals prevalent in Hellenistic philosophy, including Stoicism, are a reaction to the demise of the city-state, and the resulting political impotence of almost everyone in the Greek world, that occurred in the wake of Alexander’s conquests; at a general level the claim is attractive, but it deserves detailed scrutiny.” Bett, “Stoic Ethics,” 531. He refers to Eric Brown, who forthrightly rejects the traditional understanding: But the traditional account should be rejected. First, its explanation of the origins of Hellenistic cosmopolitanism is twice wrong. The widespread assumption that the polis collapsed under the imperial governments of Alexander’s successors is at best controversial and at worst flatly mistaken. … The second inadequacy of the traditional account is its emphasis on the negative aspect of Hellenistic cosmopolitanism. Some closer attention to the Stoic assertions that the cosmos is like a polis and that a good human being lives as a citizen of the cosmos reveals positive commitments to benefit human beings as such in the absence of the world-state.
\end{quote}
\end{itemize}

not foreign to the central, all-pervading power; he looks to every event as expressive in some fashion of universal plan and pattern; he interprets it in that way and so tries to respond fittingly.”

Finally, for the Stoics, finding agreement within this cosmic context is the highest achievement for a human being—it is one’s tēlos. According to Diogenes Laërtius, this idea traces back as far as the writings of Zeno of Citium, generally considered the founder of Stoicism. Diogenes writes that “This is why Zeno was the first (in his treatise On the Nature of Man) to designate as the end “life in agreement [homologoumēnos] with nature” (or living agreeably to nature), which is the same as a virtuous life, virtue being the goal towards which nature guides us.” So, for each person, there exists a determined place within the whole of nature. Finding it through one’s understanding of the cosmos is a necessary part of virtue; willingly participating in one’s situated circumstances, though, depends upon this discovery.

Value

As mentioned earlier, fitting action is in many respects a matter of relating and relating is understood properly in terms of action on behalf of others on the basis of their need(s). According to the principles of Niebuhr’s value system, all value is relative in the sense of being instrumental. Fitting action, then, is action characterized by making oneself

---

39 Crouter, “Niebuhr and Stoicism,” 137. Quote is from Niebuhr, Responsible Self, 171.


41 I set aside difficulties pertaining to freedom, responsibility, and motivation within Stoic ethical thought. Here, I have assumed a connection between understanding and motivation. See Bett, “Stoic Ethics,” 535–536, for some background on this. For his part, Diogenes, in the text preceding the quoted section, describes how nature directs animal (and human) action by impulse (hormê). This was not meant, however, as a description of a countervailing force. Rather, the impulses of nature are “more perfected” by the “leadership” of reason. The general idea being that natural human impulses have already oriented one in the direction of virtue, but only reason is able to deliver one to the destination, or tēlos. Because of this, perhaps no gap between understanding and motivation—or at least a minimal one—is assumed by Zeno.
useful to another in meeting his or her need(s). Since Niebuhr subordinates the concept of *good* to that of *fitting*, *good* essentially is ‘good for someone,’ which means that one is useful for that person’s needs in terms of personal growth and development.\(^{42}\) Grant highlights the following quote from Niebuhr, expanding on the notion of being useful for another: “[the fundamental observation of his relational value theory is] that value is present wherever one existent being with capacities and potentialities confronts another existence that limits or completes or complements it. Thus, first of all, value is present objectively for an observer in the fittingness or unfittingness of being to being.”\(^{43}\) Note that value relations are defined according to an objective need, which is defined by structural feature of a given circumstance, and not according to the subjective sense of what a “being desires, wants, or even thinks fits its needs.”\(^{44}\)

Whereas *value* is an objective quality determined by usefulness in meeting someone’s need(s), *evaluation* is a response of faith to an experience of being valued by someone or something beyond oneself.\(^{45}\) Everyone has faith, on this definition, but not all faith is equal. Joshua Daniel explains that, according to Niebuhr, “… faith constitutes the self as a double relation to some reality that confers value and provides a life-plan. Meanwhile, Niebuhr distinguishes different types of faith, two of which (pluralistic and social) are mal-formative of the self and in which we necessarily participate, and the last of which (radical)

\(^{42}\) Or, to be useful to that individual according to his or her “capacities and potentialities.” See Grant, *Value*, 75–76. Niebuhr also subordinates *right to fitting* for the same effect: right action is action for someone, meeting that person’s need(s).


\(^{44}\) Grant, *Value*, 127.

\(^{45}\) “But the valuation that is primary in faith is the self’s sense that it is valued by something beyond itself and not its own valuing.” Grant, *Value*, 108.
reforms the self by transforming the perverted forms of faith into expressions of true faith.”46 Accordingly, the object, or “value center,” (or centers, in the case of pluralism) of one’s faith determines whether it is mal-formative or reformative. Niebuhr cites one’s nation as an example of a finite—and thus mal-formative—value center. Assessing one’s country as the most valuable entity implies making value judgments according this standard. Meaning, with one’s country serving as a value center, any action will be judged as good or right depending on whether it is good or right in relation to one’s country.47

Evaluation is always a response to experience, not an a priori assessment. How one evaluates is grounded in one’s experience, meaning, the sum of all value sensed as being conferred upon oneself. Niebuhr claims that an experience of being valued by being itself is “primitive and original.”48 He identifies being itself with God but does not claim that this conclusion will or should be universal.49 This experience calibrates one’s own values according the experience itself.50 Either during or subsequent to the experience of being valued, value is assigned reactively to the one who bestowed value on the individual in the first place: that is, the Valuer. On this telling, the experience of being valued so thoroughly is such a radical contrast to other experiences that one determines that the only fitting response will itself be radical. The valued individual assigns an exclusive central value to the Valuer. Such an act of exclusive evaluation on one’s part involves being both trusting and loyal to the Valuer, where these two terms describe one’s faithful relation to the Valuer. Trust is a passive


47 Niebuhr describes social faith as “henotheism” because it usually involves the elevation of some finite, social reality as one’s value center—i.e., god. See Grant, Value, 52–53 and 127–128.

48 “Principle of being” is Niebuhr’s preferred description. See Grant, Value, 56.

49 Grant, Value, 108.

50 See Grant, Value, 55–56.
notion, in that one “depends not only for his own meaning but for the worth of everything else he encounters.”\textsuperscript{51} Loyalty, on the other hand, is an active “commitment to that value-center.”\textsuperscript{52}

Niebuhr holds that, theoretically, there are as many possible value centers as there are beings in the universe and claims that one of them must be chosen for the sake of consistency in judgment.\textsuperscript{53} A central value allows all other values to be judged relative to it: “every such theory adopts as its explicit or implicit starting point some being or beings in relation to which good is judged to be good and evil evil, in relation to which also the rightness or wrongness of its relations to other beings is examined.”\textsuperscript{54} Thus, the choice of a value center is religious in character, meaning that the consequences of the decision are pervasive.\textsuperscript{55} Given the relative nature of all finite value centers, though, none will be superior to any other; they each equally lack the absolute, infinite character of being itself.

Finally, Niebuhr maintains a sharp distinction between absolute and relative values. Recalling that something is valuable only to the extent that it is good for someone, absolute value is the extent to which something is good for being itself (i.e., God), while relative value is the extent to which something is good for a finite creature. The two value sets are

\textsuperscript{51} Niebuhr, \textit{Radical Monotheism}, 17. Quoted by Grant, \textit{Value}, 44.

\textsuperscript{52} Grant, \textit{Value}, 44. See also Joshua Daniel:

Niebuhr describes faith as “the attitude and action of confidence in, and fidelity to, certain realities as the sources of value and objects of loyalty.” The binaries in this description indicate faith’s double movement or relation. Faith has a passive aspect: \textit{trust} in centers of value that confer worth on the self. Faith also has an active aspect: \textit{loyalty} to causes that shape and unify the self’s practical moral life. Faith constitutes the self because through faith the self gains worth and, in Royce’s terms, a life-plan. Though faith is comprised of this double movement or relation, it is not oriented to two separate realities: what we trust provides the cause to which we are loyal.


\textsuperscript{53} Grant, \textit{Value}, 42.

\textsuperscript{54} Niebuhr, “The Center of Value,” 110. Quoted by Grant, \textit{Value}, 42.

\textsuperscript{55} Grant, \textit{Value}, 42.
incommensurable. Moreover, it is not obvious how typical judgments stand in relation to the absolute judgment of God, since all things that exist are equally good for God.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, Niebuhr’s dualist value structure presents readers with an interpretive problem. Because of God’s transcendence, everything is equally good for God, implying that value is not distinguishable according to its relative worth to human beings. The results of this can be perplexing: the smallpox virus, for example, is valuable to God simply by virtue of its existence—its being.\textsuperscript{57}

**Value and moral judgment**

Human beings judge according to a relative value structure, while God judges absolutely. Presumably, God’s judgments would be valuable to humans in some way. Niebuhr says “... all my relative evaluations will be subjected to the continuing and great correction. They will be made to fit into a total process producing good—not what is good for me... nor what is good for man... nor what is good for the development of life..., but what is good for being, for universal being, or for God, center and source of all existence.”\textsuperscript{58} With regard to how this corrective relationship would work, though, Niebuhr rejects the possibility that a non-relative value center can serve to orient one’s value judgments directly. How it could be, then, that such a value center might have any bearing upon relative moral judgments requires interpretation. Grant suggests that an absolute value center serves as a reminder of the finite and relative nature of all human judgments: “[i]nstead of being the point of reference for actual judgments within a value system, it becomes a critical principle relativizing all actual, concrete value systems and the decisions made in them. The center

\textsuperscript{56} Niebuhr: “... whatever is, is good, affirmed by the power of being, supported by it, intended to be, good in relation to the ultimate center, no matter how unrighteous it is in relation to finite companions.” *Responsible Self*, 125. Emphasis in original.

\textsuperscript{57} Grant, *Value*, 112–113.

\textsuperscript{58} Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 125.
serves to remind us in our actual use of finite values systems that these are relative systems...”

59 So, rather than serving as a point of orientation—a “true north” for moral judgments—a non-relative value center places into ultimate perspective every other perspective from which a judgment might be made. Valuing a transcendent entity as one’s central value helps prevent undue fixation or devotion to other, less exalted concerns.

Niebuhr offers practical guidance for arriving at sound moral judgments. He gives four sensible suggestions for ordinary situations that require moral judgment. However, these do not fill the explanatory gap of a missing theoretical basis for how an absolute value center would bear on one’s moral judgments. Grant suggests how this might work in terms of both the interest and disinterest of an absolute value center—that is, God. On one hand, God’s standpoint is comprehensively disinterested, in the sense of not favoring one party over another. On the other hand, God universally is interested. God is “an impartial spectator… whose impartiality is that of loyalty to the universal cause.”

The term ‘impartiality’ suggests disconnection from circumstances, but Melvin Keiser offers a useful supplement to Grant’s observation. He explains that “[i]mpartiality is a function of scope—how inclusive is the context of my considerations?—not of deracinate thinking, plucked up from the root system of our being committed in the world.” God’s disinterestedness aids moral judgments by “defining the appropriate attitude with which to make relative decisions.” One is to adopt, as far as it is humanly possible, a similar attitude of inclusive disinterestedness. Doing so makes moral judgments more responsive: “Thus, 

59 Grant, Value, 55–56.
60 From Niebuhr’s personal lecture notes. H. Richard Niebuhr, Christian Ethics Lectures, Outline and Notes, April 28th, 1961. For the list, see Grant, Value, 68.
61 Niebuhr, Responsible Self, 87–88. Quoted by Grant, Value, 95.
63 Grant, Value, 130.
Niebuhr uses this image of a universal, disinterested standpoint to bridge provisionally the gap between our relative value judgments and God’s valuations: the more universal and disinterested our standpoint, the better our judgments will be.\textsuperscript{64}

\textbf{Limiting experiences as a constraint}

Merely understanding value in instrumental terms, as “good-for-someone,” does not resolve how limiting experiences are valuable because it does not clarify how such experiences are good for someone. Niebuhr’s position on the matter appears to be twofold: one possibility would be to evaluate limiting experiences on the basis of some good end that they promote. Limiting experiences facilitate the identification of an absolute value center, and the application of insight from this orientation gradually reforms one’s character. A more altruistic character is useful for others because it disposes one to attend to their needs. As noted above, Niebuhr views the experiences of limitation as part of a coherent plan designed to get one to relinquish a selfish disposition in favor of identifying God as one’s central value.\textsuperscript{65}

A second possibility is that limiting experiences are valuable because of what they prod one toward: the experience of being valued by God.\textsuperscript{66} This Valuer is the unifying and ultimate context which, if Grant is correct, promotes more responsive moral judgment by

\textsuperscript{64} Grant, \textit{Value}, 95–96. Moreover, a disinterested standpoint is one which is “unburdened by the interpretive structures essential to human knowing. Such a perspective is able to see how things really fit, how they are really good, because it sees things simply as they really are, which is to say how they are for God...” (97).

\textsuperscript{65} Here, Niebuhr follows a progression of faith outlined by Alfred North Whitehead. The key quote regards development in religious outlook: “It is the transition from God the void to God the enemy, and from God the enemy to God the companion.” Alfred Whitehead, \textit{Religion in the Making}, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5. Quoted by Fowler, \textit{Kingdom}, 59. (See also 60–61.) Additionally, compare Grant, \textit{Value}, 105–106.

\textsuperscript{66} Niebuhr is careful to allow that one might place central value on some other entity besides the God of Judeo-Christian understanding. Ottati explains that, for Niebuhr “… religion furnishes an interpretation of the overall context for our actions.” Ottati, “Niebuhrian Legacy,” 405. Similarly, Fowler notes that Niebuhr “… is also ready to grant that there is other experience of God than Christian, and that the Christian witness must live and serve in constant acknowledgement that there may be other valid lenses for discerning and interpreting the character and action of God.” Fowler, \textit{Kingdom}, 203.
establishing for humans an absolute value to remind them of the finite nature of their relative value judgments, while at the same time providing a model of impartiality for them to emulate.

In keeping with the stated goal of this chapter, my intent is to explain the value of limiting experiences in connection with their usefulness for constraining one’s moral beliefs, principles, and judgments. In the previous chapter, I observed that an experience that bears on my moral belief, principle, or conviction becomes a morally relevant reason for me to base my judgment upon. Following the example from the that chapter, the experience of learning about the details of the punishment that John Smith inflicted on his 8-year old son caused me to judge that what he did was morally wrong. In that case, I sensed that my moral principle that ‘children ought not to be punished harshly for trivial offenses’ was violated, and that experience of sensing the violation is my reason for judging John Smith’s act to be morally wrong.

Limiting experiences are valuable in this way as well. In addition, though, they are especially useful for one in making available morally relevant reasons pertaining to one’s relationship to a specific moral belief, principle, or conviction. To illustrate this point, first consider how limiting experiences make available non-morally relevant reasons. So, for example, my experience tripping over a rock indicates to me a limitation in my capacity to move around unimpeded. Furthermore, perhaps the experience of tripping will have a temporal or emotional quality to it. These features of the experience indicate something of the structure of the perspective that I have as a self: I experience events in sequence; I have an emotional capacity; and so on. Depending on the nature and type of experience, more detailed and specific information will be implicit as well. Suppose that I have extensive training and education as a geologist. Because of this, when I observe rock formations at a research site, I understand them from the perspective of an expert. Implicit in every skilled observation I
make is an awareness that I am the type of person capable of doing so; my observations reinforce a specific self-understanding. Despite my expertise, though, I might experience a lack of familiarity concerning the specific features of some rock formation. Such an experience of limitation indicates to me a lack of relevant preparation for research at that site.

One way in which limiting experiences make available morally relevant reasons pertaining to one’s relationship to a moral belief, principle, or conviction is by underlining the difficulties one will have in realizing desired ends consistent with them. So, for example, a perception of a violation of my moral principle that ‘stealing is morally wrong’ includes morally relevant content about not just the circumstances but myself as well.67 Suppose that I observe a young adult walk out of a store without paying for an item. This sight may affect me in a number of ways. I might experience indignation, scorn, or some other similar emotion. I might also sense myself considering appropriate reactions: confront the individual? Notify the store manager? Do nothing? Perhaps I intuit that the individual likely would run quickly upon being caught, and thus might get away with the merchandise. This experience might well include frustration or anger over what I take to be an injustice—even if a relatively trivial one.68 Part of the source of such emotion is that I was not able to stop what I believed to be an act of theft. Of course, even if I did, then later reflection should leave me with the realization that I could not possibly stop all acts of petty theft in that store.69

67 Remember that, as noted the previous chapter, holding a moral principle implies that one also holds a moral belief, even if subconsciously.

68 Bear in mind that moral emotions such as these are not necessarily paired with intentions to act on such beliefs, principles, or convictions. (It would be odd for one to hold moral convictions that one has no intention to act upon, but it is possible.)

69 In Chapter Three I will discuss four ways in which a moral challenge could affect one’s relation to a moral belief, principle, or conviction. The essential difference between how moral challenges and limiting experiences each affect one’s belief is that the latter does not presume an intention to act on behalf of a moral belief. Limiting experiences, then, involve a realization of something that one cannot do, and are different in character than an awareness of being antecedently committed (at least enough to motivate action) to a belief that is being resisted.
Limitation by way of interpretive complexity

One common type of limiting experience includes being overwhelmed by available morally relevant information. (A related experience is lacking enough relevant information.) Being overwhelmed owes to natural human cognitive limitations. The morally relevant informational content of a limiting experience exists within a dynamic framework which can be interpreted from a virtually limitless number of perspectives. Keiser summarizes Niebuhr’s view on the complexity of experiences of the self in an ever-changing context with numerous interpretive layers: “Existing within a multiplicity of actions upon it, the self is relational: to be is to live in response-relations to whatever is acting upon us. Our responses are relatings to specific actions but also to the different levels within which actions occur. As selves we exist in relation to the physical, chemical, biological, psychological, socioeconomic, political, scientific, cultural levels, each of which is acting upon us in particular, although not necessarily noticed ways, all the time.”\(^\text{70}\) All informational content derived from experience is disclosed to the self, the locus of experience, even if asynchronously. Experiences are interpreted by a self that is situated within a specific context. This description includes not only numerous antecedent actions, but a plurality of domains in which such actions accrue significance. Keiser’s overall portrait is of a continuous interplay of action and reaction, all undertaken in anticipated further reaction from others.\(^\text{71}\)

Because of its complexity, Niebuhr recognized that awareness of surrounding context usually will be tacit.\(^\text{72}\) Contributing to this fact is the many layers of interpretation, each with various elements within it constantly changing. Especially considering acute human limitations, and given sufficient counterevidence, virtually any belief or principle—even

\(^{70}\) Keiser, Roots, 68.

\(^{71}\) For more on the complexity of context, see Keiser, Roots, 68–71.

\(^{72}\) See Keiser, Roots, 69–70.
moral ones—can be undermined or even overturned. As observed from the previous chapter, though, not all beliefs—including moral beliefs—are held in the same way. Moral convictions were described as both central to one’s belief structure and held firmly. For example, while it may be relatively easy to change my mind about the moral status of an activity like online gambling, it would require a complete moral re-orientation to change my beliefs about the physical abuse of children. Additionally, as explained in the previous chapter, it is not just that moral convictions are epistemically central; they are also held firmly. I do not want it to be the case that physical abuse of children is morally acceptable. I would be shocked and appalled if I learned that my belief is (somehow) mistaken. A belief such as this is more likely to be tacit, though, if it is more specific: I do not want Mark, or Suzy, or Andre to be abused.

**Limiting experiences incentivizing constraint on one’s moral convictions**

The features of moral conviction described by Pianalto are precisely why it is challenging to make them more responsive. Moral convictions are not easily reviewed. Because moral convictions are both epistemically central and firmly held, it is rarely the case that one’s experiences provoke enough reflection to overturn one. It is more typical for engagement in discourse and review to remain casual and leave one’s convictions unaffected. Since moral convictions are central to personal identity, considerable inclination exists to leave them as is. It may be the case that only a shocking or otherwise unbearable experience will be disruptive enough to motivate the type scrutiny that might dislodge a conviction.

Nevertheless, for all the reasons pointed out by Pianalto, and for the sake of making one’s judgments more responsive, moral convictions must be subjected to scrutiny. The unpleasantness of undergoing experiences of limitation, though, raises questions about motivation. Pianalto mentions humility as a crucial disposition for constraining one’s moral convictions, but humility does not come easily. The motivational issue is the deficit between
the imperative to constrain one’s moral convictions, and the desire to do so. Not many possess Socrates’s willingness to pursue an argument wherever it leads. Perhaps just as few are willing to adopt the degree of humility necessary to have their moral beliefs—much less moral convictions—subjected to exacting scrutiny. However, sustained experience with limitation, or perhaps just acute experience of a particular sort, is a plausible candidate for qualifying as disruptive or even unbearable.

Beyond their motivational value, limiting experiences also will be helpful in constraining moral convictions by helping one prioritize specific avenues of inquiry. With regard to one’s context and the information available through it, the full complexity of any given circumstance is always beyond human conception. This is itself, of course, a limitation, even if the feedback loop of awareness and interaction with context mentioned in this chapter will not necessarily be conscious; indeed, much of it will be unconscious. Niebuhr uses phrases such as “constant balancing” and “small inconspicuous shiftings” to describe “skillful accomplishment and our more general living.”

The problem that complexity presents is that merely adding reasons to what one already has will be of questionable usefulness; having more contextual information does not necessarily equate to one having a more responsive set of moral reasons. What is needed is not merely more contextual information, but additional morally relevant contextual information. Limiting experiences are valuable in this regard in that they assist one in dismissing less relevant possibilities from a seemingly endless pool. In other words, limiting

73 Plato attributes to Socrates the following statement: “... whatever direction the argument blows us, that’s where we must go.” Plato, Republic, trans. George Grube and David Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 394d. For a comparable remark, see Plato, Phaedo, trans. George Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 107b.

74 First two quotes are Niebuhr’s, from H. Richard Niebuhr, “Toward the Future,” part 1 of the Cole Lectures, delivered at Vanderbilt University, April 10-12, 1961. Quoted by Keiser, Roots, 69 (see also 73). Last quote is from Keiser, Roots, 73.
experiences help one address Niebuhr’s ‘what is going on?’ question first by imposing some degree of realization of one’s limits, thereby forcing prioritization. There is, after all, only so much inquiry one can engage in. If so, then one would have an incentive to prioritize constraining one’s set of moral convictions above other moral beliefs.

**Conclusion**

As noted, Niebuhr envisioned limiting experiences as prompting a gradual transition toward embracing a fundamental experience of being valued by Being itself, whom he identified as God. However, limiting experiences are valuable beyond the instrumental role they might play in the realization of some end, however good. That is, limiting experiences also should be considered valuable in that they constrain one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions. They may provide both a motivational force sufficient for reflection upon one’s moral convictions, and a guiding structure to one’s pursuit of additional morally relevant reasons.

I also claimed that limiting experiences are a good source of morally relevant reasons with respect to one’s *relationship* to a particular moral belief, principle, or conviction. A limiting experience will be useful for helping one realize, for example, how committed to a specific moral principle one might be, as well as how effective one may be in achieving goals in harmony with it. Finally, I also claimed that reflection upon these experiences helps one prioritize acquisition of morally relevant reasons pertaining to one’s moral convictions.

Human beings do not have an unlimited capacity for engaging in constraining activities; because of this, it is prudent to prioritize constraining those moral beliefs that play the largest causal role in one’s moral judgments: i.e., moral convictions.
CHAPTER THREE
MORAL CHALLENGES AS CONSTRAINTS

This chapter introduces moral challenges, which are experiences of moral opposition.¹ In this context, opposing another refers to intentionally countervailing action taken by another person motivated by a different moral belief, principle, or conviction. If I intentionally act to realize a specific state of affairs on account of a moral belief, principle, or conviction, and someone else acts intentionally to prevent this state, then I am being morally opposed (unintentional action and other complexities will be discussed and classified separately).² My beliefs and values can be disapproved of, but if no intentional action is exercised against me then I am not being morally opposed.

This chapter describes how moral challenges are perceived and how they are valuable for constraining one’s moral convictions. With respect to perception, I emphasize the fragile relationship between external events and first-person experience. Simply put, moral opposition does not always result in a moral challenge. I also classify moral challenges within a taxonomy developed by Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons.³ In terms of value, my approach is similar to the previous chapter: I identify value in moral challenges on account of their

¹ I use the term ‘moral challenge’ interchangeably with ‘morally challenging experience’.


³ The taxonomy is drawn from Mandelbaum, but Horgan and Timmons partially adjust it.
usefulness for constraining moral convictions. I describe four separate possibilities for how a moral challenge changes how one holds a belief. I do not identify any one of the possibilities as more valuable than the others, in that any one of the changes amounts to a constraint placed upon a moral belief.

**Perceiving moral opposition**

Moral opposition and moral challenges are, of course, both events in that they each refer to occurrences in time. The salient difference is that moral opposition is an intentional action, whereas the moral experience of a challenge occurs to a self.\(^4\) So, moral opposition and moral challenges will be perceived and described from different perspectives. Moral opposition is described in third-personal terms (see Figure 3 on the following page). Suppose I am trying to conduct a scientific experiment. However, the experiment is controversial, and opponents of the study have filed notice with the relevant authorities to force me to stop. Regardless of whether they should have taken such action, I am in fact being opposed. Any person appropriately positioned can report an objective description of the actions taken against me. Suppose also that I accurately perceive these actions taken against me. In contrast to the oppositional event, my experience is accessible only to me and is rendered in first-personal terms.\(^5\)

---

\(^4\) There are other ways to distinguish the two, but I have no reason to pursue them here.

\(^5\) I remain neutral about the scope of mental states that bear phenomenal character; for example, whether the intentional mental states associated with a morally challenging experience would have a specific *what-it-is-like* to them. I am sympathetic to the view that they do, but it is not necessary here to take a stance on this issue. See Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, “What does moral phenomenology tell us about moral objectivity?” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 25, no. 1 (2008): 275. [https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052508080102](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052508080102).
(Sensory) perception is, according to a dictionary definition, “the process or result of becoming aware of objects, relationships, and events by means of the senses, which includes such activities as recognizing, observing, and discriminating. These activities enable organisms to organize and interpret the stimuli received into meaningful knowledge and to act in a coordinated manner.”

The process of perception, then, is characterized not by passive intake of raw sensory input but an active effort—even if largely subconscious—to impose order, structure, and meaning onto what is presented to one’s sense organs. In short, perception is a goal-directed behavior. It is “behavior that is oriented toward attaining a particular goal. It is typically identifiable by observing that an organism ceases search behavior and engages in detour behavior when it encounters obstacles to the goal.”

Perception also is directed in part by the needs of the perceiver: “In order to achieve meaning, the organism must select its percepts from a multitude of potential stimulus configurations, emphasize and vivify them, and render them stable and coherent in the face of continuing

---


sensory flux. Through this three-fold process of *selection*, *accentuation*, and *fixation* the organism strikes a balance or compromise in his perception between the requirements created by physical, biological, and social existence. Moreover, perception can be enhanced by specific training and experience. On the active nature of perception, Caroline Franks Davis explains that,

> Psychological studies paint a very different picture of perception. Interpretation, far from being an extraneous element imposed from without, is absolutely essential to there occurring a perceptual experience at all. Perception of any type is never a purely physical activity; it involves the whole person. We are not passive recipients of ready-made representations of our environment; rather, stimuli from that environment must be processed by various interpretive mechanisms before they can have any significance for us, and constitute a perceptual experience (as opposed to mere sensation). Such an experience is thus the product of complex intellectual activity.

Moral perception

By comparison, *moral perception* is the process by which one perceives and assesses the moral status of a person, event, state of affairs, etc. A moral perception is, of course, a *moral experience*, which Uriah Kriegel defines as “... the domain of mental states which both embody moral commitment and are consciously experienced...” Perception, though, requires that the experience be caused by the percept(s). Walter Sinnott-Armstrong writes

---


10 This is a purposefully general definition. I take no stance on debates about the particulars of moral perception. I rely on Robert Audi for some useful distinctions, but have no intention of defending his view here. Audi’s *Moral Perception*, chapters 1 and 2, is a useful source for background commentary on pertinent issues. Robert Audi, *Moral Perception* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). His view is contrasted succinctly with other views by Robert Cowan in the latter’s review of Audi’s book. Cowan writes: “A common thought is that perception’s epistemic role in ethics is limited to providing subjects with information about non-moral (though morally relevant) facts. In his *Moral Perception*, Robert Audi sets out to argue, against this, that ordinary subjects can sometimes be said to perceive the moral qualities of actions and individuals, and that moral perception can directly ground moral knowledge.” Robert Cowan, review of *Moral Perception*, by Robert Audi, *Mind* 123, no. 492 (October 2014), 1167.

that “[moral] perception occurs only when we causally encounter the act that we judge morally.” However, precisely what occurs during moral perception and whether it occurs in some robust sense is disputed. Kriegel describes the persistent skepticism that accompanies the possibility of moral perception:

Traditionally, however, philosophers have been skeptical of the very existence of moral perception, typically on the grounds that moral properties are not sensible: ‘There is no such thing as a sensation having as its object a quality called moral goodness’ (Brentano 1876: 74; see also McBrayer 2010). Presumably, the idea is that strictly speaking what we perceive is just the (nonmoral) supervenience base of moral properties; the moral properties themselves are represented only post-perceptually. For example, although we may describe ourselves as seeing the kindness or generosity shown by one person to another, what is strictly perceptible in the exchange are certain nonmoral properties of the persons’ behavior, which properties ‘subvene’ kindness or generosity.

However, moral perception need not be understood in terms of the direct perception of some moral property. Sinnott-Armstrong provides three criteria for determining an occurrence of moral perception without this feature. The first is the already-mentioned requirement that the moral property causally generates the perception—note that the property itself is not perceived. The second requirement is that moral perception be immediate—that is, involving no conscious inferential reasoning. The final requirement is that “moral perception must


- Audi, Moral Perception.

involve some moral property,” meaning that one must judge that what is perceived has some moral property. Sinnott-Armstrong uses the following example to illustrate the last point: I may observe someone kick a child, but unless that perception is accompanied by an immediate judgment about the moral status of the act, then it is not a moral perception.15

However, there is no present need to wade into metaphysical disputes pertaining to the sense in which moral properties are perceived (if at all). Sinnott-Armstrong provides two options for avoiding these disputes through minimalist notions of moral perception. The first is to “[talk] only about moral perception of acts (but not of properties).” The second is to “[talk] about perception of a moral property of an act but meaning only that a person perceives the act and forms a judgment that it has the moral property on the basis of that perception without going through any conscious intermediate steps of reasoning.”16 I believe Sinnott-Armstrong is correct that some minimalist kind of moral perception does occur, even if the robust kind does not.

Causal complexity and perceptual fragility

Sensory perception is causally complex and fragile because of it. Disruptions to raw sensory input, such as an injury to the eyes or ears, for example, contribute to this fragility. Beyond organ malfunction, mental states affect perception as well. One would expect that psychological factors such as stress and fatigue negatively affect cognitive functions like decision-making.17 Less appreciated, at least by non-specialists, is that psychological factors


17 A number of studies observe how stress cognitively affects law enforcement personnel. For example: Kevin Harris, David Eccles, Carlos Freeman, and Paul Ward, “‘Gun! Gun! Gun!’ An exploration of law enforcement officers’ decision-making and coping under stress during actual events,” Ergonomics 60, no. 8 (2017): 1112–1122, https://doi.org/10.1080/00140139.2016.1260165. See also: Donovan Kelley, Erika Siegel,
affect perception as well, including moral perception. A moral judgment included in the causal process of perception simply adds another factor that can be disrupted. A perception of a man being shoved in front of a moving vehicle is a psychological process that can be disrupted; so too can the perception of this action as a moral action.

In any case, a substantive listing and review of factors that affect the process of moral perception is not necessary here, but I will mention two phenomena observed from research in psychology: the serial-position effect and the framing effect. I mentioned the former in the first chapter (see footnote 30). Roughly, research on the serial-position effect holds that the order in which we encounter objects, events, etc., affects how we interpret their significance. At times, even the same individual will arrive at differing interpretations based on a changed sequence of perception.

The framing effect describes changes in interpretation and belief formation on the basis of variation in how an event, object, person, etc., is communicated. With respect to moral beliefs, a framing effect is something that contributes to variation, especially with “…


morally irrelevant differences in the way a scenario is presented...”20 Walter Sinnott-Armstrong singles out two types of this effect that are of particular interest for their effect on moral intuitions: the word framing effect, and a “special kind of context framing [involving] order.”21

In short, human moral perception is affected by numerous factors, resulting in differing moral intuitions. For example, suppose that two business partners converse about a range of topics but end the discussion on a sour note. One of them makes a demeaning comment about the other’s appearance. This remark, of course, is not appreciated, but because it was the last thing mentioned it is endowed with a significance it otherwise would not have. This is not to say that demeaning remarks are more appropriate at different moments in a conversation, but that sequencing affects how they might be perceived. A remark situated at the end of a discussion will be easier to remember, and one that has a personal connotation may stand out even more. A remark that stands out in this manner will affect how it is assessed.

Even when not causally disrupted, moral perceptions change in surprising ways due to seemingly insignificant situational changes. Consider the following example. While fighting in the Spanish Civil War, George Orwell set himself up near enemy lines to wait. Once the opportune moment arrived, he noticed something that gave him pause: the enemy soldier was holding his trousers up while running. Orwell was struck by the sheer human vulnerability of the soldier, who became to him at that point a “fellow-creature.” Orwell could not bring himself to fire his weapon. It is notable that at no point did Orwell’s beliefs change concerning the human being in front of him. He knew throughout his time in Spain that his

---


enemies were human beings like himself. Under “normal” circumstances, Orwell would have pulled the trigger. But the unexpected experience of seeing the enemy soldier in such a vulnerable manner changed how he assessed him (at least in this case).

Seeing an enemy soldier in such a state led to Orwell’s reinterpretation of his significance: not as an “enemy” to be dealt with violently, but a “fellow-creature” with whom he identified. While none of his antecedent beliefs and (dis)values about his enemy changed, the new experience adjusted his belief. The existing beliefs were given additional context, resulting in a striking change in behavior—at least in the mentioned case.22 (But if his behavior was not altered subsequently, consider the belief to have been diminished—whereas it originally may have been something akin to an absolute desire to kill enemy soldiers previously, there appeared to be at least one circumstance in which Orwell was not prepared to shoot his enemy.23)

In sum, moral perception features in this chapter because of its connection to morally challenging experiences. I agree with Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s claim, noted above, that a moral perception must be generated by causal contact with the percept(s). However, a false perception can generate a moral experience, as defined above by Uriah Kriegel, and even a false morally challenging experience.24 Of course, it is a separate epistemic question whether one is able to determine the difference between an authentic morally challenging experience and a morally challenging experience generated by a false perception. I will not explore this question, though. Morally challenging experiences can occur as a result of conscious or

---


23 See the section “Context and moral convictions” below for definitions and commentary about terms such as ‘adjusted’ and ‘diminished’ with respect to moral convictions.

24 A morally challenging experience generated by a false moral perception could have the same constraining value as one generated by an accurate moral perception. In many cases, though, I suspect that this will not last. A perception that is defeated will not causally sustain a morally challenging experience.
subconscious inferential reasoning at a time much later than the initial opposing event. Because of the fragility of the causal process, though, it is more likely that morally challenging experiences will be causally sustained as a result of a genuine moral perception.

**Situating moral challenges within a taxonomy of moral experience**

Since moral challenges are a subset of a moral experience, my aim in this section will be to situate them within an existing taxonomy of moral experience. The essential quality of morally challenging experience is a perceived resistance that exerts a felt demand for a response. The “felt demand” is perceived as both exogenous and obligatory in the sense that one cannot ignore it while maintaining integrity with one’s moral beliefs. The term is taken from Maurice Mandelbaum, who writes:

>[A] demand is experienced as a force. Like other forces it can only be characterized through including in its description a reference to its point of origin and to its direction. It is my contention that the demands which we experience when we make a direct moral judgment are always experienced as emanating from “outside” us, and as being directed against us. They are demands which seem to be independent of us and to which we feel that we ought to respond.  

The perceived resistance is relative to one’s intentional action in accord with a moral belief or value.

The acquisition of additional morally relevant information contextualizes moral beliefs and thus constrains them. Classifying moral challenges will help clarify how these experiences differ from other constraining experiences. A notable feature of moral challenges is that they foster the acquisition of morally relevant information. Because they are experiences that occur in connection with intentional action on behalf of a moral belief, the opposition to one’s action is more likely to be perceived.

Moral experience is a large and diverse category, and I do not assume that it constitutes a natural kind. Above, I endorsed its definition as “... the domain of mental states

---

which both embody moral commitment and are consciously experienced...” Adding to this understanding, Horgan and Timmons state that “... [moral] experiences [are those experiences] that have to do with, or include, judgments of moral obligation and judgments of moral value, as well as experiences that involve the moral emotions—guilt, shame, indignation, and the like.”26 Their taxonomy is as follows. Each group listed is a subset of the one preceding it. So, for example, first-order and second-order judgments are a subset of judgment-involving moral experiences, and judgments of obligation and judgments of value are a subset of first-order and second-order experiences (which are themselves a subset).

- **Judgment-involving moral experiences.** Those moral experiences that involve the formation of or arrival at a moral judgment. This is to say, it may be the case that some moral experiences do not involve a moral judgment. For the purposes of this chapter, I follow Horgan and Timmons’s assessment that it is not necessary to take a stand on this issue.

- **First-order and second-order.** A first-order moral judgment refers to one of “...those more basic judgments of obligation and value that may prompt some particular moral emotion...” At the end of this section, I classify moral perceptions as first-order judgments. A second-order moral judgment would be the moral emotion that arises as a result of and is directed toward a first-order experience.

- **Judgments of obligation and judgments of value.** These are first-order judgments. The first is a judgment about what one should do; the second is a judgment about the worth of some act, entity, state of affairs, etc. Examples of the first sort will be familiar: I should

---

not cheat the store clerk; I should help this child cross a busy street. So too will examples of the second: my family is important to me; I should not waste time watching too much television; etc. I think it is sensible to suppose that judgments of the first type would follow closely from judgments of the second. So, for example, if I arrive at a conclusion that increases my regard for the value of human life, then it is conceivable that I will be confronted rather quickly with choices to make about what to do to act in accord with this conclusion. That is, while a judgment about value (in this case, of human life) does not imply a judgment of obligation, there is a natural association between the two.

- **Direct and removed judgments of obligation.** Judgments considered to be either direct or removed are judgments of obligation. Horgan and Timmons explain that:

  Direct moral experiences are those in which one is presently confronted with a set of circumstances which one experiences as “calling for” one to either act or refrain from acting in a particular way on that occasion, and in response to which one comes to have or make a moral judgment about what one ought or ought not do. By contrast, removed moral experiences include those which involve the making or the having of an ought-judgment about one’s past self or about someone else, as well as all judgments about the moral goodness or badness of the specific character traits and overall character of oneself and others.

  With a direct judgment, one senses a pressing need to respond by addressing some current situation, even if this entails intentionally not doing anything; removed judgments do not convey the same sense of urgency.

- **Intuitive and deliberative moral judgments.** Direct judgments of obligation made without reflection are intuitive. Horgan and Timmons, quoting Jonathan Haidt, write that these judgments occur “‘without a conscious awareness of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion.’ … By contrast, deliberative

---

27 Mandelbaum’s notion of “felt demand,” mentioned earlier in this section, is a feature of the direct category.

moral judgments result from such activities as consciously searching, weighing evidence, and then inferring a moral conclusion.”

At the beginning of this chapter, I defined ‘moral opposition’ as intentionally countervailing action taken by some other person motivated by a differing moral reason. Within this taxonomy, moral opposition is resistance to action on behalf of a judgment of obligation one has made. One could, of course, falsely perceive moral opposition. It is possible that a limiting experience, as described in the previous chapter, could be the basis for a misperception. However, only intentional countervailing action is taken against one’s own intentional action counts as moral opposition. Thus, according to my definition of moral opposition, judgments of value cannot be opposed; opposition is possible only when one has made a judgment about what to do and is acting in accordance with it.

Within Horgan and Timmons’s framework, then, moral challenges are moral experiences that are judgment-involving and first-order. They are moral perceptions of moral opposition, associated with an intentional action one has taken in accordance with a moral belief, principle, or conviction. The sequence of events of this process is as follows. First, one makes a judgment of obligation—which is a separate first-order judgment—and acts intentionally in accordance with it. Second, there is a perception of one’s action being opposed. This moral perception is itself a first-order judgment, which by definition involves a moral judgment. Finally, one associates the perception of being opposed with one’s intentional action.


30 A variety of dispositions can be adopted toward another’s judgment of value. Such judgments can be disapproved of, for example.

31 It also fits Kriegel’s definition of moral experience as “a mental state which both [embodies] moral commitment and [is] consciously experienced.” This contention is not universally accepted, though. See footnote 26 in the present chapter, where I mention that Robert Audi defines moral experience more narrowly.
Horgan and Timmons mention only moral emotions as candidates for second-order judgments. They use indignation as an example: a case of wrongdoing is observed (i.e., a first-order moral experience) and in response to this, one experiences emotion. Above, I mentioned their criteria for a second-order judgment: that it arises as a result of and is directed toward a first-order judgment. Moral perceptions do not meet these criteria. First, they are independent of antecedent judgments; they occur because of perceptual stimuli. Second, they are directed not toward judgments but percepts. In the case of a moral challenge, the moral perception is of opposition to one’s actions.

Furthermore, moral perceptions meet the criteria for first-order judgments: they are moral judgments, and they are not directed toward other judgments. Minimally, a judgment cannot be a moral judgment unless there is some assessment about the percept’s having a moral status. While they do not require a judgment of obligation, they do require a judgment of value. 32 This claim does not require that one assign a relative moral status; only that some moral status is assigned. Consider Gilbert Harman’s example of walking around a corner and noticing that a group of young people are tormenting a cat for fun. 33 This is a case of moral perception, given that a judgment is made about the moral status of the group’s action—yet no conscious inference takes place. Additionally, there is no judgment about the cat’s worth relative to human beings or even other cats. The value judgment made here simply is that the cat has some value-conferring moral status. In sum, because moral perception requires a first-order judgment of value, morally challenging experiences—which are a particular type of

32 Recall that Sinnott-Armstrong’s description of moral perception involves perceiving some entity, person, act, quality, state of affairs, etc., where some moral property causally generates the perception. Additionally, a non-inferential moral judgment is made about the perceived entity.

moral perception—do not involve judgments of obligation and are not second-order judgments.

**Moral opposition and the intentions of opposing agents**

There are several complexities to the concept of moral opposition, and I consider a few of them in this section. Since a consideration of every conceivable issue is not feasible, I will not attempt it. My aim merely is to add detail and clarity to the concept of moral opposition.

**Outcomes**

First, there are several possible outcomes to being opposed, one of which is being *thwarted*. As with some other definitions in this dissertation, ‘thwarted’ is a common term that I am using in a specialized manner. By ‘thwarted’ I mean that all actuality of realizing a preference or state of affairs has been eliminated. Being thwarted in this sense indicates that opposing actions have been effective; if my preferences have been thwarted, then they have not been realized in the relevant time frame.

There is no necessary connection between the intention of an agent attempting to thwart and the eventual outcome. Opposition, as noted, indicates intentional action to resist my intentional action; another individual wishes a different state of affairs than I do and is acting upon his belief. An individual may oppose my action with intent to thwart it, but not necessarily so. In the latter case, someone may choose merely to make the realization of my goal more difficult. It also is possible that an intention to thwart exists but is not successful; this would be a case where the action taken to thwart another is ineffective. Additionally, it is possible that one has no intent to thwart yet is successful in doing so. For example, suppose I am attempting to secure a permit for building a food pantry on the basis of my moral belief. Someone else, however, has a differing moral belief and attempts to delay the permit application on this basis. This individual unintentionally persuades the municipal officials to
cancel the permit altogether. My intention to build the pantry in accordance with my moral belief has been thwarted, but the opposing individual only sought to delay my building plan.

Motivation for moral opposition

The motivating reason(s) of moral opposition must be accurate. Opposition that occurs on the basis of a misunderstanding is classifiable as some type of resistance but does not meet the stipulated definition of moral opposition. As with the case of false moral perceptions, opposition on the basis of a misunderstanding may constrain one’s relevant moral belief(s) but is not likely to do so durably. If the misunderstanding is cleared up, the opposition will cease (unless a separate reason is identified as the basis of opposition). Consider the following: because of a moral belief, someone intends to apply for a job at my food pantry. When he arrives for an interview, a parking enforcement officer will not allow him to park nearby. On account of this, the applicant must park many blocks away. The parking officer, who has not been made aware of a relevant change to the parking regulations, had no intention of opposing the job applicant; he is merely performing his duties as he understands them. However, in this case, his misunderstanding about an unrelated matter caused him to oppose an action undertaken on account of a moral belief. The applicant is motivated by a moral reason, but the officer is not opposing him on the basis of a differing moral reason. All things being equal, if the police officer learns of the relevant changes to parking regulations, he would cease enforcing them. The applicant could have no authentic moral perception of moral opposition in this case.

Moral opposition is a subcategory of the experiences of limitation described in the previous chapter. The category of limitation is broader, more encompassing. The key difference is that a limitation is any obstacle to intentional action, whereas a moral challenge is a perception of oppositional action to one’s own intentional action. Whereas opposition is anchored in someone’s will (intentional or not), limitation need not be. Every experience of
moral opposition is a limiting experience, but not every limiting experience is a case of moral opposition. An experience of limitation does not require a moral perception. Rather, it simply is an awareness of an inability of some sort.

Suppose that the hopeful applicant in the above example is traveling to my office but is caught in a heavy snowstorm. A quality of non-personal obstruction is that it is non-negotiable but, in some cases, is not insurmountable. Some features of the natural world simply cannot be changed, and the laws of physics prevent them from being overcome; I cannot send a radio signal faster than the speed of light, for example. However, a limitation that obstructs moral action does not imply its cessation. Depending on the severity of the snowstorm, travel may not be barred but merely is impeded. If so, this would be a clear example of a limitation imposed by a natural event, but not one that prevents moral action. What the officer and the snowstorm have in common, though, is that neither is opposing the applicant for a differing moral reason. While it is obviously true that a snowstorm cannot be motivated to “oppose” anyone for any reason, neither it nor the officer are motivated by a differing moral reason. Because of this, no moral perception of intentionally opposing action is possible in either case.

Opposition by multiple parties

Moral opposition can be mounted by more than one person, and for a variety of reasons. Similarly, simultaneous intentional action is not required for moral opposition, as several people may oppose an action at different times and for different and overlapping reasons. For example, the construction of my food pantry may be opposed from a variety of individuals or groups from the neighborhood of the build site. These parties may have completely unrelated moral reasons for opposing my actions. Some may think that the lot should be occupied by a grocery store. Others may believe a pharmacy should be placed there. None of these persons need to coordinate with each other in order to oppose my action.
All that is required is that each opposing agent be motivated by a moral reason that differs from the agent being opposed.

**Strength of opposition**

The strength of an agent’s will to oppose can be understood as existing along a continuum. It helps to suppose a simple scheme of *weak* opposition on one end and *strong* opposition on the other. Opposition may be weak in the sense that one person would prefer another state of affairs but is not prepared to suffer more than a minimal cost for his actions. For example, consider varying degrees of strength among those opposing my food pantry. Some may not be willing to risk alienating other neighborhood groups as a consequence for their opposition. Strong opposition, by contrast, would involve a willingness to pay a personal cost to take opposing action. I might, to use another example, strongly oppose my friend’s choice to falsify information on his tax returns. In this case, I believe strongly in the value of what is at stake in the dispute and would conduct myself accordingly. Depending on the circumstances, I might even attempt to thwart him. Beyond this, it is possible to imagine *ardent* opposition, which connotes an implacable will to thwart another person’s moral action. For example, one might ardently oppose animal cruelty and be willing to pay any personal cost to thwart those who engage in it.

**Moral opposition for the benefit of the opposed party**

Different degrees of moral opposition reflect the availability of widely different motivations for opposition. Opposition even can be exerted on behalf of the person being opposed. Such opposition is illustrated in the case of a parent refusing to cooperate with a child for the purpose of inculcating a specific trait or good habit. In such cases, the parent opposes a child for the child’s own benefit, even over objections. For many parents, opposing a child can create a dilemma in which a child might come to view the parent as an
antagonist. In such a case, the parent opposes the child even if the reason for doing so is not understood. In any case, moral opposition with the framework of a parent/child relationship neatly illustrates that it is not equivalent to antagonism.

**Moral beliefs and context**

An agent’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions make available for him morally relevant contextual information when undergoing unpleasant experiences. For example, the choice to stand in cold rain to offer an umbrella to a nearby child differs from standing in cold rain because of bad luck. A moral belief can be taken as a morally relevant reason to remain exposed to weather on someone else’s behalf. In this case, the unpleasantness of standing in cold rain is endured because of the moral principle that adults should consider the well-being of children. The reverse is true as well, though: unpleasant experiences such as moral challenges add context to one’s moral beliefs. A morally challenging experience appends morally relevant information to the context in which the belief is held. The agent’s relationship to the belief is then adjusted to include this information. One’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions are constrained when the context in which they are held is expanded in this way. Morally challenging experiences are valuable for one’s moral judgment because of this constraining feature.

Consider the following example: suppose that an individual believes that murder is morally acceptable. If this person perceives moral opposition to his intentional action in accordance with this belief, he will have a decision to make (even if subconsciously) as to whether to continue acting in accordance with it. There is a morally relevant cognitive difference between holding the belief ‘murder is morally acceptable’ before an experience in

---

34 The difficulty inherent in a parent/child example like this is that a prerequisite of moral opposition is a moral action to oppose. So, an assumption must be made that the child believes himself to be engaging in something genuinely important—a moral action. Perhaps the child has spotted an injured animal and wants to tend to it. Because of the danger this poses to the child (and perhaps the wounded animal), the parent stops the child from performing this compassionate action.
which the action is opposed, and after. That is, a naive young person’s belief that ‘murder is morally acceptable’ is different from that of a similar belief belonging to a hardened misanthrope. There are several relevant factors that bear on the cognitive status of the youth’s belief. For example, he may not realize or appreciate the moral gravity of ending another person’s life. Both before and after an intentional act in accordance with his belief, though, morally relevant contextual information will be available to him, pending his situational awareness and reflection. The youth would see firsthand the pain that his action caused (or would cause) another person. While the content of their respective beliefs might be indistinguishable (‘murder is morally acceptable’), the context in which they hold it is different. Any individual who endures the experience of a moral challenge and reflects upon it has the opportunity to acquire morally relevant information useful for constraining moral beliefs, principles, and convictions. In this case, the experience at least provides an opportunity for the youth to reconsider whether his belief is true.

This example illustrates how moral challenges constrain not just moral beliefs but moral convictions: they present one with difficulty and unpleasantness, sometimes to an extreme degree. As noted at the beginning of this section, a two-way relationship exists between moral beliefs and moral experiences: each contextualizes the other. Strong moral beliefs (i.e., those considered moral convictions) are more adequate to serve as moral reasons for enduring unpleasantness on their behalf. Conversely, strongly unpleasant experiences are more likely to prompt rigorous scrutiny of a moral belief.

A high degree of unpleasantness due to moral opposition is especially useful for constraining moral convictions, which present a danger when not reflected upon. Matthew Pianalto summarizes the danger: “A person of conviction not only has strong beliefs but will also have a strong tendency to speak out on relevant issues or to take other proactive measures in the service of her convictions. This is the source of conviction’s inherent
riskiness. The strong influence and centrality of place of convictions can, if they are misguided, drive one headlong into (moral) disaster—both the outward disaster of immoral action and the inward disaster of a distorted self.”35

**How moral opposition affects moral beliefs, principles, and convictions**

The first and second possibilities: abandoned or adjusted moral beliefs

I postulate four general possibilities for what happens to a moral belief (or principle, or conviction) when one is opposed. The first possibility is that the belief is *abandoned.* Revisiting the above example, a belief that ‘murder is morally acceptable’ would be exchanged for a different moral belief. One’s opinion may change from ‘for’ or ‘against’ to ‘neutral’ or ‘no opinion.’ Other options include cases where no comparable belief replaces the abandoned moral belief; perhaps the agent becomes undecided about the relevant moral issue.

Consider the main character from Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment,* Rodion Raskolnikov. Believing “extraordinary” men such as himself to possess the “right to transgress” laws, Raskolnikov commits murder. He eventually relinquishes his desire to be a “Napoleonic figure,” though, and embraces a different approach to greatness. Bernard Paris explains: “The dream [about the plague that caused widespread madness and conflagration] shows him that he can be great not by repudiating traditional values but by preserving them in a world that is in danger of being destroyed by unbelief.”36 (Whether this is a plausible literary portrayal of abandoning a moral conviction, I will leave to others for analysis.37)

---


37 Also setting aside what motivates Raskolnikov to abandon his moral belief. For a characterological analysis, see Chapter 6 of Paris, *Dostoyevsky,* “Sonya, Svidrigaylov, and Raskolnikov’s Conversion,” 95–116.
The second possibility is that the belief is *adjusted*. Here, I have in mind those cases where the content of a moral belief is changed, but its centrality and the strength with which it is held remain the same. With the inclusion of new morally relevant information, a moral belief can remain central and be held strongly; only a slight change in content occurs. Recall the example of George Orwell in Spain during its Civil War. His interpretation of the situation involved him adjusting his conviction to killing his enemies in a more limited set of circumstances.\(^{38}\)

This is not to say that the consequences of an adjusted conviction would not be significant. After all, a moral belief like ‘murder is morally acceptable, but only in specific circumstances’ would be a significant change from ‘murder is morally acceptable.’ A change such as this may have considerable ramifications, even if the agent has not progressed all the way to a belief that ‘murder is not morally acceptable.’ It may not be possible to draw an absolute distinction between abandoned and adjusted moral beliefs. However, I will not attempt to identify necessary and sufficient conditions for these categories. My intent is to outline differences, not to identify definite boundaries.

The third possibility: diminishment of a belief’s status

The third possibility is that a moral belief is diminished or circumscribed in some way. This possibility bears especially on one’s moral convictions. As explained in the first chapter, I follow Pianalto’s description of moral convictions as moral beliefs with two special characteristics: occupying a central place in one’s cognitive structure (if a conviction is

\(^{38}\) I am assuming that Orwell did in fact change his belief. Whatever the case, he does appear to have backed away from his conviction about killing enemy soldiers in all circumstances.
dislodged, other beliefs will change, too) and being held firmly. If either aspect is lost, then a moral belief loses its status as a conviction.\footnote{Pianalto allows that moral convictions could fit either description; I prefer to assume they are combined. While I agree that it is possible, I think it would be rare for a moral belief to be either centrally important or held firmly, but not both.}

For an illustration, consider Orwell again. Suppose that instead of adjusting his conviction about shooting enemy soldiers, the experience of seeing his enemy in such a vulnerable state changed the status of the conviction itself. Orwell retains the content of his belief about shooting enemy soldiers, but it no longer occupies the central place in his belief set that it once did. It is also possible that the experience downgrades how firmly he holds his belief about shooting his enemy. Whether either or both of these possibilities occurs, Orwell’s moral belief about shooting his enemy no longer qualifies as a moral conviction. How he behaves after the change is speculative, but it is reasonable to expect that he would be less eager to seek out opportunities to engage his enemy.\footnote{I will avoid unnecessary complication by not considering an additional possibility: that a moral conviction is both adjusted and diminished.}

The fourth possibility: ratification

The final general possibility is for a moral belief to be \textit{ratified}. This occurs when a belief is both unchanged in content and augmented either in terms of its cognitive centrality or the strength with which it is held. The experience of a moral challenge is itself information-bearing: both before, during, and after moral action, a moral belief is considered in the light of newly acquired morally relevant information. The persistence of a belief through new information amounts to augmenting a moral conviction, even if only reinforcing it trivially. For example, Socrates experienced a moral challenge during his trial in Athens; if convicted, he would be sentenced to death. Of course, even though he gave the accusation against him due consideration, he did not back away from his moral conviction that he was
not corrupting the youth of Athens. Setting aside the possibility that he was being ironic, reckless, or simply mocking his accusers, Socrates was by the end of the proceeding apparently so convinced of his innocence that he claimed that he deserved to be applauded for his actions.

Each consideration of ostensibly countervailing information that does not result in abandonment, adjustment, or diminishment is itself evidential support for the existing moral belief. Persisting through opposition is an opportunity for such a consideration. However, the extent of support provided to a specific moral belief by considering countervailing information is a question that I cannot presently take up. With additional evidential support, the central place a moral conviction occupies within one’s belief structure is solidified. Furthermore, to the extent that one has any control over the relevant psychological states, there is additional reason to hold the belief more firmly. The essential claim I am making is that the more rigorously one’s own moral beliefs are subjected to the constraints of new information through morally challenging experiences, the greater warrant there is for holding them as convictions, i.e., centrally and firmly.

A ratified moral belief bears on subsequent moral judgments in that the belief is now situated within a wider, more inclusive context. It has been subjected to constraint, and because of this it is desirable for such a belief to bear a larger burden of one’s moral judgments. It would be epistemically prudent for these convictions to be included in both a larger percentage of one’s judgments and judgments of greater importance.

In all four of the general possibilities that I have considered here, morally challenging experiences have been presented as a constraint on one’s moral beliefs. The first three possibilities illustrate this clearly. By abandoning, adjusting, or having a conviction

---

diminished, moral challenges cull tenuously supported moral beliefs. However, constraint still occurs even with the fourth possibility, in which one’s beliefs are augmented. New morally relevant information is available chiefly through experience. The experience of the challenge is itself a constraint; just because the information it bears is consistent with the belief one already holds does not mean that the information is without value or that it was not worthwhile to (re)consider one’s belief in light of it.

**Unpleasant experience and self-assessment**

Morally challenging experiences also make available valuable information that will *not* be relevant for moral judgments. I have in mind implicit information about one’s motivations or commitments, pertaining to whether one is prepared to act in accordance with a moral belief in the face of opposition. Above, I noted a relationship in which moral challenges and moral beliefs contextualize each other. An aspect of this relationship is when the unpleasantness of an experience provokes reconsideration of the relevant belief as well as one’s motivations and commitments to it. Information pertaining to one’s relationship to a particular belief may be valuable, for example, through revealing a degree of *akrasia*.

If I am correct about the value of morally challenging experiences, then there is something missing from Robert Audi’s dichotomy of the value of moral experience, which he lists as either *evidential* or *non-evidential*. Evidential value, of course, pertains to the truth or falsity of a moral judgment. Non-evidential value, Audi explains, is related to other, non-epistemic goods:

Moral experiences can have instrumental value in promoting moral behavior. They can, for instance, lead people to live up to moral standards better than they would if they were guided only by moral judgments never accompanied by moral experiences, such as moral emotions supporting those judgments... And moral experience can have heuristic value too (which appears to be a broadly instrumental kind). Even if one can be misled by, say, feelings of indignation over the wrong thing, indignation can sometimes lead one to discover a moral or other truth. If well-grounded, it can lead to a moral realization one might have missed; if misplaced, it can lead to self-criticism that reveals what the moral facts really are. In general
terms, moral experience, especially when emotional, commonly motivates us to think and act concerning moral matters.\textsuperscript{42}

While I do not find anything to disagree with as far as these descriptions are concerned, what Audi’s “non-evidential” category leaves unmentioned is the \textit{self-revealing} value deriving from morally challenging experiences. I claim that there is a type of non-evidential value deriving from morally challenging experiences which illumines one’s relationship to the relevant moral belief, principle, or conviction.

Moral challenges, then, are opportunities not just for constraining one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions, but also for \textit{self-assessment}. I noted this type of non-constraining value in the previous chapter in connection with my description of limiting experiences. What can be added here, is that a better understand of one’s relationship to a given moral belief will help in deciding whether to prioritize constraining it.

A natural human response to moral opposition will be to determine whether one wishes to continue in the face of it. The unpleasantness of a morally challenging experience, which can vary from mild to extreme, will be a key factor for making this determination. Unpleasant moral emotions such as shame may be part of the experience; perhaps self-recrimination (conducted fairly or not) will be too. In any case, self-assessment itself generally is unpleasant. Depending on how extensively and remorselessly it is conducted, there is always a chance that the experience will be deeply unpleasant.

In general, difficult or unpleasant experiences are opportunities for an assessment of circumstances. When events do not proceed according to our preferences, the natural tendency is to reflect on why this is the case. It is a common human experience to feel either frustration or a similar emotion at an outcome that does not conform to one’s wishes. This is the case regardless of the moral status of the intentions involved: rarely is one satisfied (in the

\textsuperscript{42} Audi, “Axiology,” 360–361.
moment, at least) by having selfish or malicious intentions frustrated. The inquiries that follow naturally from such disappointments usually focus on the circumstances involved. Questions such as ‘why did this happen (or not)?’ and ‘how did this happen (or not)?’ will be typical on such occasions. Moral challenges direct the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions away from circumstances and toward the agent. Such inquiries help illuminate the extent to which an agent holds commitments to his assorted moral beliefs. Through the experience of a moral challenge, not only are an agent’s relevant moral beliefs constrained, but he also gains a better understanding of his commitment to the belief in question. With this increase in self-awareness, the agent can prioritize constraining his moral convictions.

**Summary: the value of moral challenges as a constraint upon moral beliefs, principles, and convictions**

The experience of a moral challenge affects an agent’s relevant moral belief(s) in one of four general ways: abandonment, adjustment, diminishment, or ratification. Whatever the outcome, the agent will make subsequent moral judgments with the belief having been constrained. The agent will engage subsequent circumstances having had his belief reconsidered in light of additional information, and in this sense his judgment will be more responsive. Morally challenging experiences, like all other constraints, at a fundamental level consist of reflection. The defining characteristic of moral challenges is a moral perception of intentional resistance that conveys a “felt demand” for reflection, which I described as a quality that seems both exogenous and obligatory. One will have less control over the reflection provoked by this demand since there is a limit to how much control one has over whether opposition is exercised by others. That is, morally challenging experiences are distinguished from other constraints mentioned in this dissertation by the urgency with which

---

43 I have not intended to construct an artificial separation in function between the various types of constraints. So, for example, limiting experiences can disclose information about ‘what is going on’ and moral challenges can close off less relevant possibilities for pursuit of the same question. Again, though, for each constraint (even for humility, which is a disposition), reflection is the fundamental feature.
they bear on a moral belief, principle, or conviction. Reflection is usually undertaken and discontinued at whim without foreseeable consequences. After all, one can always return to reflect on an issue at a more convenient time. By contrast, the stakes are higher for morally challenging experiences. Disengaging from them is possible but in doing so one risks a loss of integrity. Additionally, there is an opportunity cost in doing so in that the full extent of information made available from the experience may not be available again soon.

To illustrate the value of morally challenging experiences, consider again the two characters from “murderer” example. When the young person from this example finds himself contemplating a choice to end someone else’s life, the totality of experience brought to bear on his pending judgment is relatively narrow; he has few relevant experiences to draw from. By contrast, the “misanthrope” has more experience, including relevant experience with moral challenges. His cumulative experience contextualizes future judgments he will need to make concerning the act of murder. He might still choose to end someone’s life, but he will do so from a more considered perspective. His more experienced outlook will include relevant moral experience perhaps indicating how much loss and suffering he has inflicted on others. At this point, his relevant beliefs will have withstood substantial prior relevant constraint and still have retained for him their cognitive and moral significance. Overall, if an agent’s total experiential and cognitive framework is the basis from which moral judgments are formed—with special causal significance occupied by moral convictions—then moral challenges are good opportunities to make such judgments more responsive by the addition of relevant contextual information.

I conclude this chapter by noting that morally challenging experiences are endowed with greater purpose if they are connected to something like Niebuhr’s ‘what is going on?’ question, reviewed in the previous chapter. A question like this adds structure and significance not only to discourse and reflection, but to moral challenges as well. Thus, the
constraints discussed in this dissertation need not be aimless endeavors: by integrating them with some form of the ‘what is going on?’ question, participants have at least some additional sense of how to prioritize their search for additional information from context. A moral challenge, then, is neither an idle investigation nor pointless unpleasantness, but a means to developing more responsive judgment through the acquisition of morally relevant information. A version of the ‘what is going on?’ question focuses one’s inquiries into those that add to one’s conception of *what is the case, as best as can be determined*. Accordingly, enduring moral challenges is not a form of masochism, but an exposure to unpleasantness for a reason: subjecting one’s moral convictions to informational constraint by way of additional context, thereby rendering subsequent moral judgments more responsive to circumstances.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONSCIENCE AS A CONSTRAINT

Conscience is a familiar source of moral experience. This chapter clarifies how such experiences differ from the morally challenging experiences considered in the previous chapter. There, I claimed that moral challenges require a moral perception of intentional action taken against oneself, which implies a judgment of value (at least initially). I also characterized moral challenges as conveying what seems to one an exogenous “felt demand” for reflection. By contrast, according to one widely held contemporary view, the demand of conscience is not exogenous but reflexive: it is generated by and directed toward the self. Moreover, the operation of conscience on this view generates moral experiences that include not only judgments of value, but also judgments of obligation. Distinguishing the moral experiences derived from conscience (on the views considered in this chapter, at least) from morally challenging experiences will enable greater clarity for how each constrains moral beliefs, principles, and convictions.

In this chapter, I present two views on the nature of conscience and highlight a problem that arises for each them.1 The first is Larry’s May revision of Hannah Arendt’s view, representing the “personal integrity” view.2 I claim that the moral experiences of conscience for this view should be classified as first-order judgments of obligation, according

---


to Horgan and Timmons’s taxonomy. The second view belongs to John Henry Newman (1801–1890), whose description of conscience differs considerably. I do not take a position on the merits of either view and I do not intend for them to represent the entire spectrum of possible perspectives on conscience. In Newman’s view there are, in fact, two types of moral experience derived from conscience. One is a judgment of obligation and the other is a judgment of value—both of which are first-order. I note that while one type has some parallels with the morally challenging experiences considered in the previous chapter, they are both distinguishable.

May’s view suffers from a persistent redundancy—the tendency to seek out perspectives that are not especially different from those already considered. Newman’s view, which relies on direction from moral exemplars, suffers from a lack of readily identifiable markers for who might be exemplars and how much insight remains to be gleaned from them. In response to these problems, I refer back to H. Richard Niebuhr’s discussion of a radically inclusive disposition to novel experiences. Niebuhr’s inclusivity, paired together with his ‘what is going on?’ question, provides both a disposition and a structural direction to help mitigate the redundancy and opacity that plagues these respective views. I conclude this chapter by noting that, despite the differences between the two types of moral experience, moral challenges and experiences of conscience are similar in how they each constrain one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions.

The “personal integrity” view of conscience

Featured prominently among contemporary discussions of conscience is the view that it is a self-originating check on behavior. In this understanding, conscience is a capacity to recognize and object to behavior—even if only contemplated—or lack of behavior that is disharmonious with one’s moral beliefs, principles, or convictions. Christine Korsgaard states that “Conscience is the psychological faculty by which we are aware of and respond to the
moral character of our own actions.”\(^3\) It is important to note, though, that conscience is not a distinct faculty. Rather, it draws from assorted components of our cognitive capabilities to perform its function.\(^4\) Sidney Callahan adds detail regarding the first-personal dimension of conscience: “conscience is a personal, self-conscious activity integrating reason, emotion, and will in self-committed decisions about right and wrong, good and evil.”\(^5\) So far, then, conscience can be thought of as an integrative capacity, originating from the self and drawing together its various mental capacities. These resources are brought to bear on one’s actions (and inactions), evaluating them in terms of their harmoniousness with one’s moral beliefs or values. Adapting William Lyons’s usage, I will refer to this view as the \textit{personal integrity} view of conscience.\(^6\)

A standard component of conscience, according to this view, is that its input is generated from within. The proscriptions and prescriptions of conscience are reflexive, originating from and directed toward the self. The harmony demanded by conscience, on this view, is a harmony with oneself. So, e.g., suppose I have a moral belief that ‘stealing is wrong.’ When I act contrary to this belief, my conscience “reminds” me that this action is not...


\(^4\) The origin and development of the faculty view is traced by Jason Howard in Chapter One of Howard, \textit{Conscience}, 11–30. See also William Spohn, “Conscience and Moral Development,” \textit{Theological Studies} 61, no. 1 (2000): 122–123, \url{https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390006100106}. Spohn notes that discussions of conscience should be divided into two groups: those referring to anterior conscience (“for all the searching and deliberation that leads up to a moral decision”) and those referring to subsequent conscience (which “reflects back on decisions we have made”).


\(^6\) See Lyons, “Conscience,” 477. On the need for personal integrity, see Larry May’s comment: “For Arendt, we fear inner disharmony because in such a state we will be unable to think, that is, to engage in that inner dialogue where we uncover the meaning of our lives.” His reference is to Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” \textit{Social Research} 38, no. 3 (1971): 442, \url{https://www.jstor.org/stable/40970069}. Arendt is drawing from Socrates, and May summarizes both of them: “One comes to realize the importance of being able to engage in this thinking process and one sees that one of the conditions of thinking is that one must be in a state of harmony or integrity.” Larry May, “On Conscience,” \textit{American Philosophical Quarterly} 20, no. 1 (Jan. 1983): 58 (both quotes), \url{http://www.jstor.org/stable/20013986}. 
in harmony with my belief(s). This action by my conscience is the familiar sense of “I need to do this” or “I should not do that.” These moral experiences are first-order judgments of obligation about one’s own behavior, and as such they differ from what I described in the previous chapter as “moral challenges.” As explained, moral challenges are moral perceptions of opposition against oneself—they are judgments of value. With moral challenges, I assume that one already is acting in harmony with one’s moral beliefs. Whatever similarities they may have, then, a moral challenge is a fundamentally different moral experience than an experience of conscience, at least according to the personal integrity view.

Hannah Arendt and Kantian objectivity

My primary intent in this chapter is to describe how the moral experiences of conscience function as a constraint on moral beliefs, principles, and convictions. There is some irony, then, in turning next to Hannah Arendt, who also held some version of the personal integrity view of conscience. Arendt is a noted, if controversial, interpreter of Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment. Her view on moral judgment is not obvious, and she did not attempt to connect it with conscience. Still, it is valuable for present purposes because, despite the disconnection from conscience, it features an attractive “impartial but non-objective” approach to judgment. Her view is an attempt to meld a high ideal (Kant’s insistence on an unbiased perspective) with an inclusive disposition and experiential groundedness (i.e., her requirement for interaction).

---

7 Regarding the operation of conscience on the personal integrity view, it is worth highlighting that one is “made aware” of internal disharmony by oneself. Being made aware, then, is not a moral perception.

8 See commentary by Larry May, “Conscience,” 57–58.

9 On the lack of clarity in Arendt’s view, see, e.g., this statement: “Kant thought moral judgments are also determined by basic moral principles (the categorical imperative, in particular), whereas Arendt’s position on that point is not quite clear.” Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky, “Introduction,” in Judgment, Imagination, and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt, eds. Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), xii. On the lack of connection, see May, “Conscience,” 58.
The twin emphasis of her view on political judgment—impartiality and non-objectivity—align with what I hold to be the most important aspects of any view on moral judgment. On the one hand, impartiality reflects an unselfish concern for others. On the other, non-objectivity is at least consistent with an emphasis on the value of experience. While Arendt backs away slightly from Kantian objectivity, she does so in favor of engagement with other views—even if those views are hypothetical.

Judgments of conscience and political judgments

As noted, though, Arendt rejected the view that the judgments of conscience are moral judgments; perhaps she took them to be too self-regarding to be considered as such. It would seem she thought they do not address truly moral matters—the domain of which would be the world itself. She writes that conscience “... is not primarily interested in the world where the wrong is committed or in the consequences that the wrong will have for the future course of the world ... it trembles for the individual self and its integrity.”

Conscience, then, is not interested in the “world” in which right and wrong actions occur. Rather, it is construed as an internally oriented housekeeper, unconcerned with occurrences that fall outside of its primary domain of interest.

Judgments about internal, personal matters of conscience differs from the judgment of political matters. The former is an engagement within oneself, whereas the latter involves others, even if only imaginatively. Arendt writes: “The power of judgments rests on a potential agreement with others, and the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind,

---

10 Quoted by May, “Conscience,” 60.
in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement.”

The “enlarged mentality”

A key idea Arendt develops is what she calls the “enlarged mentality,” a term and notion she draws from Kant (eine erweiterte Denkungsart). This concept was the basis of Kant’s aesthetic judgment, and Arendt appropriates it for political judgment. Kant aims to purify judgment from personal bias and all other distorting influences. Ideally, he wants judgments to be universal (as with the categorical imperative) and transcendent. He theorizes that a “universal standpoint” (allgemeinen Standpunkte) is available to one who “… detaches himself from the subjective personal conditions of his judgement, which cramp the minds of so many others….” I mentioned earlier that Arendt aims to develop an “impartial but non-objective” theory of judgment. While Arendt generally ascribes to Kant’s insistence on an unbiased perspective, she understands the universal (or general) standpoint differently. Remi Peeters explains, quoting Arendt, that the general standpoint “is a viewpoint from which to look upon, to watch, to form judgments, or, as Kant himself says, to reflect upon human


13 Controversy exists concerning whether she interprets him correctly, but I ignore this issue. As for the appropriation itself, Beiner and Nedelsky summarize: “Hannah Arendt, who was inspired by her reading of Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgment, tried to make his account of aesthetic judgment the basis of a political philosophy.” Beiner and Nedelsky, “Introduction,” vii.

14 See the Walker translation of §40 of Kant, Critique of Judgment, 124-125.

affairs’ (1982, 44). In other words, judgment demands that we distance ourselves from our immediate involvement, to be able to look at a particular affair from the position of the spectator.”

Arendt is clear, though, that “the enlarged mentality needed for one to make political judgments is essentially different from the purely self-regarding judgments of conscience.” Generally speaking, her view is that judgments are improved by the consideration of other perspectives; the more views considered, the larger one’s mentality, so to speak. The unstated assumption is that the process of developing an enlarged mentality constrains the underlying beliefs that one’s judgments are based upon. Here, I will only mention that what is missing from this account is a sufficiently strong directive to engage consistently with novel perspectives. A lack of such a directive contributes to a diminishment in the diversity in the perspectives one considers. The mistake is conflating the quantity of exposure to other perspectives with quality.

The perspective of a “world spectator”

In place of Kant’s universal standpoint, Arendt advances an inclusive, broad-minded perspective belonging to a “world spectator” as her ideal. For Arendt, however, the act of removing bias from one’s judgments is less abstract than it is for Kant. The sense of ‘world spectator’ is not of a social or cultural elite, but of a perspective that has taken into consideration the viewpoints of all belonging to the judging community—that is, those involved in the process and activity of rendering judgments. This includes everyone who renders judgment, resulting in a vast and rather unnatural understanding of “community.”

---

16 The quote from Hannah Arendt, Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 44. Taken from Peeters, “Truth,” 414.

17 May, “Conscience,” 60.
For Arendt, there must be individuated consideration of some person’s viewpoint, regardless of whether that person is real or hypothetical. By contrast, Kant understands the scope of the “enlarged mentality” to include every possible human viewpoint. 18 Peeters explains the difference between the two approaches:

This need not imply, however, that Arendt has abandoned Kant’s allgemeine Stimme (as idea) and delivered the validity of judgment into the hands of the prevailing ‘public opinion’ of the moment. She also insists that people should compare their judgments with the ‘possible’ judgments of others rather than with their ‘factual’ judgments. While it is true that we all judge as part of a community, it is also important to realize that in the last analysis we are members of a world community: ‘When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one’s bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen and, therefore, also a Weltbetrachter, a world spectator’ (Arendt 1982, 75-76). The ‘general standpoint’ is thus far from being the greatest common denominator of prevailing opinion. 19

While there is some question regarding the relationship between the actual and hypothetical judgments of others, the key takeaway is that real interaction contributes to one’s judgments becoming less biased. 20

18 Beiner and Nedelsky:
For Kant, the ground for the “common sense” is identical cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding that all human beings share. The common sense is, thus, universal, and Kant can say that in exercising the enlarged mentality, we put ourselves in the place of every other person. Judgments are, thus, universally valid. The validity is a claim upon the agreement of all others, despite the fact that that agreement, unlike the truths of logic, cannot be compelled by reason (hence the universality is “merely subjective”).
For Arendt, the validity is more limited: claims for validity can never extend further than the others in whose place the judging person has put himself for his considerations. Judgment, Kant says, is valid ‘for every single judging person,’ but the emphasis in the sentence is on ‘judging’; it is not valid for those who do not judge or for those who are not members of the public realm where the objects of judgment appear.
(The ‘merely subjective’ quote is from §35 of the Pluhar translation of Kant, Critique of Judgment, 150–151. The Arendt quote is from Arendt, “Crisis in Culture,” 221.) Beiner and Nedelsky, “Introduction,” xi.

19 Peeters, “Truth,” 424–425. German ‘Stimme’ is equivalent to ‘voice’ or ‘vote.’

20 Eric Helleloid considers this: “Does the mental activity of judging depend on worldly interaction with others, the actual sharing of opinions and debate? Or, does worldly communication depend upon the mental activity of judging, imagination, and the sensus communis? Certainly, Arendt would not deny that we must communicate with real others in the world before we are capable of judging—we cannot imagine diverse perspectives if we have not first encountered some in the world. … It seems best to say that Arendt’s account requires a level of interdependence between the mental operations of judging and worldly interaction with others.” Eric Helleloid, “Hannah Arendt’s Phenomenology of the Will: Contingency, Temporality, and the Nature of Moral Judgment” (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2014), 353–354, Athenaeum: University of Georgia Theses and Dissertations.
Arendt insists on the acquisition of an expansive perspective based on the notion of a “world spectator,” an ideal that guides and informs. Supposedly, the world spectator judges well because his moral beliefs have been constrained by exposure to many perspectives. As noted, though, Arendt’s ideal of inclusivity lacks a guiding principle to direct it toward perspectives that differ substantially from those that already have been engaged. A concept such as Kant’s allgemeine Stimme is oriented toward acquiring new perspectives. However, it is too vague to provide the type of support needed for the acquisition of perspectives that are sufficiently different. Even if Arendt’s concept of a ‘general standpoint’ is not reducible to prevailing opinion, it is not clear what prevents it from being unduly subject to prevailing opinion or even personal preference. One’s concept of a ‘world spectator’ must be informed by some antecedent concept, and it is not obvious that the result will be so inclusive as to direct one toward continual engagement with novel perspectives—especially ones that are unpleasant to consider.

Larry May: collapsing Arendt’s distinction

Larry May argues for collapsing Arendt’s distinction between the moral judgments of conscience and political judgments, claiming the two are “intricately connected in the conscience.”²¹ He explains this connection by identifying the premium they each place on the value of harmony. First, he notes the value of harmonious agreement with respect to the enlarged mentality and aesthetic judgments: “Arendt, following Kant, explains [the intuitive nature of aesthetic judgments] by saying that we place ourselves in an enlarged mentality when we make such judgments, that is we anticipate the communication we would have with others and we predict the aesthetic judgments those others would make, and then we try to

---

²¹ May, “Conscience,” 60.
come to some sort of consensus between these others and one’s self."\textsuperscript{22} May’s next step is to draw from Socrates’s principle of internal harmony to establish a connection between self-regard and regard for others.\textsuperscript{23} He explains that, “In seeking after internal harmony we come to various insights which affect our evaluation of our conduct towards others. From our realization that we value inner harmony we move to the realization that creating disharmony, in ourselves or others, is to be disvalued. From a respect for our own self we come to a respect for other selves.”\textsuperscript{24} There is room to push back against this suggestion. Specifically, it is not clear that the force of finding harmony within oneself is enough to establish concern for the internal harmony of other selves. Nevertheless, May has pointed out one plausible way to identify a moral dimension to the activity of conscience. He writes: “Ultimately, conscience leads to a concern about the world, in particular a concern about the extent of harmony in the world. The enlarged mentality of conscience, which causes us to consider the future integrity and consistency of our self by reflecting on future states of our self, leads to the inclusion of other selves (external to us) in our imaginings. Conscience, which begins in an egoistic concern, leads one out of selfish egoism, not, seemingly, by internalizing social rules but by making one aware of the value of harmony.”\textsuperscript{25}

May’s final move is to note that for both political judgments and the judgments of conscience, there is a premium placed on the value of harmony between oneself and others.

\textsuperscript{22} May, “Conscience,” 59. Recall from the previous section that Arendt draws the concept of the “enlarged mentality,” which she deploys for political judgment, from Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment.

\textsuperscript{23} May is following Arendt in looking to Socrates. The principle is from Plato’s Gorgias 482b–c: “It is better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, being one, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me.” Plato, Gorgias, trans. Donald Zeyl (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987). Quoted by May, “Conscience,” 57.

\textsuperscript{24} May, “Conscience,” 59.

\textsuperscript{25} May, “Conscience,” 59.
whether real or hypothetical. In the case of judgments of conscience, the “other” is one’s future self. This construction imagines a “community,” which would be a community of the self with itself. If May is correct about this, then the judgments of conscience, under application of the standard that Arendt herself relies on for determining the validity of judgment (“The power of judgments rests on a potential agreement with others”), properly are described as moral judgments. May’s argument rests on this move, but my intent here is not to pronounce on its merits.

On the nature of the inclusivity of Arendt’s world spectator

As noted, Arendt’s view on judgment discloses her approach to constraining beliefs through exposure to other perspectives: that being, obtaining the perspective of a world spectator requires exposure to a wide variety of perspectives. I want to point out a potential problem for this account. On one hand, it is uncontroversial that an emphasis on including a diversity of viewpoints is useful for constraining moral convictions and improving judgment. There is considerable value in considering the perspectives of others—even hypothetical ones. Indeed, Arendt’s approach aligns neatly with Matthew Pianalto’s recommendation for reflection, discourse, and humility, as discussed in Chapter One. On the other hand, without a clear directive for engaging with increasingly diverse viewpoints, there exists a prospect of diminishing value—that is, of engaging viewpoints that are not especially different from previous ones. The problem, to which I alluded above, is that Arendt’s directive for inclusivity is too vague to sustain one through the consideration of unpleasant views. Unless a directive exists to take into consideration the full range human experience—especially including unpleasant views—then the problem of diminishing value remains.

26 May, “Conscience,” 60.
Undoubtedly, Arendt’s view could be more explicitly inclusive to avoid the potential for redundancy. Perhaps the only change necessary would be a stipulation that a world spectator would need to consistently seek out novel perspectives with which to engage, regardless of how difficult or unpleasant such a task may be. The problem inherent with an emphasis on diversity is that it is easy to overlook the natural human inclination to avoid unpleasantness and difficulty. It will be much easier to consider viewpoints that are only superficially different.

For example, suppose that an individual encounters dozens of people during her travels, and imagines dozens more hypothetical individuals, each with a perspective different than hers. However, there must be some morally significant difference between the various perspectives encountered for this individual’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions to be constrained to a maximum degree. Suppose that each individual encountered—real and hypothetical—is different, but only trivially so. Thus, if our traveler encounters people from many different countries, but these individuals largely share her educational background, religious views, moral beliefs, etc., it is likely that she did not sustain exposure to significantly different perspectives.

The appeal to diversity, while valuable, needs more specific direction to prevent it from acquiring less and less value from other perspectives. L. Gregory Jones, writing on the development of moral judgment within the context of a community, also comments on the importance of diversity for fostering valuable reflection and discourse. In particular, he remarks on the importance of friendship among members of a community for delivering tailored insights. He writes:

A third role for friends in acquiring self-knowledge is the critical perspective they have on a person’s life which she herself often lacks. Friends often see a person less deceptively than she is able to see herself and they can help her to be less dishonest about her life. Their observations are helpful in minimizing her own tendencies toward self-deception. They can help interpret what was going on in a particular
situation, and they can locate the gaps between her avowals of who she is and what they observe her to have done. In addition to this critical function, however, they also foster self-knowledge in positive ways. They sometimes perceive growth one may not have noticed. Because friends share conceptions of the ends toward which one’s life is directed, they help her see how her life is related to those ends.\textsuperscript{27}

Jones’s approach to engaging with novel perspectives is an interesting contrast with Arendt’s. Whereas Arendt emphasizes input from a wider variety of individuals (even hypothetical ones), Jones appears to prefer a smaller, more intimate group. The salient point is that through the bond of friendship, keen insight is available regarding specific cognitive or moral weaknesses one may have. Through the investment of time, effort, shared experiences and a mutual others-oriented disposition, Jones contends that valuable information is available to constrain one’s set of moral convictions.

However, Jones also appears content not to direct the imperative for diverse viewpoints beyond the level of friendly discourse and reflection:

People ought to want to have a diversity of friends. Because each friend possesses qualities that are distinct from oneself, and typically from one’s other friends, such diversity ought to enhance the conversation while extending and deepening one’s vision. Sometimes a person’s vision is extended in that she includes features she had not seen before; it also happens—in cases of unresolved disagreement—that people’s vision is deepened by clarifying the nature of the disagreement. But both in the extension and the deepening of vision, diversity within the community of friends (if it is genuinely a community where goods are held in common) is desirable because it stimulates conversation among friends; and such stimulating conversation extends and deepens the shared vision, develops character, and enhances people’s capacity to make wise judgments.\textsuperscript{28}

The issue here is that a directive such as “extending and deepening one’s vision” is not explicit enough and does too little in the way of providing a reason for persisting through difficulty and unpleasantness while encountering novel perspectives. While I find nothing


\textsuperscript{28} Jones, \textit{Transformed Judgment}, 85–86.
here to disagree with *per se*, Jones’s account exemplifies the problem of diminishing returns that exists as well in Arendt’s account.

**Niebuhr on radical and directed inclusivity**

A more rigorous example of diversity and inclusivity with regard to directedness is from Niebuhr, who insisted on an openness not just to other perspectives, but to all being itself. Inclusivity is understood by Niebuhr in a radical fashion and is not limited to that which is conceivable. Maintaining this degree of inclusivity requires a comparable degree of personal integrity. R. Melvin Keiser remarks that a disintegration of the self is experienced as events are responded to according to various “levels.” He writes: “The self is fragmented so long as it tries merely to respond on each level to the different actions, for there is only the psychological self, the social self, the economic self but not an underlying integrity. But in responding to the One acting in all these impacts on me, I become ‘I’; I become one.”

Niebuhr conceives of the requisite integrity as an experiential unity in relation to One to whom all responses are directed. He, of course, understands the “One” as God, but that assumption need not be made to appreciate the point. Personal integrity is achieved by unifying all of one’s responses to a transcendent and personal One who ultimately either allows or wills the circumstances of each moment.

While Niebuhr’s inclusivity is comprehensive, the distinctive feature is that he identifies a specific direction toward which one should be disposed to in terms of experiential openness: God. Niebuhr’s inclusivity is not, after all, an *aimless* inclusivity. The move here is that the personal One to whom all responses ultimately are directed is also a transcendent

---


One. Thus, openness to the One is in effect openness to all being in that the One is radically other. Keiser explains:

In that each new moment brings a novel configuration of particular actions upon me, each of my responses changes and hence I am changing. In that I respond to God acting upon me in each new interaction, I am constantly being drawn out of my narrow confines to respond in a way fitting to the total context of my being and to whatever new thing God is enacting within the interrelational network. Responsible existence is therefore continuing transformation. While being stretched to the universal over and over again, I am also drawn from my abstraction about God and what I ought to do back into the world.

In sum, Niebuhr structures the directive for new experiences in personal, relational terms. One is not merely adding new perspectives to an existing collection but also guarding against personal disintegration by relating every response to a transcendent, personal One.

Niebuhr’s view on inclusivity and directiveness is not the only option, of course, but it does illustrate an appealing guiding feature that provides adequate direction for sustaining openness to experiences and perspectives: he connects inclusivity to transcendence. As noted in Chapter Two, Niebuhr considers the ‘what is going on?’ question necessary for responsible action. Properly applied, this question is both a practical beginning point and a guiding principle for the inclusion and consideration of new information from other perspectives. If adhered to faithfully, Niebuhr’s question directs one away from immediate concerns to consider one’s circumstances as broadly as possible. The ultimate answer to this question, according to Niebuhr, is that the One is ceaselessly acting in love toward one. Seeking this answer, though, will be a matter of responding to each circumstance in radical, directed openness.

31 Jones also mentions the alterity between humans and God: “Friends are crucial to self-knowledge in several ways. ... a friend may contribute to self-knowledge not through similarities but through differences. ... In theological terms, a person’s primary friendship is with the Triune God who is decisively Other ...” Jones, Transformed Judgment, 83. Emphasis added.

32 Keiser, Roots, 92.
Moral challenges as a practical step toward dispositional inclusivity

Constraining one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions to a maximal degree will require more than encountering a large quantity of perspectives. This effort is hampered when there is redundancy among the considered perspectives. One way to counteract this redundancy is by encountering moral opposition. In this way, moral challenges are attractive as a practical component for helping one engage with a greater variety of viewpoints. In the previous section, I considered Arendt’s view on conscience and judgment, emphasizing that a clearer directive for inclusivity is needed. I submit that intentional action according to one’s moral beliefs at least partially provides this; following intentional action, moral challenges are likely to occur at some point. As such, moral challenges connect inclusivity not to transcendence but to opposition which, for practical purposes, may be a preferable option. If moral opposition is perceived accurately, it is an opportunity for considering a perspective that is opposed to one’s own, which means that it likely will be quite different. In this way, intentional action according to one’s moral beliefs, principles, or convictions is a practical approach for fostering encounters with different perspectives. Because of this, moral challenges help mitigate the problem of insufficient diversity.

John Henry Newman on conscience

So far, this chapter has been occupied mostly with Larry May’s revision of Arendt’s “personal identity” view of conscience. I have explained how an experience of conscience on this view would be relevant for constraining moral convictions. The present section has three goals. First, I will summarize Newman’s view on the nature of conscience. The second will consider his view on the operation or function of conscience. For the third, I will describe Newman’s view on the two distinct experiences of conscience, categorized according to the taxonomy of moral experience by Horgan and Timmons.
The nature of conscience

The first goal is simple. Newman straightforwardly describes conscience as a natural feature of the mind, comparable to memory and other native capacities. He also explicitly states what conscience is not: a mental capacity for maintaining integrity with one’s own moral beliefs. Indeed, Newman’s take on conscience is notable in that he disavows the personal integrity view: “Conscience is not a long-sighted selfishness, nor a desire to be consistent with oneself.”

The operation of conscience

For the second goal, I have two points to make. First, Newman holds that a primary function of conscience is perceptual: it is sensitive to the moral law, something that exists naturally in human beings “prior to their training, upbringing, and education.” Conscience perceives the moral law, which by faith can be understood as the divine voice, and it does so “immediately and non-inferentially.” (I hasten to add that I will not summarize or assess his view about conscience as a basis for belief in God.) What is perceived is the basis of its


authority; it is precisely because one’s conscience perceives the moral law that its demands are authoritative.\textsuperscript{36} Essentially, conscience is that which is appealed to when forming judgments about particular moral matters. It is the cognitive source for making sound moral judgments, similar to Aristotle’s \textit{phronesis}.\textsuperscript{37} Newman is careful to note that the authority ascribed to conscience should not be conflated with infallibility. Frederick Aquino explains that “[although] conscience is a basic or natural aspect of cognitive existence, it is epistemically fallible, especially in terms of the output of beliefs and judgments. Thus, not all appeals to the ‘feeling’ of conscience entail that the resultant moral judgments are necessarily apt and reliable.”\textsuperscript{38}

Second, Newman emphasizes the “subtle” nature of conscience, a feature that makes it incompatible with a scientific or rationalistic approach to ethics. Newman states that “[noble] buildings have been reared as fortresses against that spiritual, invisible influence which is too subtle for science and too profound for literature.”\textsuperscript{39} This comment highlights his view on the inadequacy of rule-following for ethical guidance. Hughes points out that Newman’s aversion to scientific or rationalistic approaches pitted him against contemporary attempts to ground ethics by such means. He describes that context as follows:

In a broad sense, most of the ethical theories he rejects probably did have some pretensions to scientific exactitude. Bentham, Mill, and the later utilitarians were reacting against various earlier accounts of moral perceptiveness. By offering what they termed a calculus, in contrast to what they regarded as the undefended and often indefensible claim made by earlier philosophers to possess a clarity of moral perceptiveness, they saw themselves as putting ethics firmly on a rational, almost a scientific, basis. … Newman wishes to argue that moral judgements are indeed not numerically \textit{calculable} nor are they \textit{logically} derivable. The ‘subtlety’ which he

\textsuperscript{36} Aquino, “An Educated Conscience,” 64–66.

\textsuperscript{37} Hughes, “Conscience,” 194.


wishes to defend depends upon a nicety of judgement which cannot be reduced to any scientific terms or process.  

Rationalism and science, as methods, aim for definite results. As such, they are ill suited for conducting inquiry in the domain of the delicate and “least luminous” input of one’s conscience, which Newman viewed as a conduit for the voice of God.  

Hughes remarks that, for Newman, attempting to ground ethics by making it more scientific is a project destined to fail: “Scientific ethics fails on two counts, then. First it pretends to a rigour which is insufficiently nuanced (if that is the point of his use of ‘subtle’) to be useful in practice. Secondly, it fails to see that the strength of moral demands derives not from scientific rationalism but from God to whom all human beings owe total obedience.”  

Newman claims that the operation of one’s conscience is not present in experience with the same force as, say, logic. Rather, it is subtle and easily dismissed. Newman writes of these demands:

But the sense of right and wrong, which is the first element in religion, is so delicate, so fitful, so easily puzzled, obscured, perverted, so subtle in its argumentative methods, so impressible by education, so biased by pride and passion, so unsteady in its course, that, in the struggle for existence amid the various exercises and triumphs of the human intellect, this sense is at once the highest of all teachers, yet the least luminous; and the Church, the Pope, the Hierarchy are, in the Divine purpose, the supply of an urgent demand.  

The experiences of conscience

Reaching the third goal will require more labor. Newman’s two-fold understanding of conscience requires a categorization of two distinct experiences. One is a judgment of

---

41 Conscience is “the internal witness of both the existence and the law of God.” Hughes, “Conscience,” 192.
43 Newman, “Letter,” 253–4. Quoted in part by Hughes, “Conscience,” 194. Newman here is referring to what he calls the “Moral Sense,” which is one of two aspects of conscience he distinguishes between. The difference between the Moral Sense and conscience, understood as a “sense of duty,” is explained in the following section.
obligation and the other is a judgment of value—both of which are first-order.\textsuperscript{44} Newman’s understanding of the experience of conscience is not especially clear in that he describes two “aspects” to the “feeling of conscience.” In a key passage from the Grammar of Assent, he refers to one aspect as the “Moral Sense,” and the other as “Conscience.” This is confusing, but if Newman is read as meaning that both are aspects of conscience, the passage allows for a coherent categorization of experience. Here is the passage, quoted in full:

The feeling of conscience (being, I repeat, a certain keen sensibility, pleasant or painful,—self-approval and hope, or compunction and fear,—attendant on certain of our actions, which in consequence we call right or wrong) is twofold:—it is a moral sense, and a sense of duty; a judgment of the reason and a magisterial dictate. Of course its act is indivisible; still it has these two aspects, distinct from each other, and admitting of a separate consideration.\textsuperscript{45} Though I lost my sense of the obligation which I lie under to abstain from acts of dishonesty, I should not in consequence lose my sense that such actions were an outrage offered to my moral nature. Again; though I lost my sense of their moral deformity, I should not therefore lose my sense that they were forbidden to me. Thus conscience has both a critical and a judicial office, and though its promptings, in the breasts of the millions of human beings to whom it is given, are not in all cases correct, that does not necessarily interfere with the force of its testimony and of its sanction: its testimony that there is a right and a wrong, and its sanction to that testimony conveyed in the feelings which attend on right or wrong conduct. Here I have to speak of conscience in the latter point of view, not as supplying us, by means of its various acts, with the elements of morals, such as may be developed by the intellect into an ethical code, but simply as the dictate of an authoritative monitor bearing upon the details of conduct as they come before us, and complete in its several acts, one by one.

Let us then thus consider conscience, not as a rule of right conduct, but as a sanction of right conduct. This is its primary and most authoritative aspect; it is the ordinary sense of the word. Half the world would be puzzled to know what was meant by the moral sense; but every one knows what is meant by a good or bad conscience.

\textsuperscript{44} Newman’s first type differs categorically from morally challenging experiences, but the second has some parallels, which I mention below.

\textsuperscript{45} There is a potential point of confusion in Newman’s description of the “act” (i.e., the function or operation) of conscience as “indivisible.” However, Wainwright explains in a footnote (see Wainwright, Religion, 30–31 n. 9) why Newman might use this term to describe the “act” of conscience in the midst of a passage dedicated to describing two distinct experiences of conscience. I accept Wainwright’s explanation and do not intend to explore the issue further. Here is the relevant footnote:

Why say, then, that acts of conscience are “indivisible”? Presumably, because the two aspects of conscience are normally united in one complex act of consciousness. A comparison may be helpful. I can attend to a conjunction of two propositions in a single act of awareness. It is nevertheless possible for me to attend to the first conjunct without attending to the second, or to the second without attending to the first. Similarly, I can attend to the forbiddenness of dishonesty without attending to its moral deformity, and I can attend to its moral deformity without attending to its forbiddenness.
Conscience is ever forcing on us by threats and by promises that we must follow the right and avoid the wrong; so far it is one and the same in the mind of every one, whatever be its particular errors in particular minds as to the acts which it orders to be done or to be avoided; and in this respect it corresponds to our perception of the beautiful and deformed. As we have naturally a sense of the beautiful and graceful in nature and art, though tastes proverbially differ, so we have a sense of duty and obligation, whether we all associate it with the same certain actions in particular or not. Here, however, Taste and Conscience part company: for the sense of beautifulness, as indeed the Moral Sense, has no special relations to persons, but contemplates objects in themselves; conscience, on the other hand, is concerned with persons primarily, and with actions mainly as viewed in their doers, or rather with self alone and one's own actions, and with others only indirectly and as if in association with self. And further, taste is its own evidence, appealing to nothing beyond its own sense of the beautiful or the ugly, and enjoying the specimens of the beautiful simply for their own sake; but conscience does not repose on itself, but vaguely reaches forward to something beyond self, and dimly discerns a sanction higher than self for its decisions, as is evidenced in that keen sense of obligation and responsibility which informs them. And hence it is that we are accustomed to speak of conscience as a voice, a term which we should never think of applying to the sense of the beautiful; and moreover a voice, or the echo of a voice, imperative and constraining, like no other dictate in the whole of our experience.

And again, in consequence of this prerogative of dictating and commanding, which is of its essence, conscience has an intimate bearing on our affections and emotions, leading us to reverence and awe, hope and fear, especially fear, a feeling which is foreign for the most part, not only to Taste, but even to the Moral Sense, except in consequence of accidental associations. No fear is felt by any one who recognizes that his conduct has not been beautiful, though he may be mortified at himself, if perhaps he has thereby forfeited some advantage; but, if he has been betrayed into any kind of immorality, he has a lively sense of responsibility and guilt, though the act be no offence against society,—of distress and apprehension, even though it may be of present service to him,—of compunction and regret, though in itself it be most pleasurable,—of confusion of face, though it may have no witnesses. These various perturbations of mind which are characteristic of a bad conscience, and may be very considerable,—self-reproach, poignant shame, haunting remorse, chill dismay at the prospect of the future,—and their contraries, when the conscience is good, as real though less forcible, self-approbation, inward peace, lightness of heart, and the like,—these emotions constitute a specific difference between conscience and our other intellectual senses,—common sense, good sense, sense of expedience, taste, sense of honour, and the like,—as indeed they would also constitute between conscience and the moral sense, supposing these two were not aspects of one and the same feeling, exercised upon one and the same subject-matter.

So much for the characteristic phenomena, which conscience presents, nor is it difficult to determine what they imply. I refer once more to our sense of the beautiful. This sense is attended by an intellectual enjoyment, and is free from whatever is of the nature of emotion, except in one case, viz. when it is excited by personal objects; then it is that the tranquil feeling of admiration is exchanged for the excitement of affection and passion. Conscience too, considered as a moral sense, an intellectual sentiment, is a sense of admiration and disgust, of approbation and blame: but it is something more
than a moral sense; it is always, what the sense of the beautiful is only in certain cases; it is always emotional.\textsuperscript{46}

The following tables parse key phrases from the passage. I found eleven noteworthy points where Newman compares the two, which I present below. (I use numbers to indicate points of comparison. Most entries are direct quotes; those that are not are indicated with parentheses.)

Table 2. Conscience as the “Moral Sense”

| 1. a judgment of the reason [Newman means ‘intuition’—or non-inferential judgment] |
| 2. (is not lost just because conscience [as a “sense of duty”] is lost) |
| 3. critical |
| 4. testimony that there is a right and a wrong |
| 5. [supplies one], by means of its various acts, with the elements of morals, such as may be developed by the intellect into an ethical code |
| 6. rule of right conduct |
| 7. half the world would be puzzled to know what was meant by the moral sense |
| 8. [just like] the sense of beautifulness, [the Moral Sense] has no special relations to persons, but contemplates objects in themselves |
| 9. [appeals] to nothing beyond its own sense |
| 10. (should not be referred to as a “voice”) |
| 11. [speaking of the feelings associated with conscience {as a “sense of duty”}] |

…especially fear, a feeling which is foreign for the most part, not only to Taste, but even to the Moral Sense, except in consequence of accidental associations.

Table 3. Conscience as a “sense of duty”

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Magisterial dictate [i.e., authoritative; definitive]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>(can be lost independent of one’s Moral Sense)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>judicial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>sanction to that testimony [that there is right and wrong]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>the dictate of an authoritative monitor bearing upon the details of conduct as they come before us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>sanction of right conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7a.</td>
<td>the “primary and most authoritative” aspect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7b.</td>
<td>The ordinary sense of the word; what most people refer to when they mention conscience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>is concerned with persons primarily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>dimly discerns a sanction higher than self for its decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>we are accustomed to [speaking] of conscience [as a “sense of duty”] as a voice… Furthermore, [conscience as a “sense of duty” is] a voice, or the echo of a voice, imperative and constraining, like no other dictate in the whole of our experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>And again, in consequence of this prerogative of dictating and commanding, which is of its essence, conscience has an intimate bearing on our affections and emotions, leading us to reverence and awe, hope and fear, especially fear…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From this passage, two distinct types of moral experience emerge, each anchored to one aspect of conscience. For the “Moral Sense,” Newman is describing first-order judgments of value. In this aspect, the mind operates on its objects impartially (that is, without favorable consideration for any persons involved) and without fear. Moreover, its
judgments are arrived at non-inferentially. Because the morally challenging experiences from the previous chapter also are judgments of value, it is worth mentioning a couple differences between them and Newman’s Moral Sense. One difference is that experiences of the Moral Sense are had in connection with a broader range of circumstances; morally challenging experiences, by contrast, occur only in circumstances in which particular conditions hold. The primary difference, though, is that moral challenges require that intentional action take place in harmony with one’s moral belief(s)—even if subconsciously so. Newman specifically mentions (in the quoted passage from the Grammar) that the sense of obligation can be lost without also losing the Moral Sense. If so, this separability implies that the Moral Sense operates even when one acts disharmoniously with one’s moral belief(s). Still, it is true that an experience of the Moral Sense can also meet the conditions I stipulate for a moral challenge.

By contrast, the experience of conscience as a “sense of duty” is a first-order judgment of obligation and is personal (or partial) in character. Something of the personal nature is captured with Newman’s references to these experiences as a “voice” that “constrains” and “[dictates].” Moreover, there are characteristic feelings associated with it: “self-reproach, poignant shame, haunting remorse, chill dismay at the prospect of the future…” and “self-approval, inward peace, lightness of heart, and the like…” These feelings, 47

Charlotte Hansen adds these comments concerning the Moral Sense:

To Newman, moral sense, or ‘spiritual discernment’ as he also referred to it in the wonderfully titled sermon The Usurpations of Reason, is the act of the mind which enables it to distinguish between good and evil and between right and wrong and also to understand certain principles that underlie the human reasoning in matters of morality or religion. Right and wrong are the words that Newman mostly used in connection with conscience, with right denoting behaviour that is required and obligatory. The moral sense immediately perceives what is right and wrong and so it follows that one action will be approved and another will be condemned. The perception of what is right and wrong is not purely a matter of personal preference or emotion as the moral sense, through different experiences, provides the first elements of a morality that will develop, via reason, into a moral code.

Hansen, “Conscience,” 214.
far removed from the impartiality of the Moral Sense, indicate personal involvement. On this latter point, Newman is descriptive:

If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear. If, on doing wrong, we feel the same tearful, broken-hearted sorrow which overwhelms us on hurting a mother; if, on doing right, we enjoy the same sunny serenity of mind, the same soothing, satisfactory delight which follows on our receiving praise from a father, we certainly have within us the image of some person, to whom our love and veneration look, in whose smile we find our happiness, for whom we yearn, towards whom we direct our pleadings, in whose anger we are troubled and waste away. These feelings in us are such as require for their exciting cause an intelligent being: we are not affectionate towards a stone, nor do we feel shame before a horse or a dog…

Newman on the “illative sense”

Further clarity on Newman’s view of conscience is achieved by comparing it to his view on the “illative sense,” a similar human capacity for judgment. In contrast to the conscience, which is appealed to for moral judgments, the illative sense renders judgments about theoretical matters in practical cases. Frederick Aquino explains that the illative sense “principally is a natural faculty of judgment, an informal and tacit ability for reasoning, developing intellectual skills, and making apt judgments.” It is informal in that it is an ability to arrive at inferred conclusions justifiably without self-conscious reliance on logical patterns. Hughes notes that “Newman’s point is … there are many times when a person is justified in their assessment of complex evidence without there being any possibility, or need, to demonstrate that justification in formal logical terms.” The illative sense is “a non-rule-governed process of reasoning, which accumulates probabilities and renders informed

---

48 Newman, Grammar, 101. Again, setting aside Newman’s contention that these observations contribute to belief in God. My only point is drawing attention to the personal nature of these emotions.


50 Hughes, “Conscience,” 198.
It is also, once suitably developed, a *reliable process*. Aquino remarks: “Though people may falter in their reasoning occasionally, the illative sense is fundamentally a reliable belief-forming process, analogous, for example, to that of memory and sense perception.” The illative sense “plays a dominant role in weighing evidence and so forming a response, thereby solidifying a reliable belief-forming process that ensures certitude about particulars.”

Newman’s reservation about applying formal logic to specific circumstances owes to his belief that doing so does not always provide a suitably granular solution. Newman, of course, does not deny the value of logic, he merely is cautious about its application. Because initial assumptions, i.e., first principles, exert such force on the subsequent deductive process, in selecting one an agent may be prevented—even though reasoning perfectly—from arriving at a desirable resolution. Thus, Newman identifies a “gap” between logic and practical reasoning, and envisions the illative sense as a cognitive process for bridging it. There exists no deductive process for identifying a “correct” first principle to apply to each specific circumstance. Thus, Newman tasks the illative sense with the role of identifying first principles.

---

51 Aquino, *Communities*, 48.
52 Aquino, *Communities*, 90.
53 Aquino, *Communities*, 57.
Regarding first principles, Aquino comments that “[they are] fundamental premises or assumptions that furnish an ‘intellectual and moral frame of reference.’”\textsuperscript{56} Hughes points out that moral principles are generalities drawn from particular experiences: “Moral principles are summaries of the individual decisions already made—‘universals come from particulars’ as Aristotle puts it.”\textsuperscript{57} For Newman, the role of first principles in deductive reasoning is similar to Aristotle’s use of first principles in his process of \textit{apodeixis}, in which a principle is identified from several experiences with particulars. Once such a principle has been identified, inferences are drawn from it deductively. Crucially, though, this type of reasoning is not how the illative sense operates, nor how one arrives at moral judgments via conscience. Hughes explains:

An Aristotelian \textit{apodeixis}, ‘demonstration’, starts from accepted premisses which are true of necessity and proceeds by strictly defined logical steps to reach conclusions which are equally necessary. Suppose it is known that water is H\textsubscript{2}O; the idea would be that, with that basic starting-point (no doubt along with other similar ones), one would be able to show that the other properties of water—its ability to dissolve many other substances, its boiling point, and so on—followed logically. ... It is this model that Aristotle says does not fit ethics, for two reasons: particular moral conclusions do not follow from moral principles by necessity; and the principles themselves are not true of necessity.\textsuperscript{58}

This is not to say that moral principles are not brought to bear on specific situations. However, when they are, they do not remain the same. That is, while moral principles are informed by prior experience, they are also changed as they are brought to bear on present circumstances. Simply put, any principle that is used for a judgment will by the very fact of

\textsuperscript{56} Aquino, \textit{Communities}, 82.

\textsuperscript{57} This comment assumes a specific understanding of a key passage from Aristotle’s \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, Book Six, which I will not pursue. Hughes footnotes his remark as follows: “\textit{NE}, VI, 11 (1143a22–b5). This passage is central to an understanding of Aristotle’s account of \textit{phronēsis}. The interpretation of it is, however, still controversial. A convenient summary of the discussion is to be found in D. Bostock, \textit{Aristotle’s Ethics} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [sic]), 88–98.” Hughes, “Conscience,” 200.

\textsuperscript{58} Hughes, “Conscience,” 198–199.
its application be endowed with additional meaning—even if only trivially.\textsuperscript{59} Hughes comments,

It is Aristotle’s contention, though, that these moral terms—‘killing’, ‘unjust’, ‘generous’ ‘courageous’ and so on—get their meanings from our past experience and from the individual judgements we have already made in interpreting that experience morally. So when we are faced with a particular situation now, our experience, which is a necessary aid to our judgement, certainly does not make that judgement automatic. We will come to a decision with all these patterns of thought at our disposal: we have concepts like ‘killing’, ‘unjust’, ‘foolhardy’, ‘adultery’. ... But Newman’s key claim is this: in making such judgements, we do not make a decision which is in any way in conflict with our principles, for the principles themselves are now interpreted in the light of this decision as well as our earlier ones. ‘Killing’ (or any of our other concepts) may come to have a slightly different application for us than it previously did; and so the moral principles may come to have a different sense precisely because of what we have seen to be required in individual cases...\textsuperscript{60}

In sum, a moral principle is not a necessary truth that one deductively infers moral judgments from; rather, it is a generality distilled from a range of experience that is useful for moral judgment as a morally relevant reason. As moral principles are referenced by one’s conscience in the formation of moral judgments, they do not remain unchanged; indeed, they are refined through each application to a specific circumstance.

Both the Moral Sense and the illative sense are comparable to Aristotle’s \textit{phronēsis}.\textsuperscript{61} As I have noted, the Moral Sense is a capacity for perceiving moral properties such as right and wrong, and the illative sense is (among other things) a capacity for (tacit and informal) reasoning. Both the Moral Sense and the illative sense arrive at conclusions informed by reference to past experience. Thus, the opinions of the wise and experienced are to be considered especially valuable. Hughes notes: “That is why Aristotle says that the

\textsuperscript{59} I make a similar point in Chapter Three, under the section ‘Context and moral belief,’ where I state “... a two-way relationship exists between moral beliefs and moral experiences: each contextualizes the other. Strong moral beliefs (i.e., those considered moral convictions) are more adequate to serve as moral reasons for enduring unpleasantness on their behalf. Conversely, strongly unpleasant experiences are more likely to prompt rigorous scrutiny of a moral belief.”

\textsuperscript{60} Hughes, “Conscience,” 200–201.

\textsuperscript{61} “Newman’s view of conscience ‘truly so called’ is very close to Aristotle’s notion of \textit{phronēsis}, practical wisdom.” Hughes, “Conscience,” 194.
undemonstrated opinions of the experienced are to be respected. Reliable moral judgement, in Newman’s view and in Aristotle’s, like any other judgement about the complex realities of life, requires the growth of lifelong experience more than logic, and a reliable grasp of the fundamental values in human life, ‘the principles of things’.”62

The development of the Moral Sense and the illative sense through exemplars

The Moral Sense and the illative sense are comparable in a second way in that each requires development through consistent training. Aquino mentions the requirement in reference to the Moral Sense in the following remark: “Conscience [as the Moral Sense] certainly includes a perceptual feature, especially given Newman’s emphasis on its basic or pre-trained aspect, but background beliefs, training, experience, and practice play a crucial role in how we learn to perceive and make sense of things divine.”63 Furthermore, he mentions the illative sense’s requirement for development as follows: “... [rules] play an important role in addressing moral issues, but applying them in concrete situations requires skillful judgment. The exercise of the illative sense, which is analogous to the formation of good judgment in the area of morality, also depends on the level of sagacity, skill, or prudence cultivated by a person.”64

Newman describes special individuals possessing either a developed illative sense, or a developed Moral Sense (or both), whose ability to form apt judgments make them exemplars. Those who heed their insights and follow their example have the opportunity to acquire similarly developed capacities. Exemplars are Newman’s preferred mechanism for the development required by both the Moral Sense and the illative sense. Aquino (quoting

62 Hughes, “Conscience,” 199.


64 Aquino, Communities, 70, citing Newman, Grammar, 280. (Edition published by the University of Notre Dame Press.)
Newman) explains the connection with respect to the illative sense as follows: “…the illative sense needs to be honed within a community of informed judgment. Though it is an informal process of reasoning, skillful judgment about concrete matters requires perfection of ‘right judgment in ratiocination’.”\textsuperscript{65} The type of development referenced here is to be acquired through relevant experience and guidance from someone with an already refined illative sense.\textsuperscript{66}

The same could be said for the Moral Sense, which, as a natural mental capacity, is also grounded in experience and belief. The Moral Sense must be developed through education, training, and careful attention to those individuals who already have done so. Otherwise, one’s ability to perceive the moral law will be diminished. Newman states that “…training and experience are necessary for [the] strength, growth, and due formation [of one’s conscience].”\textsuperscript{67} Aquino adds to this point, noting that, Newman certainly doubts that the perceptual aspect of conscience alone will necessarily yield fruitful insights if it is not expanded, deepened, and completed ‘by means of education, social intercourse, experience, and literature’ (\textit{Grammar} 80). In effect, the claim here seems to be that we trust those who have been aptly formed to render reliable judgments about the particular issue at hand. Deferring to people of informed judgment seems to be key for educating conscience. Educating conscience, therefore, is a communal affair, not merely the outcome of an isolated faculty of the mind.\textsuperscript{68}


\textsuperscript{66} The development I have in mind here does not address issues presented by the problem of common measure—that being, how one community might adjudicate truth claims from another community with different evaluative standards. See Aquino, \textit{Communities}, 6–7.

\textsuperscript{67} Newman, “Letter,” 247–248. Quoted by Hughes, “Conscience,” 193. More from Newman in this vein: “But the sense of right and wrong, which is the first element in religion, is so delicate, so fitful, so easily puzzled, obscured, perverted, so subtle in its argumentative methods, so impressible by education, so biased by pride and passion, so unsteady in its course, that, in the struggle for existence amid the various exercises and triumphs of the human intellect this sense is at once the highest of all teachers and the least luminous.” Newman, “Letter,” 253–254, from Hughes, “Conscience,” 194.

\textsuperscript{68} Aquino, “An Educated Conscience,” 69.
These comments outline Newman’s program for constraining the Moral Sense through a type of communal education, with exemplars occupying the central role. While training the Moral Sense differs from Pianalto’s recommendations for constraining moral convictions, the developmental parallels are clear enough. For both undertakings, improving one’s judgment requires engaging in a set of activities which cultivate the underlying basis from which judgments are formed.

Newman, of course, is an Aristotelian, and this is evident through his emphasis on the effort needed for developing one’s capacities. Aristotle’s view was somewhat different, in that he placed more importance on an early starting point for the development of virtue, arguing that: “Hence, we must make our activities be of a certain quality, for the characteristics correspond to the differences among the activities. It makes no small difference, then, whether one is habituated in this or that way straight from childhood but a very great difference—or rather the whole difference.” Because the starting point for moral development makes all the difference, Aristotle (at least in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) appears to hold out little hope for the prospects of developing an alternative starting point later in life. While Newman does not share Aristotle’s unforgiving view about early starting points, he

---


does, however, leave little doubt about the effort required to develop both the Moral Sense and the illative sense.

As noted, exemplars facilitate the development of better judgment “by means of education, social intercourse, experience, and literature.” They provide a personal example and give instruction so that one may perceive and interpret events as they do. Without the trustworthy guidance of those who already possess a developed Moral Sense, then the prospect for similarly developing this capacity is dimmer. The same point applies to the development of one’s illative sense. Exemplars serve as a personal example to those who wish to develop the habits and qualities conducive to developing good theoretical judgment. Those interested in doing so look to the exemplars for guidance, follow their example, and learn to interpret experiences as they do. Whether developing good theoretical judgment through use of the illative sense, or moral judgment via conscience, each requires input from exemplars.  

Exemplarism and “indeterminate remaining value”

Critiques of exemplarism include a number of epistemic issues. Two prominent critiques would be how exemplars are to be identified before apprenticeship, and what to do about disagreement among exemplars. When selecting exemplars, a difficulty exists in

---

71 In addressing the problem of common measure (see footnote 66 in this chapter), Aquino endeavors to complete Newman’s conceptual development of the illative sense. See especially Chapter Four, “A Social Epistemology of Informed Judgment,” of Aquino, Communities, 95–146. The remaining conceptual development is situated within the context of a moral community. Aquino describes himself as continuing Newman’s project after pointing out what he believes to be the latter’s failure to “trace out the social implications of the illative sense.” Aquino, Communities, 92.


73 Plainly stated, this is when exemplars reach different judgments about the same issue. On the issue of disagreement among phronimoi (which are not necessarily exemplars) in Aristotle, see Brennan McDavid, “Aristotle’s Ethical Epistemology and the Uniqueness Thesis.” Unpublished manuscript delivered at Princeton’s Classical Philosophy Conference. Dec. 2016. Available online at: https://philosophy.princeton.edu/content/classical-philosophy-conference. Another worry is how exemplary qualities are to be developed without the aid of exemplars. That is, if exemplars are considered more than a mere
determining which ones are in fact exercising responsive judgment. Apprentices interested in constraining their moral beliefs begin the process with a need to identify those who merit imitation. The selection process is complicated by the existence of different judgments among exemplars. If we assume that all exemplars are judging earnestly, then disagreement complicates the selection process by undermining the ability to pick from among them.

Scott Rubarth describes the identification dilemma well in a discussion of epistemic exemplars:

The first problem is that of identifying a moral exemplar. It is presumably possible to misperceive or misidentify the exemplar. One might respond that the phronimos for Aristotle is a hypothetical moral ideal, much as the ideal sage is in Stoic epistemology. This, however, only complicates the problem since now we must imagine, invent, or construct the exemplar. What prevents me from importing moral failings into the construction? What we need then is some criteria for identifying or imagining the exemplar. What makes the moral exemplar worthy of emulation and readily identifiable? Presumably the moral exemplar is an exemplar because he or she behaves in a certain way or possesses certain virtues. And why is this way of behavior better than another? Here we are going to have to evaluate the behavior based on certain principles or criteria, for it is the behavior that distinguishes this person from another to the external observer. However, if we have such rules or criteria, what need is there for an exemplar?

Linda Zagzebski argues that the process of picking out exemplars can be grounded to our emotional reactions to them, which she describes as “reflective admiration.” She lists three hypotheses for guiding this process:

1. We admire psychological sources of admired behavior, not external causes that bypass the person’s agency. To the extent that we find out that the admired behavior has external causes, we admire the person less. That does not rule out acts that are influenced by other persons as long as the external influences are integrated into the person’s motivational structure. (2) Within the category of psychological features, we admire acquired features in a different way than we admire natural temperament. We are interested in the former for the purposes of a moral theory. So we are attempting to identify acquired psychological features of the person that are the sources of acts we admire. (3) Within the category of acquired psychological features that are the sources of acts we admire, we admire motives of concern for others more than motives of self-interest.


Exemplars provide a rarefied perspective, one that has been honed through substantial experience and reflection. If it is easy to identify exemplars, then it must be because the criteria for exemplarity are readily identified. If this is true, however, then the value of exemplars as examples for one is less clear. On the other hand, if it is difficult to pick out exemplars, then whether anyone will be able to identify and follow them becomes a greater concern.76

With regard to constraining moral beliefs, principles, and convictions, exemplarism faces the following problem: there is no obvious way to gauge the value of what one has acquired through apprenticeship relative to what one has not. Not all views pertaining to the acquisition of a developed, constrained perspective face this problem. Kant, as noted above, hypothesized that a “universal standpoint” is available for any human being who “… detaches himself from the subjective personal conditions of his judgement, which cramp the minds of so many others…”77 On this understanding, a universal standpoint is the ultimate goal: it cannot be improved upon. Once identified, there is no remaining worry about whether a better, more developed perspective is available.

However, if experience is a necessary precondition for constraining and thus making one’s judgment more responsive, as I assume it is, then it is less obvious what a maximally developed perspective would be. Regardless, there is a practical limit to how much constraining activity can be undertaken. Human beings are limited by time, movement, etc., and do not have an unlimited capacity to engage new perspectives and experiences. Because of this, apprentices have a practical need to be able to identify how much they have learned.

76 Arendt’s account also contains an element of exemplarity too, which Eric Helleloid discusses. See, e.g.: “One of the most important activities of the moral life—and it is essentially tied up with the activity of judgment—is selecting moral examples, which will help determine how one thinks about morality and also how one acts.” Helleloid, “Arendt’s Phenomenology of the Will,” 39. See also pages 129 and 360.

77 See the section ‘The “enlarged mentality,”’ above.
from an exemplar relative to what might yet be learned. The central problem is that without a set of criteria for measuring progress, the potential exists for misidentifying the extent of what has been acquired. The difficulty parallels the dilemma identified by Rubarth: if a set of criteria is easily identified, then it is less clear why exemplars are helpful; if a set of criteria is not easily identified, it is not clear how one will know when exemplary capacities have been acquired. In other words, if it is assumed beforehand that an exemplar has been successfully identified, the problem, then, is knowing how to determine what gaps remain in one’s range of relevant experience and wisdom. One will need to avoid conflating the valuable training one has acquired from an exemplar with everything that remains to be acquired.

The false impression that an apprenticeship to an exemplar has endowed one with all relevant experience and wisdom will undermine additional acquisition. This is especially the case with the unpleasant and difficult experiences of the Moral Sense, where added incentive to engage them is needed. Above, I quoted a reference to a passage from the Grammar in which Newman stresses how the perceptual aspect of conscience must be “expanded, deepened, and completed” by means of apprenticeship to exemplars. The use of a term like ‘complete,’ which connotes the acquisition of all relevant valuable experience and wisdom, raises the question of what criteria would constitute this state. Without a specification of ‘completion,’ the agent is left without needed direction for his inclusive disposition and with an increased risk for limiting further engagement with a wider range of moral experiences. The failure to specify criteria for ‘completion’ diminishes one’s ability to pursue further training with exemplars, making it especially difficult to endure those experiences that require additional motivation.

I take it for granted that some type of apprenticeship to an exemplar is valuable for constraining moral beliefs, in that it would involve extensive discourse and reflection, as well as a good model for conducting oneself humbly. However, the issue of indeterminate
remaining value poses a problem when what has been received from an exemplar—valuable though it may be—is mistakenly understood to represent exposure to the full range of relevant moral experience. One part of a feasible response to this problem will be adopting a Niebuhr’s approach to radical, directed inclusivity—if one has not done so already. One would need to adopt a radically inclusive openness to all perspectives and moral experience, regardless of how unpleasant, ensuring that nothing relevant would be overlooked.

Niebuhr identified a personal and transcendent One to whom all responses ultimately are directed. This identification provides a directive which, if faithfully adhered to, minimizes redundancy during the acquisition of new experiences and perspectives. I stated that the essential element of Niebuhr’s approach is the connection it draws between inclusivity and transcendence, even while maintaining a radical openness to all possible morally relevant experiences. Niebuhr assumed that new experiences were always available in that every moment modified previous moments, and that these experiences were relevant for interpreting one’s circumstances from a wider perspective. Sustained attention to something like Niebuhr’s ‘what is going on?’ question would prevent complacency by directing one toward an ever-increasing understanding of reality or, to use Niebuhr’s preferred term, being.

The connection between inclusivity and transcendence (or, at least, moral opposition, as I suggested) will also help by circumventing the problem of indeterminate remaining value. A dispositional openness to moral experience that is specifically directed will diminish the need to answer antecedent questions about what amount of valuable training remains to be acquired. That is, rather than searching for answers, one would have direction for a type of definite action to take that would increase the likelihood of encountering perspectives significantly different than one’s own. Intentional action in accordance with one’s moral beliefs, principles, or convictions would be an attractive alternative to attempts to resolve indeterminate remaining value possessed by exemplars.
Summary

In this chapter, I examined moral experiences connected to the operation of conscience. I considered two quite different understandings of conscience: Larry May’s revision of Arendt, representing the “personal integrity” view, and John Henry Newman’s two-aspect view. For both, I pointed out how problems arise absent a clear directive for seeking out novel experiences and perspectives. For May’s view, I proposed that an emphasis on engaging with a diverse range of perspectives must be coupled together with a directed, radical inclusivity. Without such a coupling, the value of further engagement with other perspectives eventually diminishes on account of redundancy. As for Newman’s view, I noted that his reliance on exemplars leaves apprentices with questions about how to determine what amount of valuable training remains to be acquired. In response to this issue, I also proposed that Niebuhr’s radical, directed inclusivity would be a feasible option.

In the previous chapter, I argued that morally challenging experiences are valuable for constraining one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions, even if they sometimes do so only trivially. Experiences of conscience are similarly valuable as constraints—regardless of whether the experiences are unpleasant. Though distinct from moral challenges, they bear on the underlying moral belief(s) in much the same way. Earlier in this chapter, I quoted Hughes’s description for how this happens, and I repeat the relevant comment here: “…in making such judgements, we do not make a decision which is in any way in conflict with our principles, for the principles themselves are now interpreted in the light of this decision as well as our earlier ones.” As with moral challenges, prior relevant experiences of conscience bear on one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions, thereby providing additional morally relevant reasons for one’s judgments.

Moral challenges are helpful for illustrating the relationship between moral experience and moral judgment. They are difficult to disengage with, in that the
consequences for doing so are more apparent for one. While dismissing or ignoring one’s conscience might have less visible consequences in one’s immediate circumstances, doing so likely will have greater consequences in the long term. Regardless of consequences, one should respond to the experiences of conscience—even the deeply unpleasant ones—similar to how one responds to moral challenges, i.e., by persisting through them. As with moral challenges, the experiences of conscience are no less valuable for being unpleasant. Indeed, the two potential difficulties mentioned in this chapter in connection with engaging new experiences and perspectives result in no small part from the natural inclination to avoid unpleasantness.
CHAPTER FIVE
SITUATIONISM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Introduction

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I endorsed the position that moral principles typically are involved in the formation of moral judgments, and that moral judgments typically are formed on the basis of moral reasons. From that point, I have made the case that constraining moral beliefs, principles, and convictions makes moral judgments more responsive. I identified value in subjecting one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions to constraining activities such as discourse and reflection, provided that each is conducted with a humble disposition. These activities are valuable in that the moral experiences one has while undertaking them bear on one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions. In Chapter Two, I conducted a sympathetic review of H. Richard Niebuhr’s concept of a radical, directed inclusivity as an ideal disposition for maximizing moral responsiveness to experiences of limitation.

In Chapter Three, I introduced moral challenges, a moral experience where one perceives intentional action in opposition to one’s own intentional action on behalf of a moral belief, principle, or conviction. Moral challenges are an experience that occurs when one perceives moral opposition—a subset of the limiting experiences discussed in Chapter Two, consisting of an intentional action in opposition to one’s own intentional action. Despite the unpleasantness of moral challenges, I claimed that exposure to them constrains one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions, and thereby promotes more responsive moral judgment.
In Chapter Four, I applied this claim to a more familiar type of moral experience: the demands of one’s conscience. There is considerable variation in how the nature of conscience is understood, but I claimed that if the experience of conscience involves a judgment of obligation (as with what may be called the “personal integrity” view, or John Henry Newman’s view) or a judgment of value (as with Newman’s view), its operation constrains one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions.

In the present chapter I turn my attention to a potential threat. Throughout this dissertation, I have made claims that assume the possibility of morally responsible judgment and action. For example, I expressed approval of the central claims of morphological rationalism (MR). While there are numerous ways to define ‘moral responsibility,’ I hold that it requires sensitivity to morally right reasons.¹ Of course, affirming the prevalence of morally responsible judgments does not require assuming that everyone’s moral judgments are morally responsible in each and every situation. Everyone is at least occasionally subject to actions and events that preclude moral responsibility, and the threat I will be addressing does not involve a claim of comprehensively undermined moral responsibility.

Even so, if it is the case that moral responsibility is significantly degraded for many people across a wide range of circumstances, then troubling questions arise for accounts like mine. Most critically, it is not clear why one should undergo unpleasant experiences such as moral challenges if one’s beliefs—moral and otherwise—are often precluded from causal involvement in the process of moral judgment. Again, I hold that the process of arriving at a moral judgment typically does involve moral beliefs and principles. If the process of

¹ This definition draws from John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza’s moderate reasons-responsiveness (MRR). Christian Miller, “Situationism, Social Psychology, and Free Will,” in The Routledge Companion to Free Will, eds. Kevin Timpe, Meghan Griffith, and Neil Levy (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 412–413. I will have more to say about what is included in being ‘sensitive’ (or, being able to recognize and respond) to morally right reasons in the upcoming section, ‘Moderate reasons-responsiveness.’ Another threat discussed by Miller is through “unconscious processing,” though I do not cover that in this chapter beyond mentioning it at the beginning of the ‘Moral responsibility and reasons-responsiveness’ section.
including moral beliefs can be and often is disrupted by situational factors, then the rationale for constraining one’s moral beliefs is diminished.

I respond to this threat beginning with an endorsement of Michael McKenna and Brandon Warmke’s “pessimistic realism,” an outlook developed on the basis of John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza’s moderate reasons-responsiveness—MRR. Next, I consider an important distinction by David Brink between performance errors and competence errors, intended to defend the viability of reasons-responsiveness in the face of the situationist literature. I note that, contrary to Brink, not every competence error is exculpatory—some of them are due to prior performance errors.

**Situationism**

Situationism is a relatively new topic in moral philosophy. It arose out of a series of studies in psychology in the 1960s and 1970s which called into question the possession of “broad or global traits that are cross-situationally consistent and situation or context free.”

One such study, commonly referred to as “Dime in a Phone Booth,” observes that of the twenty-five subjects who did not find a strategically placed dime, only one stopped to help another person in the controlled environment (of the sixteen who did, fourteen offered help).

---

2 Miller, “Situationism,” 407–408. Here is a brief list of some of the studies featured prominently in philosophical considerations of situationism, listed with their common references.

Situationists point to this study as one example of the predictive power of a seemingly irrelevant circumstantial factor. It found that whether or not one might stop to help others is correlated strongly to the placement of the extra dime. John Doris summarizes the finding as a “mere dime strongly [influencing] compassion relevant behavior.”

The key takeaway from this experiment and others like it is that “Typically, the situational change introduced in situationist experiments is seemingly both morally and motivationally innocuous but, yet, produces morally inappropriate, dubious, or even appalling behavior from its subjects.”

Candace Upton provides an overview of the development in the debates surrounding situationism, breaking it down into three phases. She describes the second phase as “[focused] on the situationist critiques of virtue ethics.”

This phase took its cue from the work of Gilbert Harman and John Doris, and is of interest presently because it is the context from which questions about the connection between situationism and moral responsibility began to take shape.

Taking stock of the empirical studies commonly cited by situationists and the debates surrounding them raises questions about what situationism is, precisely, and how it threatens moral responsibility. These two questions will occupy my attention for the remainder of this section. First, consider that there are different ways to construe the causal interaction between

---


6 This is the period during which situationism began to earn considerable attention from philosophers. Miller states that “[t]he early work by Gilbert Harman and John Doris on character and situationism has fostered a vast literature over the past 15 years [i.e., before 2017].” Christian Miller, “Character and Situationism: New Directions,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20, no. 3 (2017): 459, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-017-9791-4.
situational factors and behavior. Just about any definition of situationism will mention a causal relationship between some seemingly irrelevant situational factor and behavior. So, for example, John Doris says that “behavior is—contra the old saw about destiny—extraordinarily sensitive to variation in circumstances.” Another summary holds that “[s]ituationism is, roughly, the thesis that normatively irrelevant environmental factors have a great impact on our behaviour without our being aware of this influence.” There are many other definitions. Christian Miller, though, proposes three versions that I believe are especially helpful for identifying the threat to moral responsibility precisely. First, there is:

- **Extreme Forces**: Behavior is entirely a product of situational forces. Personality does not make any causal contribution.

This version serves mainly to set a boundary for the range of causal possibilities. It is to be distinguished from *determinism*—a metaphysical theory holding that every event is caused by a prior event—but it is not plausible, and I will not consider it further.

Weakening the influence of situational factors results in:

- **Strong Forces**: Behavior primarily is a product of situational forces. Personality only has a modest contribution to make.

---

7 Doris, *Character*, 2.


9 Other examples include the following: situationism is “a framework in personality and social psychology in which human behavior is explained solely or primarily in terms of the contribution of the situation or environment.” Mark Alfano, *Moral Psychology: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 189. From Candace Upton: “Situationism is the empirical thesis, supported by the research of several hundred social psychologists, that variance in human behavior is typically a function of the situation a person inhabits, or takes herself to inhabit, rather than any traits of character she putatively possesses. Articulated in epistemic terms, situationism claims that the situation a human being inhabits, or takes herself to inhabit, better predicts and explains her behavior than her putative traits of character.” Upton, “Virtue Ethics,” 104.

10 Miller, “Character and Situationism,” 408.
This version is more plausible but also widely rejected. The problem is with the claim that situational factors produce behavior, even if not always. It is widely accepted that such factors do not produce behavior; if anything, they exercise causal influence upon it.

A more plausible version of situationism is still wanting. Thus:

- *Surprising Dispositions*: The behavior of most individuals tends to be influenced by various situational forces which activate certain of our mental dispositions—certain beliefs, desires, emotions, and the like. Furthermore, the functioning of these dispositions in our minds and especially their degree of impact on behavior are often unappreciated by both ordinary people and even trained philosophers and psychologists.

Two key moves here are the introduction of the causal relevance of dispositions and the modulation of situational causal input from “produce” to “influence.” The latter renders the effects of situational factors more plausible, and the former locates the point of causal impact. Dispositions are personal states that are sensitive to specific stimuli. Once triggered, dispositions produce mental states that result in behavior. Roughly, if I possess a disposition to be kind, for example, then when presented with an opportunity to do so, my disposition is triggered and I behave accordingly.\(^\text{11}\) Miller provides further description:

Dispositions are sensitive to certain stimulus events or stimulus conditions specific to the given disposition. In virtue of being fragile, for instance, a vase might be sensitive to being hit by a baseball, but not to the color of the baseball. Similarly, a properly functioning thermostat is sensitive to the temperature in the room, but not to its smell. It seems that certain events and facts about a situation or environment are relevant to a disposition in a way that others are not. Stimulus events can trigger characteristic manifestations of dispositions. A baseball can break a fragile vase, and the temperature of the room can lead to a certain

\(^{11}\) Miller is careful to note that the mental states involved in this causal sequence need not be occurrent: “Note that I do not intend ... to suggest that any step of the process ... from relevant stimuli to compassionate behavior must be intellectually reflective or even conscious. A spontaneous act of helping can be done as a result of subconscious beliefs and desires being activated and in turn causing bodily movement.” Christian Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 27 n. 64. Horgan and Timmons specify, as part of their description of (MR), that such mental states are not even tokenized. On this, see Christian Miller, “Rationalism and Intuitionism—Assessing Three Views about the Psychology of Moral Judgments,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Moral Epistemology*, eds. Aaron Zimmerman, Karen Jones, and Mark Timmons (New York: Routledge, 2019), 338–339. Miller quotes Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, “Morphological Rationalism and the Psychology of Moral judgment,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10, no. 3 (2007): 280, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-007-9068-4.
Moral responsibility and reasons-responsiveness

Moral responsibility

With a definition of situationism in place, I can now trace the connection between it and a concept of moral responsibility. Miller lists two broad possibilities for doing so: through unconscious processing or reasons-responsiveness. The former has to do with concerns about a lack of conscious awareness when making moral judgments and deciding on a course of action in a given situation. Theories about unconscious processing and its connection to moral responsibility trade on the intuition that moral responsibility requires agency, which, on this understanding, requires conscious awareness of one’s moral reasoning.¹³

The latter concern was noted above as my preferred definition of moral responsibility. It pertains to whether sensitivity exists to morally right reasons for action, and I will focus on this connection.¹⁴ On this definition, moral responsibility requires more than responding to just any reason in a given circumstance. Thus, for example, the participants in Stanley Milgram’s “Obedience to Authority” study formed intentions on the basis of reasons, but

---

¹² Miller, Character, 20.

¹³ Miller suggests the following as one way to argue this point:

1) Free and/or morally responsible actions require expressions of agency.
2) Agential behavior is caused by thoughts which, minimally, are conscious and informed.
3) Situationism supports the claim that much of our morally relevant behavior is caused by (or at least significantly causally influenced by) thoughts that are unconscious. Therefore, 4) We are justified in believing that much of our morally relevant behavior is not free and/or morally responsible. Or at least we are not justified in believing that it is.

Miller, “Character and Situationism,” 415.

¹⁴ Miller, “Character and Situationism,” 412.
these reasons lacked moral salience. While an inclination to obey legitimate authority may be admirable in many circumstances, most people have the intuition that such authority does not bestow license to command immoral actions. Yet, disturbingly, this is what Milgram’s experiment appears to reveal: test subjects exhibited a willingness to inflict agonizing electrical shocks (or so they believed) on experiment collaborators. Test subjects were indeed given reasons in the form of instructions from experimenters. These reasons seemed to overpower other, cognitively available and morally salient reasons to disobey the order and not inflict electrical shocks on others.

The problem is that if moral responsibility requires a degree of sensitivity, or reasons-responsiveness, such that people typically respond to morally right reasons in a given situation then, on the assumption that Surprising Dispositions is true, people are not often morally responsible. Miller makes the argument explicit as follows:

1) The behavior of most individuals tends to be influenced by various situational forces which activate certain Surprising Dispositions that are typically not sensitive to morally right reasons, but rather to morally neutral or morally problematic reasons.

2) Morally responsible behavior requires sensitivity to morally right reasons.

Therefore, 3) behavior which is significantly influenced by Surprising Dispositions, is not to that extent morally responsible behavior on the part of the agent in question.  

Reasons-responsiveness

The test subjects in Milgram’s “Obedience to authority” study did not exhibit responsiveness to morally right reasons. However, while we may be tempted to dismiss a shocking study like this as anomalous, Miller’s Surprising Dispositions holds that the behavior of most people is the result of dispositions that are typically not sensitive to morally

15 Miller, “Character and Situationism,” 412–413.
right reasons. Evaluating Surprising Dispositions requires specifying the features of reasons-responsiveness. Accordingly, this section presents Brandon McKenna and Michael Warmke’s four general features of reasons-responsiveness.

First, there is a modal dimension. Reasons will prompt varying reactions depending on circumstances. While in the actual world I react in one manner, in slightly different circumstances in other possible worlds I might react differently—or not react at all. The idea is that responsiveness to reasons is understood in terms of what an agent might do. McKenna and Warmke write: “What matters is that the resources from which [an agent] acts support dispositions allowing for the prospect of responding to reasons. In this way a free agent will be able to respond to reasons even if when she acts she does not actually do so.”

Second, responsiveness to reason is a matter of degrees. Being able to respond to reasons does not imply an ability to respond to every reason. “A person rendered unfree and not responsible for an act of compulsive handwashing might still be responsive to some range of reasons while being unresponsive to many good reasons for not handwashing. If, for instance, she were told not to wash her hands while being threatened at gun point, she might respond to this reason by refraining from washing.” The same applies to an agent who is free: an occasional failure to respond to a good reason does not indicate a lack of freedom and responsibility. McKenna and Warmke explain that “What is required, then, on a reasons-responsive account of freedom is the specification of a spectrum of responsiveness to a sufficiently rich range of reasons. Doing so establishes that the agent is a sane, morally competent person.”


Third, reasons-responsive theories have both a *cognitive* and *volitional* element. Fischer and Ravizza uses the terms ‘receptivity’ and ‘reactivity’ to moral reasons. If an agent does not recognize salient reasons, then he cannot respond to them. Moral reasons can be available for one, but if they are not ascertained (in some way) they cannot be of use. This process can be disrupted, of course. For example, if I choose not to inform a neighbor that a venomous snake is on his back porch, then he might not otherwise have a reason to keep his children and pets from venturing out on to it. Disruption can occur less nefariously as well: I might *forget* to tell my neighbor that I saw a snake, thereby also depriving him of receiving a good reason to act protectively. The cognitive element, though, generally refers to an agent’s ability to form a mental association between some situational feature and a moral reason.

Additionally, an agent is responsible only if he possesses the capacity to react appropriately to reasons. McKenna and Warmke note that:

One reason to say that a theory like [moderate reasons-responsiveness] has both a receptivity and a reactivity component is that distinguishing them helps to explain a range of excuses and exemptions. When an agent is, for instance, tied up or instead paralyzed, she’ll not be able to translate some good reasons she would accept into action. In the case of compulsive handwashing, for instance, an agent might recognize that she has good reason not to wash her hands, but she might not be able to be reactive to such reasons. Her “reactivity” component is impaired, which explains our inclination to excuse such behavior. In other cases, an agent instead might be impeded from recognizing what good reasons there are, as perhaps happens when operating in poorly lit conditions or suffering from a delusional disorder. Here, too, we would be inclined to excuse, but in this case, it would be because we would judge the agent to have lacked the ability to recognize or receive the relevant good reasons.

The final element is a neutral stance between compatibilist and incompatibilist views on free will and moral responsibility. McKenna and Warmke conceive of free will in terms of

---

19 These elements constitute the ‘sensitivity’ referred to by Miller’s summary of the argument that moral responsibility requires a degree of reasons-responsiveness. See premises 1 and 2. I revisit this claim in the “Pessimistic realism” section below.

“...the control condition(s) necessary for moral responsibility.” However, as McKenna notes, control condition accounts of free will do not require affirming compatibilism:

“Despite what many assume, Frankfurt’s conclusion is not the exclusive domain of compatibilists. Source incompatibilists have accepted the conclusion to Frankfurt’s argument and set out to develop an actual-sequence account of free action, one that requires the falsity of determinism.” Accordingly, in what follows, I endeavor to remain neutral between compatibilism and incompatibilism.

**Moderate reasons-responsiveness**

One prominent account of responsiveness to reason belongs to John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza. Labeled as *moderate reasons-responsiveness* (hereafter MRR), this

---


23 It is true that MRR is typically deployed in the service of defending compatibilism, which can be understood as the thesis that free will and moral responsibility are compatible with the truth of determinism. But there is no reason why a view like MRR can’t be deployed by incompatibilists who defend libertarianism about free will and moral responsibility. On such a view, free will and moral responsibility require reasons-responsiveness as well as a further condition: the falsity of determinism.” McKenna and Warmke, “Situationism,” 709.

account serves as the basis from which McKenna and Warmke outline their “pessimistic realism,” which I outline in the next section. MRR is summarized ably by David Zimmerman: “[The] central thesis is that a person acts responsibly at a time only if the decision-making mechanism which generates the act has the dispositional property of recognizing and reacting appropriately to a sufficiently wide range of considerations which count as reasons for action.”

I will provide a bare outline of MRR to help explain some of these terms. First, a decision-making mechanism is contrasted with decision-making conducted by an agent. More specifically, a mechanism is the “human deliberative mechanism,” that is, the psychological decision-making process. According to Fischer and Ravizza, though, it is the mechanism that is reasons-responsive, not the agent. McKenna explains: “… [a mechanism of action], as Fischer and Ravizza understand it, is meant to pick out ‘nothing over and above the process that leads to the relevant upshot.’ To make clear that they do not mean to reify the notion of mechanism or to suggest that it is something like a natural kind, they remark that rather than use the term, we could instead just speak in terms of the ‘way the action came

25 David Zimmerman, “Reasons-Responsiveness and Ownership-of-Agency: Fischer and Ravizza’s Historicism Theory of Responsibility,” The Journal of Ethics 6, no. 3 (2002): 203–204, http://doi.org/10.1023/A:1019561013541. Fischer and Ravizza provide their own summary of MRR at Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility, 81–82. The ‘moderate’ aspect is explained by Zimmerman as follows: “In their current version of the theory they see a need to introduce a level of moderate reasons-responsiveness. It involves two sub-capacities: a robust sub-capacity for reasons-receptivity, i.e., the capacity “regularly” to recognize those factual considerations which count as reasons for action, and a somewhat less robust sub-capacity for reasons-reactivity, i.e., the capacity to transform such recognition into action.” Zimmerman, “Reasons-Responsiveness,” 204. Emphasis in original.

26 Other helpful terms: in this context, ‘guidance control’ (as opposed to ‘regulative control’) grounds moral responsibility and is compatible with causal determinism (See Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility, 34). What Fischer and Ravizza mean by ‘guidance control’ is source freedom, the claim that freedom does not require the ability to do otherwise. On the other hand, ‘regulative control’ means freedom to do otherwise (or leeway freedom). See McKenna, “Reasons-Responsiveness,” 152 n. 3.

27 McKenna, “Reasons-Responsiveness,” 159.

28 Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility, 36.

29 McKenna, “Reasons-Responsiveness,” 159.
about.\textsuperscript{30} However, a mechanism does not include all of the agent’s psychological features, but rather a subset. One can imagine certain features that have no causal bearing on a decision. For example, whether I prefer chocolate or vanilla ice cream surely does not affect my decision whether to assist a stranger in distress.\textsuperscript{31}

Second, specifying what it means to ‘recognize’ and ‘react’ to reasons is crucial for explicating MRR. Recognizing reasons, or, one’s receptivity to them, is the “... capacity to recognize the reasons that exist.”\textsuperscript{32} On the other hand, the capacity to react to reasons involves intentionally acting on the basis of a reason, or as Alfred Mele describes it, “the capacity to translate reasons into choices (and then subsequent behavior).”\textsuperscript{33} McKenna explains both components: “Being reasons-receptive is a matter of being able to recognize what reasons there are, and in particular, being able to recognize what reasons count as sufficient for action. Being reasons-reactive is a matter of being able to react to the reasons one recognizes as sufficient by choosing and acting as needed.”\textsuperscript{34}

A range of sensitivity is assumed for both components. At the extremes would be receptivity (or reactivity) to every morally relevant reason and receptivity (or reactivity) to no morally relevant reason. Fischer and Ravizza stipulate their requirements for each of these two components as follows: “Moderate reasons-responsiveness consists in regular reasons-receptivity, and at least weak reasons-reactivity, of the actual-sequence mechanism that leads

\textsuperscript{30} McKenna, “Reasons-Responsiveness,” 159. Quotes Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility, 38.

\textsuperscript{31} See McKenna, “Reasons-Responsiveness,” 160. He points out difficulties in specifying individuation conditions for a mechanism of action in sections 4 and 5 (pages 160–165), but I will not take up these issues.


\textsuperscript{33} Mele, “Fischer and Ravizza,” 287. Quotes Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility, 69.

\textsuperscript{34} McKenna, “Reasons-Responsiveness,” 156.
to the action.”35 They explain “regular” reasons-receptivity as follows: “Regular reasons-receptivity ... involves a pattern of actual and hypothetical recognition of reasons ... that is understandable by some appropriate external observer. And the pattern must be at least minimally grounded in reality.”36 McKenna adds further detail: “For a person to be morally responsible for what she does, she must be receptive to reasons in a manner that displays a rich pattern of recognition whereby reasons can be placed on a scale with a continuum involving stronger and weaker incentives.”37 The general idea behind the regularity requirement is that an agent must recognize relevant reasons in an ordered manner—that is, non-haphazardly.

Mele explains weak reasons-reactivity: “A mechanism of an agent is at least weakly reasons reactive provided that although it issues in the agent’s doing A in the actual world, there is some possible world with the same laws of nature in which a mechanism of this kind is operative in this agent, ‘there is a sufficient reason to do otherwise, the agent recognizes this reason, and the agent does otherwise’ for this reason.”38 Suppose that I always brush my teeth in the morning, never forgetting to do so on account of the value I ascribe to dental hygiene. If some possible world exists, though, in which I react to some reason not to brush my teeth in the morning—say, I wake up and my house is on fire—then I am at least weakly reasons-reactive according to Fischer and Ravizza.

35 Mele, “Fischer and Ravizza,” 287. Quotes Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility, 89. The term “actual sequence” is meant to exclude alternative sequences, which are considered in the alternative possibility scenarios typically envisioned by incompatibilists.


38 Mele, “Fischer and Ravizza,” 287. Quotes Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility, 63.
There exists an asymmetry between the requirement of regular reasons-receptivity with weak reasons-reactivity. McKenna comments on reactivity component as follows:

It is enough, [Fischer and Ravizza] contend, that among the worlds in which an MRR agent is receptive to sufficient reasons to do otherwise, she reacts to only one of those reasons. Here, one might wonder why weak reactivity would be enough. Wouldn’t this show that in the wide spectrum of cases in which the agent recognizes sufficient reasons but does not act upon them that the agent cannot act upon them and so is impaired for morally responsible agency? Fischer and Ravizza do not think so. They contend that “reactivity is all of a piece” (1998: 73). As they see it, the fact that there exists just one world in which an agent reacts differently to a sufficient reason to do otherwise is sufficient to establish that in each world in which an agent recognizes sufficient reasons to do otherwise that she is able to react to those reasons, even if at those worlds she does not.

The concern, plainly stated, is that such a minimal capacity to react does not fit comfortably with the claim that moral responsibility is a matter of responsiveness to reasons.

“Pessimistic realism”

This, of course, is not the only concern expressed about Fischer and Ravizza’s MRR. But my outline provides an adequate basis to begin a consideration of McKenna and Warmke’s “pessimistic realism,” an outlook developed on the basis of MRR. Their “pessimistic” assessment is an expression of concern in response to the threat presented by

---

39 The asymmetry is by design. See Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility, 81.


41 See, e.g., McKenna’s worry about individuation conditions for mechanisms that produce action (McKenna, “Reasons-Responsiveness,” 160–165); also, Mele’s critique that the necessary condition Fischer and Ravizza offer for moral responsibility is too strong and the sufficient condition is too weak. Alfred Mele, “Reactive Attitudes, Reactivity, and Omissions,” review of Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility by John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, S.J., Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 61, no. 2 (2000): 447–452, https://doi.org/10.2307/2653661. See also Mele, “Fischer and Ravizza,” 283–294. Mele further expresses concern about the subjectivity condition Fischer and Ravizza stipulate for moral responsibility. They write: “...an agent is morally responsible for an action insofar as it issues from his own, moderately responsive mechanism.” Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility, 86. Quoted by Mele, “Fischer and Ravizza,” 287. The ‘his own’ phrase here is key. Fischer and Ravizza, in Responsibility, use this term in the sense of “taking responsibility” for it. They provide three criteria for taking responsibility (210–217), among which is the requirement that the agent accept that “he is a fair target of the reactive attitudes” (211). In response to this, Mele expresses “...skepticism about the view that, on the assumption that moral responsibility is to be analyzed in terms of the reactive attitudes, being a morally responsible agent entails seeing oneself as an apt target of the reactive attitudes.” Mele, “Fischer and Ravizza,” 294. For more on this issue, see John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, S.J., “Replies,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 61, no. 2 (September 2000): 467–480, https://doi.org/10.2307/2653664.
the situationist literature. Above, I mentioned a concise statement of the situationist threat to moral responsibility: Miller’s Surprising Dispositions. This statement was deployed in an argument from Miller connecting reasons-responsiveness to moral responsibility. The key point for present purposes is that in two premises the ‘sensitivity’ referred to should be understood as a cognitive and volitional element, i.e., the third feature of a reasons-responsive theory mentioned by McKenna and Warmke. Recall that premise (1) of that argument held that “surprising dispositions” typically are not sensitive to morally right reasons, and that premise (2) qualified moral responsibility in terms of sensitivity to morally right reasons. If either the cognitive or volitional element is prevented from functioning properly, then one will lack the required sensitivity to morally right reasons. Without adequate sensitivity, so the worry goes, then agents lack moral responsibility in a surprisingly large proportion of circumstances. McKenna and Warmke explain how a malfunction of either element could lead to this result:

Situations might undermine a more or less general capacity to respond to reasons in at least two ways. First, recall from the previous section that MRR has a cognitive component – what Fischer and Ravizza call receptivity. One way for situations to undermine a more or less general capacity to respond to reasons is therefore in virtue of compromising the receptivity aspect of MRR. Situations may sometimes prevent an agent from being able to see or recognize something as a reason (good or bad). Alternatively, situations could incapacitate a more or less general ability to respond to reasons by undermining the volitional component – what Fischer and Ravizza call reactivity. Here, reasons-responsiveness would be undermined because a situation has the effect of eliminating or severely impairing the agent’s ability to act on a reason.43

This pessimistic statement neatly captures the situationist threat to reasons-responsiveness and thus moral responsibility. Surprising Dispositions is a distilled statement

42 The distinction between situationism and the situationist literature, McKenna and Warmke report, is from Dana Nelkin, “Freedom, Responsibility, and the Challenge of Situationism,” Midwest Studies in Philosophy 29, no. 1 (2005): 191, [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.2005.00112.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.2005.00112.x). The issue is: if a specific rendering of situationism is shown to be false or implausible, would the body of studies it was drawn from still constitute a threat to free will and/or moral responsibility? McKenna and Warmke, “Situationism,” 706.

43 McKenna and Warmke, “Situationism,” 711.
of the situationist threat, and Miller’s argument expresses how it creates problems for one’s sensitivity to morally right reasons. Furthermore, since ‘sensitivity’ should be understood in terms of the cognitive and volitional elements of a reasons-responsive theory, the burden for defenders of moral responsibility is to show that Surprising Dispositions does not render one unresponsive to morally right reasons.

Performance errors and competence errors

McKenna and Warmke do precisely this by recruiting David Brink’s distinction between performance errors and competence errors. Responsibility is excused for the latter, but not the former, Brink explains:

It is important to frame this approach to responsibility in terms of normative competence and the possession of these capacities for reasons-responsiveness. In particular, responsibility must be predicated on the possession, rather than the use, of such capacities. We do excuse for lack of competence. We do not excuse for failures to exercise these capacities properly. Provided the agent had the relevant cognitive and volitional capacities, we do not excuse the weak-willed or the willful wrongdoer for failing to recognize or respond appropriately to reasons.  

Brink’s distinction can be illustrated as follows. Suppose that I am asked to identify some shapes and figures during a cognitive assessment: “triangle,” “airplane,” “television,” “chocolate cake,” etc. Suppose also that I somehow misidentify one of these. There are many possible explanations: I may have spoken too hastily, I may have been distracted, and so on. The point is that I, or any adult with properly working cognitive faculties, would be expected to be able to make the proper identification. Moreover, even if I failed to identify a figure—since I am not a chef, for example, I might fail to identify a specific dish—I could develop the capacity with relative ease. My mistake in a case such as this, then, would be an example of a performance error. Even if I occasionally fail, under typical circumstances I would be

---

capable of making correct identifications. By contrast, a butterfly does not possess the cognitive ability to identify these shapes and figures. It cannot “fail” to perform the task because it lacks the competence to do so in the first place. A butterfly is not expected to recognize and respond to such pictures in the way that a human being would. Additionally, one does not censure the butterfly for failing to do so. So, adjusting the example so that it includes morally relevant features, suppose that I am shown pictures of someone being assaulted. Because I possess the relevant competency, it should be expected that I recognize whether these unambiguous depictions of assault are morally wrong.

The claim is that the findings of the situationist literature mostly describe cases of performance failure. Brink writes:

[M]ost situational findings describe patterns, albeit surprising patterns, in behavior. They do not demonstrate incapacity. For instance, in the Milgram experiments we may be surprised to find that two-thirds of subjects fail to do the compassionate thing because of a desire, perhaps sub-conscious, to conform to the firm requests of the experimenter. But while many people did in fact act surprisingly badly, there’s nothing in the situationist gloss in the Milgram experiments to suggest that subjects lacked the ability or capacity to resist the experimenter’s suggestion. We might put this point by saying that situationism addresses situational patterns in performance, not issues in competence.\(^{45}\)

**Non-exculpatory competence errors**

Brink’s distinction is the basis of McKenna and Warmke’s “realism.” I endorse the general outlook, if not necessarily the particulars of the position. The goal of this chapter, though, is not to provide a definitive assessment of the debate between situationists and those keen to defend reasons-responsiveness. Instead, I aim to lend support to a slightly less pessimistic outlook about whether human beings generally are responsive to morally right reasons. Pursuant to this end, I will propose an adjustment to Brink’s claim: that a subset of competence errors should not be understood as exculpatory because they are causally

attributable to prior performance errors. That is, in cases where a performance error leads to a lack of competency, the responsibility for the lack should be attributed to the performance error. If so, then the lack of competence is non-exculpatory because at the relevant time it was within one’s ability to develop the relevant competence.

Recall the cognitive component of the third feature listed by McKenna and Warmke for a reasons-responsive theory, described by Fischer and Ravizza in terms of receptivity. Now, consider the following question: how responsible should an agent be for the reasons she receives? McKenna and Warmke acknowledge that an agent can be “impeded” from receiving good reasons, but the only example they mention suggests that the difficulty is due to conditions the agent cannot control. I believe that examples can be pressed in a different direction. Thus, while it might seem natural to excuse an agent from responsibility on account of poor vision, the opposite intuition seems more appropriate if the agent had purposely limited his vision—perhaps by blindfolding himself. In such a case, the agent exercises direct control over whether a relevant capacity is impeded. Suppose that a firefighter is unable to save an entrapped individual because smoke and noise prevents him from ascertaining the correct location. Because of the conditions which inhibit vision, it is natural to absolve the firefighter of responsibility. He could not carry out his duty because he did not have access to the necessary visual information that would lead him to the entrapped individual. On the other hand, if, out of fear he closed his eyes and refused to move from room to room, then blame would be appropriate. This is a case which involves a competence error that is a direct result of a prior performance error. The firefighter was unable to locate anyone, but it is not difficult to imagine counterfactuals in which he does. Most importantly, his incapacity is self-inflicted: he cannot see because he chose to obscure his own vision.
For another example, suppose that I work as a switch operator at a 19th century railyard. Generally, I am responsible for deciding where railcars are stationed before being assembled together and sent to their next destination. I am new to this job and was given a manual and instructed to study it. However, I spent the previous few evenings at the saloon playing cards. During my shift, an accident occurs that requires me to pull a lever and direct a line of cars down a specific track. There are many levers, though, and I do not know how to interpret their labels. In addition, I do not have time to track down my supervisor and ask which lever is the right one for the situation. A mistake here could cost my company a lot of money in damaged equipment, and there is a possibility of injury to other workers. My inability to determine which lever is appropriate equates to a lack of competence. Again, though, the lack of competence arguably is due to my own irresponsibility and should not be exculpatory.

Consider yet another example, this time from the same scenario: suppose that my coworker Hiram has duties at the railyard which require him to read signs at a distance. He knows that he is not able to do this, on account of near-sightedness. However, he knowingly informed the supervisor that he had no vision issues. Perhaps he wanted the job badly enough and did not anticipate that his dishonesty would place co-workers in danger. This performance error (i.e., not telling the truth when he could have) creates a situation in which he is required to exercise an ability that he lacks. While no one should blame him because of his near-sightedness, his lack of competence is not exculpatory. He lacks it precisely because he failed to be honest at an earlier point in time. Hiram had reason to believe that he would need to be able to read signs at a distance; his supervisor asked him about it before offering him the job. Hiram’s competence error is a causal result of his prior performance error.

46 I say “19th century,” because for all I know this process is now fully automated.
(assuming no causal deviancy) and is not exculpatory. In general, an agent is culpable for passing up on an opportunity to assume competency when there is reason to believe it will be required at a later point. In Hiram’s case, he had reason to believe that he would at some point be in a position in which a specific competence would be required—one that he lacked.

The least controversial aspect of Brink’s distinction between performance errors and competence errors is that capacities that are eliminated are exculpatory. If I am in a coma, for example, I cannot recognize or respond to stimuli such as the figures mentioned in the example above—I should not be expected to.47 McKenna and Warmke add further detail:

Since capacities and abilities come in degrees, they can be degraded significantly enough without being eliminated to count as fully exculpatory – and not just count as mitigating factors. Example: Joe, a professional basketball player, is an excellent free throw shooter who can hit roughly 80% of his shots. If he is tied up, his here-and-now specific ability is eliminated. He can hit exactly 0%. But suppose he can hit 40% with his left hand tied behind his back. Is his ability completely eliminated? It seems not. But is it degraded? Yes. Enough to count as fully exculpatory rather than mitigating (because it is freedom-defeating rather than freedom-diminishing)? Maybe not. But now place a deep cut in his right arm and pour salt water in his eyes so his success rate plummets to 3%. At this point, we are prepared to say that Joe’s ability is retained but is so degraded that it is exculpatory (not in terms of moral blame, but perhaps in terms of “sports blame”). Likewise, we want to say, it is enough of a threat to freedom and responsibility if a situation significantly degrades an agent’s reasons-responsive capacities or abilities. It need not completely eliminate them.48

Note that in this example, though, exculpation is described in terms of the capacities in the present circumstance. What needs to be added is that capacities that are eliminated or sufficiently degraded by the agent are not necessarily exculpatory. So, suppose Joe decides to consume a considerable amount of alcohol before a game. Inexplicably, the coach allows him to play and Joe somehow manages to earn a few free throw attempts during the game. Unsurprisingly, he misses all his attempts. Joe’s ability (in the present game) is downgraded to the point where he lacks the competence to make free throws. As with Hiram the near-


48 McKenna and Warmke, “Situationism,” 712. They credit Alfred Mele for the free throw shooter example.
sighted railyard operator, though, it seems that Joe himself is responsible for his lack of competence. His failure to perform well in terms of making responsible pre-game decisions should earn him a share of “sports blame.”

For his part, Brink notes the difficulty with deciding where to draw boundaries of culpability:

Life is replete with unexercised capacities of various kinds. ... In analyzing these ascriptions of capacities, we are positing an actual psychological structure, but one which funds relevant counterfactual claims about how the agent would have behaved in other circumstances. If determinism is true, we do not think that the agent would behave any differently in circumstances exactly like the actual circumstances. Instead, we think that he could have acted differently in the actual circumstance if he would have acted differently in circumstances that were relevantly different. Of course, relevant differences cannot be too great; otherwise, we will not be tracking actual capacities. We cannot test whether I could have made the putt that I failed to make by asking whether I would have made the putt if I first became as good a golfer as Tiger Woods. Exactly how to constrain the relevant counterfactuals is a complex matter, but it is reasonably clear that the relevant differences should be familiar and modest. And one counterfactual does not confirm or disconfirm a capacity. Incompetent golfers can make lucky putts once in a great while, and Tiger Woods occasionally misses putts that are makeable for him. What we should expect from someone who has a capacity is that in the relevant counterfactuals he will perform successfully on a regular basis. But by this test it seems plausible that most subjects that did not display compassionate behavior could have.49

As explained here, assessing culpability will not be clear in all cases. With the first railyard example, suppose that instead of being given instructions to study a manual, I was only given the manual. If so, it seems culpability would be less defined because there is greater room for ambiguity or misunderstanding. I might wonder, for example, whether the manual is intended for me. Also, I might wonder whether I am expected to study it while on the job. If I am unsure of the urgency attached to studying the manual, perhaps my decision not to study it does not make me culpable for the subsequent lack of competence.

Nevertheless, the presence of ambiguity does not undermine the following point: a culpable agent is one who 1) has reason(s) to believe that he will be in a circumstance that

49 Brink, “Situationism,” 141.
requires a specific competence, and 2) he has the ability to develop (or maintain, etc.) this competence, and yet 3) fails to do so. In this section, I have argued for expanding agent culpability to cover a class of competence errors that Brink deems exculpatory. Doing so increases the range of cases—if only marginally—in which an agent is reasons-responsive.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I addressed the threat posed by the situationist literature to moral responsibility, understood in terms of reasons-responsiveness—that is, a capacity to perceive and react to morally relevant reasons. In response to the general findings of the situationist literature, I endorsed Michael McKenna and Brandon Warmke’s “pessimistic realism,” which is based on Fischer and Ravizza’s moderate reasons-responsiveness. However, I offered one reason to be slightly less pessimistic. McKenna and Warmke incorporate a distinction made by David Brink between performance errors and competence errors. I claimed that not every competence error is exculpatory; some of them are due to prior performance errors. Fewer competency errors mean there will be more cases in which responsibility should be expected—hence the reason for slightly less pessimism about the prospects for moral responsibility.

In contrast to my endorsement of a “pessimistic realism,” this dissertation is marked by an optimistic stance concerning the prospects for improving moral judgments. In the first four chapters, I considered the value of constraining one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions through various moral experiences. Chapter One focused on Matthew Pianalto’s recommendations for avoiding cognitive vices such as fanaticism and dogmatism: reflection

---

50 The first point highlights how there is reason to think that some kind of epistemic component should be included as to whether the agent could have reasonably anticipated the necessity for a specific competency. Joe the free-throw shooter should be held responsible for consuming alcohol before a game. However, his culpability would not be as obvious if he were to take pain medication that he did not know had a side effect with a similar result. I will not explore this question further, though. The claim I made about agent-eliminated capacities being “not necessarily exculpatory” will be sufficient for now.
and discourse, conducted with a humble disposition. However, in venturing beyond this, I recommended an additional application of constraints to one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions. This was the project that occupied Chapters Two, Three, and Four. In each of these, I considered experiences that are not (typically) undertaken intentionally: experiences of limitation, moral challenges, and experiences of conscience, each of which (typically) occur while engaged in other activities. Moral experiences such as these add contextual information to existing belief, principles, and convictions, and allows one to form new morally relevant reasons. One’s moral judgments are made more responsive to circumstances by the consideration of these reasons—in keeping with the receptivity requirement of a reasons-responsive theory.

The emphasis on receptivity began in Chapter Two, in which I introduced H. Richard Niebuhr’s notion of a radically inclusive disposition. Especially in Chapter Four, though, I described this dispositional openness to all morally relevant experiences as directed toward a goal of maximizing situational understanding. Having the widest possible context from which to make moral judgments would be aided by a directed search for novel morally relevant experiences. Natural human limitation, though, would preclude encountering all such experiences, and so I mentioned how Niebuhr connected the radically inclusive disposition to a sustained, systematic posing of the question, ‘what is going on?’ Niebuhr was convinced that the answer to this question could be addressed by understanding all experiences as part of a pattern of relating to being itself, whom he identified as God. As a practical matter, I suggested connecting radical openness not to transcendent being, but to moral opposition. Doing so would at least direct one toward the concrete step of intentionally acting in harmony with one’s moral beliefs, principles, and convictions. This step would increase the likelihood that one would encounter perspectives differing from one’s own.

Improving moral judgments not unduly influenced by situational factors
The pertinent lesson from the situationist literature is that moral judgments and behavior are not morally responsible as frequently as one might initially suppose (or hope for). Indeed, according to Christian Miller, human beings are causally influenced surprisingly often by situational forces in ways that preclude moral responsibility, or at least diminish it.\footnote{Recall the statement of Surprising Dispositions: The behavior of most individuals tends to be influenced by various situational forces which activate certain of our mental dispositions—certain beliefs, desires, emotions, and the like. Refer to the “Situationism” section above.}

I have not endeavored to identify the precise extent of this influence, but I assume it is sufficient to warrant a degree of caution about assigning moral responsibility to moral judgments.

However, any moral judgment not unduly influenced by situational factors is in principle improvable. That is, absent such mitigating factors an agent remains able to receive and respond to morally relevant reasons.\footnote{Recall that Alfred Mele explains the receptivity component as a “... capacity to recognize the reasons that exist.” See the “Moderate reasons-responsiveness” section above.} Whether this occurs in a given case is not the salient issue; the point is whether additional morally relevant reasons can be recognized by the agent and thus brought to bear on a judgment. My pessimistic outlook about moral responsibility has to do with how often one’s judgment is unduly influenced by morally irrelevant situational factors. However, even if such factors undermine morally responsible judgment surprisingly often, it remains the case that morally responsible judgment still occurs. I have not attempted to argue that increasing moral responsibility equates to increasing the frequency of cases in which the threshold for moral responsibility is met. Rather, my optimism has to do with those cases in which responsible judgment is exercised, however rare they may be. Just because moral responsibility can be—and perhaps often is—undermined does not preclude further improvement through the inclusion of morally relevant reasons. This dissertation has made the case that some moral experiences have precisely this
effect on moral judgments. As noted, beginning with Chapter Two, I emphasized the receptivity component of a reasons-responsiveness theory. This emphasis can be stated plainly as follows: a token psychological process of moral judgment is improved to the extent that one has access to additional morally relevant context, which provides the basis for an updated set of morally relevant reasons.
REFERENCE LIST


———. “The Responsible Self.” Unpublished manuscript.


VITA

David Bukenhofer graduated from Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, OK, in 2002 with a Bachelor’s degree in Computer Science. He taught introductory computer classes at Carl Albert State College in Poteau, OK, and during this time decided to pursue a graduate degree in philosophy. He earned a Master’s degree from the University of Oklahoma in 2010 and a Ph.D. from Loyola University Chicago in 2020. Since the Fall of 2015, Dr. Bukenhofer taught one class per semester, first at Triton College in River Grove, IL, and later at Rose State College in Midwest City, OK. His teaching responsibilities have included courses in religion and ethics, and his research agenda reflects a similar interest.