

9

‘For every Foot its own Shoe’: Method and Moral Theory in the Philosophy of Iris Murdoch*

Julia Driver

The significance of Iris Murdoch’s work against the backdrop of analytic moral theorizing is just recently beginning to garner the attention it deserves. Roger Crisp’s excellent essay in this volume points to the impact her writing has had on criticisms of traditional moral theorizing. Specifically, she was part of a group of philosophers committed to criticizing the predominant ethical theories of the 20th century. Her work, along with that of some of her contemporaries, gave impetus to the development of *particularism*. There are many varieties of the view, but many particularists, very broadly, hold that general rules and principles are insufficient to capture what is important to morality. Here I am reminded of a story I came across in Montaigne’s essays, in which he declaims against those who would try to constrain experience, and try to formulate policies that cover all of our experience:

Nature always gives us happier laws than we give ourselves . . . Witness . . . some who employ, as the only judge in their quarrels, the first traveler passing through their mountains. And these others on market day elect one of themselves who decides all their suits on the spot . . . What would be the danger in having our wisest men settle ours in this way, according to the circumstances and at sight . . . ? For every foot its own shoe . . .

Who has seen children trying to divide a mass of quicksilver into a certain number of parts? The more they press it and knead it and try to constrain it to their will, the more they provoke the independence of this spirited metal; it escapes their skill and keeps dividing and scattering in little particles beyond all reckoning.¹

* I would like to thank Justin Broackes and an anonymous referee for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft.

¹ Montaigne, from his essay ‘Of Experience’, in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, translated by Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), 816.

Montaigne is speaking against the attempt at formulating general policies to guide moral or political decisions and action, in favor of a methodology that gives preference to the perceptions of those with the experience to make the right decisions, or the appropriate disinterest in deciding among people who disagree. Montaigne thus might be seen as advocating a particularist approach to both moral decision-making and the understanding of moral phenomena, or what I view as a particularist methodology. Central to this methodology is the idea that experience is crucial—not sufficient, of course, but nevertheless, crucial—in training up a judge’s sensibilities so that he or she can detect the morally relevant or salient features, of a given situation. This strategy goes against general theorizing, it would seem, at least of the sort that one sees in Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics. And, as Crisp points out, Iris Murdoch was concerned that people attend to the details of that experience, something that is frequently overlooked in theory with its emphasis on generalities and universal principles. A narrow diet of examples, gleaned from a narrow experience, can at best deliver only one aspect of the truth. And, as Murdoch writes, ‘The authority of morality is the authority of truth, and that is of reality’ (SGC 90/374).² Of course, there is a difference between believing that experience is the precursor to doing theory, and believing that experience replaces the genuine need for a theory.

My claim in this essay is that there is much insight in Murdoch’s criticisms of principle-based ethics—her main target being Hare’s universality in ethics.³ Murdoch did believe that ethics was more closely affiliated with aesthetics, and so she rejected the scientific paradigm for philosophy. In fact, she may have viewed principle-based ethics as an illegitimate attempt to bring ethics into the science camp. Ever since Hume, however, this has been viewed as problematic due to the normative leap to be made between fact and value. However, she is famous for the rather different task of having rejected the non-cognitivist view that there is no truth in ethics (unlike physics), since normative discourse is just an expression of taste. Murdoch is seen as resisting the rejection of speculative metaphysics in ethics. This also explains her interest in religion and the good, since religion was one of those areas rejected by the Logical Positivists—relegated to the realm of bad metaphysics.

However, my view is that a substantive form of particularism is the wrong lesson to take away from the important concerns she raises. Her criticisms of theory, which Crisp expresses some sympathy for, are criticisms of theorizing in an antiseptic and overly streamlined way. Murdoch, echoing the concerns of other writers critical of the way analytic moral theorizing has developed, called for a moral philosophy which connects with the reality of human psychology, and which reflects human experience

² I shall refer to the three papers that make up Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good* [SG] (London: Routledge, 1970/New York: Schocken Books, 1971) as IP, OGG, and SGC—to abbreviate ‘The Idea of Perfection’, ‘On “God” and “Good”’, and ‘The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts’. Page numbers refer to the original book printing and (after a forward slash/) to the reprints in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* [E&M], ed. P. J. Conradi (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997).

³ See ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, [VCM], reprinted in E&M.

(OGG 46/337). Experience of morally charged situations offers a mechanism for developing tools of ethical reflection. But 'experience' doesn't actually mean one has to live through situations fraught with moral overtones. One simply has to be faced with possibilities for imaginative reflection—and literature, history, the lives of one's friends, and so forth can all provide this, as well as the situations one confronts in one's own life. Before we actually set about confidently making moral judgments, we must be sure that we are basing our capacity to make them on wide rather than narrow experience. Literature and imagination, are, of course, elements on this experience, as is history, which offers us a more detached mode of evaluation.⁴ We can all broaden our affective experience by reading history and literature. Again, this is one of Murdoch's themes, that 'We use our imagination not to escape the world, but to join it . . .' (SGC 90/374). Indeed, consideration of history and literature makes us better able to arrive at objective truth since it is abstracted—or at least more abstracted—from our own idiosyncratic emotional responses, from our self-serving and egoistic reactions. She's right that ethical reflection is not egoistic. But my view is that she goes wrong if what she claims is the particularist claim that there are aspects of morality, or moral reasons, which have no *general* significance. This is to be distinguished from the claim they have no *universal* significance. I will claim that the evidence for Murdoch's particularism is mixed, and that it is not clear that she was a substantive particularist—that is, a particularist about moral metaphysics. However, I do believe that the evidence is clear that she was a methodological particularist—that is, a particularist about moral theorizing.

Some writers have pointed out that the demand for generality in ethics is linked to its role in moral justification. The idea—perhaps not well defended in the literature—is that general principles such as the Utilitarian principle 'Maximize the Good' provide a superior form of justification *because* they are general—because they cover a host of cases that are quite disparate at the specific, *particular*, level.⁵ But generality needs to be distinguished from universality. Generality is thought to be a degree concept in that it involves ' . . . a measure of the relative range of application of a moral principle'.⁶ Thus, 'Don't Kill' is more general than 'Don't kill except in self-defense'. Universality, on the other hand, is different. One can hold a principle to be universal ' . . . if it can be stated without the use of any proper names or indexicals'.⁷ As Don Loeb notes, this usage is attributed to Hare. It will be remembered that Hare is one of Murdoch's targets. Murdoch is also familiar with the distinction, though her use of it seems rather confusing. She argues that universality is mistaken because it fails to consider the point of view of those who view the world as mysterious and morality as ' . . . the

⁴ See the really wonderful discussion in Murdoch's essay 'Morals and Politics', in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* [MGM] (1992; New York: Penguin, 1993), at 389.

⁵ See Don Loeb's 'Generality and Moral Justification', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56 (March 1996), 79–96. Loeb attempts to argue against this privileged role for generality.

⁶ *Ibid.* 80–1.

⁷ *Ibid.* 81.

exploration of that mystery in so far as it concerns each individual' (VCM 88). My claim is that a universalist will just come back and say that she is utterly mistaken here. It may be a hard task to refine principles and norms but it can be done, and, indeed, we have a good idea of what some would look like—'torturing animals just for the fun of it is wrong' is true, no matter who the particular agent is. Of course, this is not a very general claim. Fine and well.

However, there are other well known passages where Murdoch seems to embrace either generality or universality, as when she claims that one thing the utilitarians got right is the importance of happiness: '... utilitarian considerations are in general *prima facie* relevant because we all understand the importance of happiness. It is always *a*, not necessarily final, argument against doing something to someone that it will reduce his happiness' (MGM 365). One can find support for a variety of views in her writings, and it is quite possible that she simply did not clearly delineate the different positions in her own writings.

It seems that though Murdoch recognizes the distinction it turns out to be misunderstood in relation to many arguments purporting to establish particularist claims. Universality is not a degree concept. One principle is not more universal than another, though one principle may be more general than another. Many complaints about universality really boil down to complaints about generality.⁸ This is a point to be returned to later.

With this in mind, how is Murdoch thought to be a particularist? This widely held view about Murdoch appears in various commentators. Alison Denham, for example, writes that particularism, and Murdoch's view, is:

the view that ethical properties are properties of particular actions and persons rather than classes or kinds. A correlate of this view is... that general principles and codifiable rules will often mislead us in ethics, we do better always to consider the context and detail of the specific case... For Murdoch, scrutiny of the relevant phenomena, alertness to specifics, sensitivity to subtle differences—these are the characteristics of proper attention that must underpin reliable moral judgement.⁹

Of course, Murdoch is a complex figure. The evidence for a particularist position is much stronger in 'Vision and Choice' than in, for example, *Sovereignty of the Good*. However, it is certainly the case that recent writers, inspired by Murdoch, have taken her to be a particularist and at the very least it seems reasonable to view her work as an important source for particularism. For example, Lawrence Blum views Murdoch's work as calling to the particularity of moral perception, which is crucial to morality but separate from moral judgment. He believes that Murdoch's emphasis on love, for example, demonstrates a central place for concern for a *particular* other person, and this

⁸ Russ Shafer-Landau, 'Moral Rules', *Ethics* 107 (July 1997), 584–611.

⁹ See her 'Envisioning the Good: Iris Murdoch's Moral Psychology', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 47 (Fall 2001), 621.

is inimical to the impartialist case of much contemporary ethical theory. He writes that certain prominent ethicists (e.g. Williams, Nagel, and Sheffler)

accept an identification of morality with an impartial, impersonal, and objective point of view. These writers all give the impression that the sole or major issues of personal conduct concern the clash between personal and impartial reasons for action, between an impersonal “right” and a merely personal “good.” Nowhere . . . is articulated the Murdochian moral task of caring for or attending to particular other individuals.¹⁰

For Blum, expanding on this Murdochian insight calls into question principle-based moral systems.¹¹ Principle-based moral systems, such as Utilitarianism and Kantianism, seem to be one of the primary targets of the particularist. They offer universal principles which also tend to have a high degree of generality.

Murdoch can be viewed as a particularist at several levels, and one of my aims in this paper is to spell out the different sorts of particularist attitude her philosophical work expounds. Denham’s characterization conflates several senses, though it must be noted Murdoch herself isn’t very clear on separating her claims.

- (1) Substantive particularism
 - (1a) metaphysical particularism
 - (1b) particularism about reasons (or ‘considerations that serve as reasons’)
 - (1c) particularism about rules or principles
- (2) Epistemological particularism
- (3) Methodological particularism¹²

These claims will be distinct, though related in various ways. In the case of (1a) the particularist believes that there is no pattern of subvening non-moral properties which underlie moral properties. This is not a version I will explicitly be discussing here, but will simply note that this version has a connection with (1b) in the following way: I can have the property of ‘having a reason’ to avoid, let’s say, a particular action in virtue of that action having a certain ‘grounding’ property—e.g. it is a cruel action. There is plenty of evidence that Murdoch was committed to something like (1a) since she criticizes those who are against a metaphysical ethics. Critics of a metaphysical ethics often proceed by noting that moral terms must always be reducible to non-moral. This would mean that there is nothing ‘moral’ that fundamentally underlies moral terms. Murdoch was against this reductionist view. Instead, she seems to suggest that moral perception picks up on the moral reality, and that there are no patterns or generalities that are being picked up on instead (VCM). However, the view that there is no pattern

¹⁰ Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 16.

¹¹ Lawrence Blum, ‘Moral Perception and Particularity’, *Ethics* 101 (July 1991), 701–25.

¹² Walter Sinnott-Armstrong makes similar distinctions amongst types of particularism, though his use of ‘methodological particularism’ differs slightly from my own. See his ‘Some Varieties of Particularism’, *Metaphilosophy* 30 (January/April 1999), 1–12.

of non-moral properties that underlie the moral has been effectively criticized by Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith.¹³ One couldn't educate others without such patterns out there to recognize. Of course, this says nothing about perception. One could agree with the view that a perceptual sensitivity is necessary to pick up on these patterns, but this by itself does not commit one to (1a). How do we square this with her realism? After all, she did write that morality is a form of realism. But again, this all by itself does not commit her to (1a) since she simply believed a kind of formal realism, a conceptual connection between truth and knowledge. In this respect her view is realist because committed to the view that there is truth in morality—it's just that the truth of moral claims citing moral properties cannot be reducible to the physical.¹⁴ So evidence for her views on (1a) is mixed. (1b) and (1c) will be discussed shortly. (2) holds that we can only come to know moral properties by contact with particular instances; and that a priori reflection on generalities is not a route to moral knowledge. (3) holds that the methodology used in contemporary moral theorizing is flawed because it does not deal with specific cases, and instead utilizes cases which have been stripped down to isolate what is 'morally relevant'. One can see in Murdoch's work, and in particular 'Vision and Choice', a commitment to all of these claims, in one form or another. My argument will be that all of them have serious problems—however (3) does expose one problem with a popular methodological tool used in moral philosophy.

Some might argue that Murdoch couldn't possibly be committed to (2) since she places enormous weight on exposure to literature and history in developing moral sensitivity, and one of the main objections to (2) is that it doesn't account for the role imaginary cases play in reasoning. But what Murdoch could argue is that contact can be made imaginatively, as long as there's enough detail—as long as the specificity is such as to make the case seem real, and this is the work of the novelist, and, one would suppose, the gifted historian.¹⁵ But this observation doesn't rebut the generalist position, since he or she could maintain that this method works precisely because there are true generalities. Note that there could be generalities even if a reasoning method using them doesn't work, or is misleading in some way. And this will get us to (3), methodological particularism.

There is also substantial evidence that she endorsed some version of both (1b) and (1c). She frequently condemned the rule-oriented approach to moral philosophy prevalent at the time she was writing. To her, the focus on rules was just an attempt to develop some kind of crutch, and attempt to fend off the essential 'ambiguity of the world' (VCM 90). However, it is important to note that even in making these sorts of

¹³ F. Jackson, P. Pettit, and M. Smith, 'Ethical Particularism and Patterns', in *Moral Particularism* ed. by Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 79–99.

¹⁴ OGG 60/349, where she notes that the certainty and permanency of goodness is not reducible to psychology.

¹⁵ As she writes at OGG 65/353, when we look at great works of art, or read great literature, we learn 'about the real quality of human nature, when it is envisaged, in the artists' just and compassionate vision, with a clarity which does not belong to the self-centred rush of ordinary life'.

criticisms of the rule approach, she doesn't totally condemn them; she is simply claiming that rules cannot exhaust all there is to morality: 'this cannot be taken as the only structural model for morality'. Note the word 'only'.

One can be a particularist about reasons without being a particularist about rules or principles.¹⁶ To quote Dancy on (1b):

The leading thought behind particularism is that the behavior of a reason (or a consideration that serves as a reason) in a new case cannot be predicted from its behavior elsewhere. The way in which the consideration functions *here* either will or at least may be affected by other considerations here present. So there is no ground for the hope that we can find out here how that consideration functions *in general*, somehow, nor for the hope that we can move in any smooth way to how it will function in a different case.¹⁷

One clarificatory comment on the terms: note that Dancy writes of 'a reason (or a consideration that serves as a reason)'. Again, to bring this in conformity with other discussions in the literature one should note that a grounding property could offer a consideration that serves as a reason. This gets us into many complexities that I'd like to ignore in this paper—though they would benefit from further investigation.¹⁸

Elijah Millgram uses the following illustration of the particularist insight on reasons: 'That a company is your employer is a reason not to leak its confidential documents to the press, but when its employees are being pressed to become complicit in its misdeeds, that you are an employee becomes precisely a reason to leak.'¹⁹ And, as Dancy notes, all kinds of reasons function this way. That a blouse is pretty may be a reason for wearing it to a party but be a reason for not wearing it while mopping the floor. The particularist about reasons, in the (1b) sense, is just pointing out that moral reasons function like other reasons. To Dancy, this is not a surprising claim at all. Indeed, the contrary would be more surprising.

Millgram refers to this as 'the defusing move'—the original reason is 'defused' as opposed to 'overridden' in the new context. Others refer to these reasons as underminers. We can note that there are two sorts of defusers or underminers—there are ones that neutralize and ones that reverse the normative force of the reason. Some underminers, however, are stronger—as when *x* is a reason to do *y* in one context, but a reason not to do it in another context. When conditions change, the reason takes on a different normative quality. Thus, the argument goes, one can't generalize about morally relevant reasons for action. And it also shows that moral norms do not apply

¹⁶ Jonathan Dancy, for example, is a particularist about reasons but does not embrace particularism about rules. *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

¹⁷ Dancy, 60.

¹⁸ For example, one can draw another sort of distinction between a sort of metaphysical particularism and another epistemological form. This would then bring in the difference between internal and external reasons. However, this investigation isn't necessary for the purposes of this paper. The same qualms about one variety could be raised for the other.

¹⁹ See Elijah Millgram, 'Murdoch, Practical Reasoning, and Particularism', *Notizie di Politeia* 18 (2002), 69–70.

universally. This in turn is taken to show that rules and generalizations are useless. As Millgram points out, however, the main evidence used by the particularists simply seems to establish that what counts as a good reason will vary from context to context—that this is a context-sensitive issue. That isn't to say that generalizations can't be made, and certainly not that they are useless. Indeed, numerous writers have pointed out that they are critical in moral argumentation.²⁰

Russ Shafer-Landau notes, for example, that Dancy's cases all involve cases where the purporting grounding properties are described in extremely general terms. Once narrowed, universal relevance can be re-established. Shafer-Landau's cases include factors such as taking pleasure in another's pain (this is bad), or being cruel (this is also bad): 'There may be very rare circumstances where such action is, all-things-considered, justified, but its permissibility must be a matter of overriding the wrong-making features present in each such action.'²¹

Roger Crisp has, further, pointed out that the particularist thesis about reasons suffers from being either trivial or false.²² Crisp makes a distinction between ultimate and non-ultimate reasons. Ultimate reasons ground actions, provide some fundamental justificatory basis for them, non-ultimate reasons provide a kind of justification in particular cases, but a justification understood in terms of some other ultimate reason. This is like Shafer-Landau's account of grounding properties (though, of course, here we're talking about reasons). In ordinary circumstances I should return to you the book I borrowed, but if I find out that you in fact stole the book, then I should not return it, because *that* would be unjust. The cases that work for Dancy, that illustrate the defusing move, all involve non-ultimate reasons. And this makes the particularist thesis trivial—as Crisp notes, even a universalist such as an act utilitarian who employs a highly general criterion for rightness, will note that a non-ultimate reason will act as a justificatory reason in one case and not in another—because the ultimate aim will be served differently in different circumstances. But this doesn't entail the particularist thesis about ultimate reasons. And, indeed, we have a great many reasons to prefer the generalist thesis about ultimate reasons, since that assumption underlies a good deal of our moral methodology. But it is this very methodology that I think Murdoch wanted to call into question. However, one can raise questions about the methodology without being committed to particularism about reasons.

Murdoch, against universality, writes:

A man may penetrate his life with reflection, see it as having a certain meaning and a certain kind of movement. Alternatively . . . a man may regard himself as set apart from others, by a superiority which brings special responsibilities, or by a curse, or some other unique destiny. Both these fables may issue in practical judgments, possibly of great importance. Now does the question

²⁰ See Millgram; also see Sinnott-Armstrong.

²¹ *Op.cit.*, 590.

²² Roger Crisp 'Particularizing Particularism', in *Moral Particularism* ed. by Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 37.

whether these are moral decisions really depend on the answer to the question: would you wish anyone else so placed to act similarly? If faced with this somewhat surprising query, the fable-makers might reply, 'Yes, I suppose so'; or possibly they might reply . . . 'But nobody could be in *this* position without being *me*,' . . . My point is that here the 'universal rules' model simply no longer describes the situation. (VCM 86)

In this passage she criticizes the relevance of the universalizability test employed in Kant's ethics. In the context of how ethics has developed over the last half century, some of Murdoch's remarks—such as this one—can be read as feeding into the widespread dissatisfaction with principles, such as the principle of utility and the categorical imperative. In trying to decide on an appropriate course of action sometimes people find themselves in unique situations. Trying to figure out what to do based on a universal standard that applies to everyone fails to accurately model that uniqueness. But this does not get us all the way to substantive particularism since this is compatible with there being plenty of situations which are relevantly similar. General criteria might still apply.

What valuable lessons can be taken away from reading Murdoch on the issue of particularism? My view is that she has targeted a methodology common to analytic philosophy, at least, in analytic moral theory—a methodology she finds to be distorting of moral experience.

And here we get to (3), *methodological* particularism, which makes a point about the sort of methodology employed by moral philosophers, and is opposed to the use of reflective equilibrium and the contrastive method. The contrastive method assumes the 'ubiquity' thesis: that 'if variation in a given factor makes a difference *anywhere*, it makes a difference *everywhere*'.²³ But, as Shelly Kagan points out, even if one believes the contrastive method fails because the ubiquity thesis is false, this does not mean that principle-based moral theory is false. Indeed, principle-based moral theory may be all the more needed to ground our moral judgment since it is intuition that fails, in that it cannot capture all the subtleties and nuances when factors interact in a given context. However, in contrast to this view is a Murdochian one, picked up by Nussbaum and others, that properly cultivated perception can pick up on the nuances and can form the basis of reliable moral judgment. But the point is to get away from the contrastive method, which strips down cases to isolate the essential features, and then hold some constant while testing our intuitions about the difference that variability makes. Like some contemporary writers, I believe she displays a concern that the use of something like the contrastive method really just boils down to a description of our intuitions about cases—so—why not just go with those intuitions? Why not look at the cases as singularities, and judge them on the basis of the complex process of imaginative

²³ Shelly Kagan, 'The Additive Fallacy', *Ethics* 99 (1988).

reflection? The *principles* that one derives are just a fifth wheel, with no prescriptive force whatsoever and also woefully inadequate even as mere descriptions (because they lack the richness of actual cases). But the lessons she draws from this are far different from the lessons someone like Kagan draws. For Kagan the remedy is a greater reliance on foundational moral theory. For Murdoch, it is a rejection of such a theory since the theory cannot be a satisfactory replacement for moral perception. Perhaps she is a substantive particularist—the evidence exists for either interpretation. But I do believe there is good evidence that she is a methodological particularist, holding the view that we must consider cases in detail in making moral judgments, and we consider them as singularities:

Philosophers have been misled, not by a rationalistic desire for unity, but also by certain simplified and generalised moral attitudes current in our society, into seeking a single philosophical definition of morality . . . Why should philosophy be less various, where the differences in what it attempts to analyse are so important? . . . For purposes of analysis moral philosophy should remain at the level of differences, taking the moral forms of life as given, and not try to *get behind them* to a single form. (VCM 97)

Methodological particularism challenges the role of *abstract* intuitions in moral decision-making—that is intuitions about a certain choice made outside of the context of the choice itself, for example. The agent in a specific situation where moral judgment is called for will be faced with truly unique circumstances; and one where imaginative reflection is called for in making a truly reliable moral judgment, one devoid of self-serving and egoistic motivations.

This, I take it, is one of the points behind the famous case of M and D, presented in ‘The Idea of Perfection’:

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D . . . M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very ‘correct’ person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. (IP 17/312)

But M is also someone who is ‘capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her’. And, she does just that with D. By careful attention to detail, she comes to change her view of D. This has no effect on her behavior, it is purely attitudinal—it is a change not in behavior but judgment. This example is often cited in support of Murdoch’s view that moral vision is relevant to moral theory, as opposed to a simple focus on conduct and behavior.²⁴ It also gives an example of moral reflection, and how it works. Attention to detail gets us further at the truth. But we have to approach such cases with mental descriptions that are general, and then search for more detail.

²⁴ See Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 89.

This is imaginative engagement:

Imagination is an (inner) activity of the senses, a picturing and a grasping, a stirring of desire. At a more explicitly reflective level, in everyday moral discussion as well as metaphysics, we deploy a complex densely textured network of values round an intuited centre of 'good'. We imagine hierarchies and concentric circles, we are forced by experience to make distinctions, to elaborate moral 'pictures' and a *moral vocabulary* . . . so we may talk and think, constantly examining and altering our sense of the order and interdependence of our values. The study of this interweaving *is* moral reflection, and at a theoretical level makes intelligible places for defining and understanding central concepts which may have become isolated and attenuated in our argumentative and emotional use of them: happiness, freedom, love. (MGM 325–6)²⁵

Of course, this 'interweaving' is enormously complex. It isn't to be expected that the person's knowledge can therefore be communicated. The reflection may not be replicable. A standard in science cannot be met here—that results be replicable. This is because imaginative reflection in ethics is a singularity.

But, again, as far as particularism is concerned, one feature to be stressed is the idiosyncrasy of the moral experience or moral judgment itself that characterizes Murdoch's views. Consider again one of the things she says about the case of M: 'M's activity is peculiarly *her own*. Its details are the details of *this* personality; and partly for this reason it may well be an activity which can only be performed privately. M could not *do this* thing in conversations with another person' (IP 23/317). This may be because we are aware of the reasons, but not able to articulate them, but it also may be due to the fact that there are reasons that move us and that we respond to that we aren't even fully aware of. In 'Vision and Choice' she also writes, as part of her criticism of Hare et al.: 'There are situations which are obscure and people who are incomprehensible, and the moral agent, as well as the artist, may find himself unable to describe something which in some sense he apprehends' (VCM 90). Thus, I agree with Millgram's view that Murdoch is best read as offering an 'idiosyncrasy' account—but, even more than this, view her as being open to the view that persons can be moved by reasons that they aren't able to articulate because they aren't even fully aware of what the reasons are that they are responding to. This would explain her view that the inarticulate are virtuous, and those who are naturally good may be responsive to reasons that they cannot represent to themselves—if they could describe them internally then presumably they would be able to describe them externally. Joseph Raz nicely presents this in his discussion of particularism (though he is not discussing Murdoch):

We may be unaware of our own reasons. We act for reasons we know of, be it through our general stock of beliefs, or through what we come to believe about the situation we are in at the time of action. Either way we know more than we can articulate. No one can spell out all that he knows, and no one can detail all that he perceives, or even just sees at any moment. There may be

²⁵ From 'Imagination'.

nothing we know that cannot be stated, and nothing we see which cannot be described. But it does not follow that we can state all that we now, and all that we see. . . . We can rationally respond to what we see and act as we do because of what we know, without being aware of that knowledge at the time.²⁶

Raz is pointing out that some of the force of the defusing move is due to our inability to fully articulate our reasons for actions. We may be responsive to grounding reasons, but have some difficulty either identifying them, articulating them, or both. This may be especially true as the degree of generality is reduced. But note, these reasons are universal.

So these cases don't seem to bear the weight that some particularists place on them. Millgram believes that particularists need to adopt a Murdochian approach in order to be truly distinctive. And, on his view, the Murdochian adopts a kind of idiosyncrasy approach to moral justification. Moral justification is based on individual perception; which at the most precise level of detail cannot be articulated to others. One can privately justify some moral judgments that may not be publicly justified. It's worth noting here that if this thesis is correct there is a crucial difference between public and private moral justification. Ironically, this is something the Utilitarians were criticized for, since some argued that it may not maximize utility to make public the Utilitarian rationales for various policies. However, for Murdoch, unlike the Utilitarian, the private nature of at least some instances of moral reflection and justification is essential, it is not a matter of secrecy. Even if one wanted to make it public one could not do so.

This inarticulacy of reasons isn't particularism—it is simply the view that we cannot articulate all that we do know. Some people are better at this than others, but in the end even the most articulate are at a loss for words. Of course, a rejection of codifiability of some sort does not imply particularism. Nor does a rejection of reducibility imply particularism, nor a rejection of the truth or usefulness of rules. This is because one could also deploy these considerations to argue for moral skepticism.²⁷

But this is clearly not the direction Iris Murdoch would pursue. It's not that there isn't any moral truth; rather, moral truth is rich and complex. Perhaps one doesn't follow rules (though at places she claims rules are very useful) and perhaps morality isn't codifiable.

Thus, it seems a genuine methodological insight that traditional theories give the impression that detail is ignored, is irrelevant. And sometimes it is. Killing an innocent person for no good reason is wrong, and the detail of what color shirt he or she happens to be wearing matters not at all. To use an example from Loeb, the claim that it is permissible to eat potatoes but not beans is absurd. Even though potatoes and beans are different, and certainly have many different properties, they are not different in any morally relevant way. The challenge for a methodological particularist is to argue that

²⁶ Joseph Raz, 'The Truth in Particularism', in *Moral Particularism* edited by Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little (Clarendon Press, 2000), 48–78.

²⁷ See Sinnott-Armstrong, *op. cit.*

in all cases exhaustive detail is relevant, and not just relevant, but crucially important to arriving at a reliable or true judgment.

Also, a danger of a particularist methodology, and one that Murdoch does not dwell on, is that it ends up providing another kind of distortion. It is the sort of distortion that Hume wanted to guard against by requiring that moral judgment take place from 'the general point of view'. If one attends to the details of a case and looks at things from the perspective of a protagonist in a novel, or the perspective of an historical figure, and so forth, one runs the risk of making judgments that are biased or prejudiced. True, they will tend not to be biased in the ways that Murdoch was primarily concerned with—i.e. in the egoistic way which she feels is the enemy of the moral perspective. However, an *empathic* engagement with an historical character such as Brutus, or a literary figure such as Madame Bovary, runs the risk of leading us astray as well. But I believe that what Murdoch wants is a balance between considering questions at a high level of generality as well as detail. That's how this danger can be avoided. My reading of her is therefore the more moderate reading in which she is advocating a particularist methodology because it has been ignored, but which does not reject a crucial role for considering things in general *as well*.²⁸

But what of Murdoch's reservations regarding the tendency we seem to have, to try to focus on some single aspect of the good, isolate it, and make a principle out of it? Are we doomed to be like Montaigne's children, engaged in the impossible task of bending moral experience to our theoretical wills? I don't think so. The fact that modern Utilitarians have taken the criticisms of virtue ethics seriously shows that the reality of our moral experience has an impact on the development of the theory. And, as Crisp notes, there are aspects of this approach that are appealing to Murdoch—the impartiality of morality, for example, the cleanness of the moral vision, and the fact that it gets us away from our egoistic preoccupations. For Murdoch, the good may be indefinable, but we can still know it through our experience of life and art. And, it is a testament to the force of Murdoch's work—as well as that of Anscombe and Foot and, of course, Professor Nussbaum—that current moral theorists are taking this experience seriously and attempting to accommodate it. It may be that for every foot its own shoe—all situations are different, and deciding in advance a formula for resolving them does seem like the hopeless task of Montaigne's children. But, as Murdoch also points out, this need not rule out a unified vision of the Good, of Love, which can inform our moral perceptions and help us to appreciate the moral significance of details that all too often get lost in the theorizing.

²⁸ To me this comes out most clearly when she is discussing other views. For example, in 'Morals and Politics' she writes:

A 'sense of duty' may be a sensibility to general rules or an active creation or discovery of detailed ones. Reason seems to dart from the outside into specific situations with an eagle glance which sets all in order. (MGM 384)

