

*Commitment, Integrity, and Moral Realism**

Matthew Pianalto
Truman State University

Moral Realism picks out a family of views about the nature of moral value and the truth of moral claims which hold that values “exist” independently of subjects who make moral judgments and, consequently, that the truth of those judgments does not depend upon the distinctive beliefs, feelings, or wishes of the individuals who judge.¹ The fact of moral diversity has always posed a challenge for moral realism, insofar as the realist must either explain how a large number of morally serious individuals (or cultures) could be deeply mistaken in their views, or show how realism can tolerate diversity in how people go about judging the world. (By “tolerate,” I do not mean tolerate the fact that some people hold mistaken views, but rather tolerate—that is, account for—the idea that a world which contains real values can give rise to equally true, but diverse, judgments.) It might be thought that the latter option is not really an option for the moral realist, insofar as it seems that in order to allow that a diversity of moral views or judgments could have an equal claim to truth (or, an equal grounding in realistic values), one must allow that the truth of a particular person’s judgment will have to depend, in some sense, upon the distinctive contributions made by that person. I will argue that this second route is open to the moral realist, and will try to motivate the plausibility of this approach by considering one area in which a diversity in judgment arises—namely, within the context of moral conflicts (or, some will prefer to say, moral dilemmas).

On the view I will offer, some of these conflicts have no formal, determinate solution, but when we consider such conflicts from the perspective of the agent, we may find that the agent has commitments which bridge the gap between the inconclusiveness of moral theory and the necessity for practical

* This paper is drawn from the first half of the penultimate chapter of my dissertation. The main portion of it, in which I discuss Sinnott-Armstrong’s arguments, was presented at the APA Central Division Meeting (April 2008) and at the Annual Meeting of the Southwest Philosophical Society (November 2007). My dissertation advisor, Ed Minar, has been enormously generous with his time in helping me to hone my views here. In addition, my conference commentators Darin Davis (at the Southwest) and Andrew Cullison (at the Central APA) provided much constructive criticism, as did the chair of the APA session, Mark Jenkins.

¹ I put “exist” in scare-quotes in order to emphasize that there are different views about what it means to make realist claims about the existence of values. For detailed discussion of various forms of moral realism, see Stephen Finlay, “Four Faces of Moral Realism,” *Philosophy Compass*, 2:6 (2007).

judgment and decision.² Whether such judgments about what one must do are correct (or true) or not, will thus depend upon some contribution made by the agent to the overall situation. But this contribution does not imply that the truth of such judgments depends upon the agent in a way that forces us to abandon moral realism. This view might seem counterintuitive to those who conceive of moral realism as Philippa Foot does when she writes, “Those who say that where the solution of some ethical conflicts is beyond our capacities there will nevertheless *be* a solution which is perhaps know to God are realists: those who deny it are antirealists as regards the class of propositions in which moral judgments are asserted.”³ However, Foot’s view assumes that if there is a realistic moral order, it must be orderly, in the sense of harmonious, and which, if we could know it, would leave no practical (deliberative) remainder, and no possibility of conflict between either kinds of moral value, or between ways of realizing moral value. Someone who denies this need not also deny that conflicting values (or conflicting ways of realizing value) admit of a realistic analysis, although this would seem to imply (if we are strict realists) that there is no determinate truth about a potentially wide range of moral problems. If this is all a realist can say about morality, then the resulting view may seem deeply unsatisfactory, particularly since there appears to be a fairly straightforward anti-realistic way for accounting for this range of morality which such a realism leaves indeterminate. In what follows, I will consider this antirealist alternative and propose a realist response, although something rather different from the conception of realism at work in Foot’s remarks.

1. Moral Conflicts and Moral Realism

First, let us briefly survey some of the moral diversity we find in the world. Different people do conflicting things in the name of the common good (or of moral rightness), and individuals caught up in similar moral conflicts judge differently in their respective situations. Even where there is agreement at some formal level (say, that we ought to be concerned with the common good, or the needs of others besides ourselves, etc.), there is disagreement about the best way to respect and implement these formal

² I have argued for this kind of indeterminacy elsewhere more succinctly, although the general shape of this view should emerge in this chapter as well. See my “Moral Conflict and the Indeterminacy of Morality,” *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 23:1 (2007). (This paper comprises part of an earlier chapter of my dissertation.)

³ “Moral Realism and Moral Dilemma,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 80:7, (1983), 397-398,

principles. Some of these disagreements, of course, may simply be “engineering” problems that stem from factual uncertainty about the best way to preserve and realize particular values. These are not moral problems, but technical or predictive problems. However, it also seems to be true, for example in the case of the common good, that there can be deep disagreement about what the common good is. (Some will frame their claims in terms of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain; others will focus on notions of respect, autonomy and freedom of choice, equality, and justice.) At the level of individual agents—with which I will be particularly concerned herein—we find that different agents, given their distinctive commitments, projects, and ideals, judge and act differently in formally similar situations, each with an equal sense of having judged or acted morally and each (let us stipulate) a morally serious agent who strives to be as sensitive as possible to the features of his or her situation.

Thus, the picture of moral practice we get from surveying our actual situation in the world is one in which our ground-level judgments about what is of moral value and what we ought to do are significantly influenced by the particular commitments, ideals, and projects we have. This actual moral diversity creates enormous difficulties for the moral realist: either the realist must provide good reasons for accepting a view which implies that some significant range of morally serious individuals are mistaken in their judgments and/or make morally incorrect decisions (based upon morally flawed commitments), or the realist must show how such diversity of judgment is compatible with moral realism. (Note that the second option does not preclude the possibility that *some* actual judgments or decisions are mistaken, but must hold that there are various ways of pursuing or preserving, say, the good.) Taking the first horn of this dilemma does not seem particularly promising, but I will not argue directly against it here. Instead, I want to concentrate on exploring what it might look like (and whether it is possible) for a moral realist to opt for the second route instead.

One way of arguing that realism is compatible with a plurality of individual judgments and decisions is to embrace value pluralism. As Isaiah Berlin suggests, we are confronted with a plurality of choices and ends, all of which may have some claim to value, and yet we must often choose one course of action (or way of being) while sacrificing another (see the epigram of this chapter). According to Berlin, that we must sometimes choose between “ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute” is unavoidable. He writes, “If, as I believe, the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle

compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict—and of tragedy—can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition.”⁴ Importantly, “the necessity and agony of choice” of which Berlin speaks presupposes a realistic conception of moral values.⁵ We must choose between things which we have reason to believe really have equal merit, and which make equal claims upon us, and Berlin does not seem to think that the initial demands made upon us by such values can be reduced to anything like subjective preference.

Such a view, if fully worked out, would provide us with a realist account of moral values, but it leaves some questions about the status of our particular judgments and choices unanswered. If there is no principled way of ranking the plurality of values, then does this mean that when one is faced with a conflict, there is no “right answer” to the question, “What should I do?” Perhaps the pluralistic realist will simply say that the truth is indeterminate, and that one must choose (and that one’s choice between these two options cannot be assessed in terms of correctness or truth). This would imply that what we call “moral dilemmas” are not really moral dilemmas at all (i.e. situations where we have conflicting overriding obligations both of which we can’t satisfy), but rather just difficult personal choices. Of course, if we say that, then we fail to do justice to Berlin’s view that pluralism has a tragic aspect, insofar as the options that face us are equally, *morally* demanding of us, and choosing one course leave some ultimate demand left unanswered.

On the other hand, we can encounter cases in which what appears to be a *formally* tragic dilemma does not appear tragic to the agent who is actually in the dilemma, because she is particularly committed to one sort of value in a way which is not blindly dogmatic, but nevertheless inclines her toward the course of action which accords with that commitment. It would seem that such a decision is a good one for the agent to make, and is perfectly understandable, but if realism requires that we not allow the truth of a judgment (or the correctness of a decision) depend upon features of the agent, then we would be forced to hold that the agent’s commitment cannot be part of what makes her judgment, “I ought to do X,” true. The puzzle is that such a reasonably committed agent might well make such a judgment, but the

⁴ “Two Concepts of Liberty,” *The Proper Study of Mankind*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 239.

⁵ On this point, see also Thomas Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value,” *Mortal Questions*, (New York: Canto, 1979).

realist would have to hold that, strictly speaking, this judgment is false (because the “truth” is indeterminate: either she ought to do X or Y). I will say more about why I find this result puzzling, and unsatisfactory, in the sections that follow.

While I am sympathetic to value pluralism, it should be noted that monistic value systems which embrace a realist analysis of value will be susceptible to similar practical difficulties. Thus, the puzzling nature of the result above does not depend upon the adoption of pluralism. For as Sartre suggests with his example of the young man who must decide whether to remain in France to care for his mother or to set off for England to fight in the war, it appears that there are situations in which what we ought to do is underdetermined by even a monistic ethical system. As Sartre sees the young man’s situation:

Who could help him to choose? Christian doctrine? No. Christian doctrine says, “Be charitable, love your neighbor, take the more rugged path, etc., etc.” But which is the more rugged path? Whom should he love as a brother? The fighting man or his mother? Which does the greater good, the vague act of fighting in a group, or the concrete one of helping a particular human being to go on living? Who can decide a priori? Nobody. No book of ethics can tell him. The Kantian ethics says, “Never treat any person as a means, but as an end.” Very well, if I stay with my mother, I’ll treat her as an end and not as a means; but by virtue of this very fact, I’m running the risk of treating the people around me who are fighting, as means; and, conversely, if I go to join those who are fighting, I’ll be treating them as an end, and, by doing that, I run the risk of treating my mother as a means.⁶

Importantly, Sartre does not seem to be simply suggesting that the difficulty is *epistemological*—that there is a right thing to do in this situation even if no one is able to know what it is—because it appears that any support one might give in favor of one course of action over the other will involve contestable (but perhaps reasonable) interpretation of crucial notions in each system of value (in order to push the results in a determinate direction); this point is particularly clear with respect to what he says about both Christian ethics and Kant’s categorical imperative. As for a consequentialist or utilitarian system, Sartre’s criticism implies that such a system, in these situations, has little or no practical value, or at least, its practical value is exhausted prior to arriving at a determinate moral decision. Supposing that the best calculations revealed that both courses of action would have equal expected utility, the utilitarian can say:

⁶ “The Humanism of Existentialism,” in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, ed. Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 275.

“It doesn’t matter which course of action you choose.” But, of course, for the person who must choose, *it does matter*, for there is more at stake for the individual than a mere utility calculation.

Thus, even on monistic systems where conflicting possibilities would both amount to the preservation or realization of moral value, it makes sense to say that, while the theory itself may be indifferent about which course of action one should take, from the perspective of the agent who must decide, the fact that each course of action has (or would realize or preserve) moral value still raises the possibility of tragic conflict—in this case, not between competing values, but between various ways of realizing a particular value. (For example, in choosing one way to benefit the greater good, the young man still has to leave something possible, about which he cares deeply, undone.) However, the difficult question for the realist has to do with the status of our *decisions* in the face of such conflicts. Since we cannot perform every action that it would be good to perform, or live every kind of life that would manifest moral goodness, we must choose from among the possibilities. Where our choices are underdetermined by our values (or for the pluralist, where values conflict), it doesn’t seem that we can say that we chose the *right* thing, or that our decision to do such and such reflects what we truly ought to do, and it may be asked how a realist can accept this kind of formal indeterminacy, or whether *we* should accept a theory which, in principle, leaves so much unsettled about the status of our decisions.

The reason why the theoretical indeterminacy which these sorts of moral conflicts point to (or at least make plausible) presents such a challenge for moral realism is that a compelling case can be made for the idea that if a particular agent has a commitment which makes a particular course of action seem “more right” to her (even though she acknowledges the difficult conflict), then it makes sense to say that she ought to act in accordance with her commitment, or that she acts rightly by honoring her commitment, or (and this is perhaps most directly problematic for the moral realist) that it is *true*, because of who she is and what she is committed to, that she ought to choose in a particular way. Since all these claims seem to depend upon a feature of the agent (the particular commitment she had adopted), they do not seem amenable to a realistic analysis. In what follows, I will consider the case made for this approach, and its incompatibility with realism, by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. I will, in large part, accept the basic approach, but also show that (something that warrants the name) realism *can* avail itself of a version of what Sinnott-Armstrong proposes.

2. Moral Realism and Ways of Life

In *Moral Dilemmas*, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues that a person's commitment to a particular "way of life" is relevant in assessing the truth of a person's decision about what he or she ought to do when faced with a moral dilemma. He also claims that the plausibility of his view serves as an argument against a strong formulation of moral realism that he calls *extreme universal moral realism*. I want to consider his argument against this view in order to show what issues a more plausible form of moral realism must resolve. I will argue that commitments to ways of life⁷ can be regarded as "realistic factors" in moral deliberation when such commitments count as permissible ways of pursuing a (morally) good life. Because such commitments presuppose the reality of the values which shape them, they are not arbitrary and cannot be reduced to mere preference. Although this view does not eliminate the possibility that someone else with different commitments might—rightly—judge differently in a similar situation, it is not incompatible with moral realism. Permissible commitments derive "realistic" status from their responsiveness to pre-existing values and moral demands.⁸

Sinnott-Armstrong summarizes his position as follows:

The basic idea of my argument is that realistic moral facts do not favour either alternative in a moral dilemma, but different agents can still personally favour different alternatives, and then their personal rankings or choices can determine what they morally ought to do. Since moral realists deny that any moral judgments depend on mental factors like moral beliefs or choices, extreme universal moral realism is false.⁹

Sinnott-Armstrong then offers a pair of cases: Fritz promised to complete a professional project by tomorrow, but is short on time and can only complete the project if he works on it today. However, today is his daughter's birthday, and his family always goes sailing on her birthday. Although he made no

⁷ In what follows, I will sometimes speak simply of *commitments* or of *ways of life*. There may be important ways in which these concepts should be distinguished, but for my purposes here, I will focus on what they share in common, which is that both refer to ways of prioritizing values such that particular values become integral to the moral identity and perspective of the agent.

⁸ Obviously, a complete account of this view must offer some defense of the realistic status of the values which inform these commitments, and space does not allow a full discussion of that issue here. The basic idea, which should emerge in what follows, is that such commitments arise as a response to ways of living and acting which strike the agent as having a value which precedes their adoption of the commitment. Since Sinnott-Armstrong is willing to countenance the idea of their being realistic moral facts (at least for the sake of argument), I do not believe I am begging the essential question which his arguments address by likewise leaving this issue somewhat unaddressed.

⁹ *Moral Dilemmas*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 200.

explicit promise to go sailing, he is expected to come, and so Fritz has conflicting obligations to his colleagues and to his daughter. Neither alternative plainly trumps the other, and so Sinnott-Armstrong claims that Fritz's case is, on an uncommitted interpretation of the reasons, a moral dilemma. In the second case, Pedro is in a situation relevantly similar to Fritz's. Sinnott-Armstrong stipulates that despite the overall similarities of each case, "Fritz and Pedro still *personally* rank the moral requirements differently."¹⁰ Fritz ranks his obligation to his daughter higher than his professional promise, "because he chooses to be a family man committed to a family way of life." Pedro, on the other hand, ranks his professional obligation higher than his familial obligation, "because he chooses to be a professional man whose priorities are to the professional way of life." Sinnott-Armstrong insists that both agents consider the same moral factors involved in their situations—say, that promises ought to be kept, or that failing to meet their familial obligations would be a kind of betrayal. Sinnott-Armstrong calls such considerations realistic factors because they are relevant (and presumably true) considerations about the case regardless of how one personally ranks these considerations. He also stipulates that both Fritz and Pedro's ways of life are morally permissible and that neither one commits any clear error in his personal ranking of the moral considerations. However, Fritz ultimately judges that he ought to go sailing with his daughter, and Pedro judges that he ought to complete his project.

In each agent's case, one course of action is favored by personal rankings—or more fully, by a commitment to a particular way of life that fosters such rankings. If it is true that Fritz ought to go sailing and that Pedro ought to finish his project, the truth of each statement cannot be established by only the realistic factors of each situation, for some reference must be made to each agent's personal commitments or rankings in order to explain why it is true in Fritz's case that he ought to go sailing and true in Pedro's case that he ought to finish the project. Thus, there is something different about each person's case, but the difference—the variation in each one's personal rankings of the considerations—is not a realistic factor, according to Sinnott-Armstrong. On his account, personal rankings are not realistic factors because these rankings depend upon beliefs or choices made by each agent. According to extreme universal moral realism, the truth of a moral judgment does not depend upon the particular beliefs or choices of the agent. If there are reasons for allowing both that it is true that Fritz ought to go sailing and that Pedro ought to

¹⁰ Ibid., 201.

finish his project, and if these reasons make essential reference to non-realistic factors, then extreme universal moral realism is false.

To motivate the idea that there is some sense in which the judgments that Fritz ought to go sailing and that Pedro ought to finish his project are both true, Sinnott-Armstrong writes:

[S]uch ways of life *do* affect what agents ought to do in some moral dilemmas. If Fritz asked me what he ought to do, I would tell him that he ought to break his promise [to complete the professional project on time] in order to avoid hurting his daughter. Why? Because this choice fits best into his family way of life, and this way of life is both morally and rationally permissible, so to choose otherwise would show a lack of integrity on his part. Fritz's family way of life is rationally permissible, because his choice of it does not depend on any defect, such as error, ignorance or irrationality. Fritz's family way of life is also morally permissible, because he is not so committed that he would help his family if there were a realistically overriding moral requirement not to do so. Still, if he hurt his family when there was no realistically overriding moral reason to do so, he would violate his way of life and his integrity.¹¹

We cannot perform every possible action that it would be good to perform or live every possible kind of life that it would be good to live. Once we have adopted a particular permissible way of life, it is reasonable—and perhaps a necessary part of what it is to be committed to that way of life—to allow our moral deliberations to be guided by our particular commitments (which is not to say that we are justified in becoming dogmatic). Importantly, Sinnott-Armstrong notes that “neither [Fritz nor Pedro] has to condemn the other's choice or way of life.”¹² Each agent can allow that a different person with different commitments might reasonably arrive at a different judgment about what to do. But if this is the case, then at least some moral judgments are not realistically true, but only true *relative* to one's personal commitments, beliefs, or way of life. Thus, extreme universal moral realism is false, and such cases provide a presumption in favor of some form of moral relativism (or anti-realism). The burden of proof is on the moral realist (extreme or otherwise) either to show that ways of life do not contribute to the truth of a moral judgment, or to show that some form of moral realism can account for the truth of these judgments.

I find much of Sinnott-Armstrong's argument compelling; however, I will argue in the next section that the direct justificatory weight Sinnott-Armstrong puts on Fritz's commitment (or his

¹¹ Ibid., 206.

¹² Ibid., 201.

integrity) in *his* (Sinnott-Armstrong's) assessment of Fritz's case differs in important ways from how the commitment figures into *Fritz's* judgment. I will argue that the way in which a permissible commitment shapes the agent's judgment is compatible with moral realism.

3. The Shaping-Role of Commitments

Sinnott-Armstrong agrees with the extreme realist that commitments to a way of life are not realistic factors. However, Sinnott-Armstrong seems to assume that if ways of life are relevant (non-realistic) factors in moral judgment, they must figure in as positive moral reasons for preferring one course of action over the other. On his view, while these factors are legitimate moral considerations, they are not "realistic," because a commitment to a way of life essentially involves a choice or decision on the part of the agent to prefer particular goods or values over others, where this choice cannot be justified in a way that rationally excludes all other possible rankings of values.

I think it is doubtful that commitments or ways of life, if they are to be relevant to making moral decisions, can be construed as additional *reasons* in favor of one course of action. A different way in which such factors could be relevant is by serving as background conditions which generate a determinate context (or perspective) for the evaluation of the realistic moral considerations that comprise a person's situation. For example, where it is indeterminate as to which of two or more conflicting reasons has greater weight, commitments to particular ways of life may serve not as explicit additional reasons, but rather as a kind of filter which selects, assigns added weight to, or directs one's attention to reasons that would recommend actions that are in stricter accordance with that particular way of life. In this case, commitment to a way of life does not fall among the *agent's* reasons for action because such a commitment is what gives shape to the agent's particular way of viewing and evaluating the available reasons for action. That is, such commitments enable an agent to weigh the reasons in a particular (and permissible) way, and in virtue of serving this role cannot themselves be counted amongst the *agent's* reasons.

An agent might, however, be *aware* that her capacity for moral judgment and decision-making is influenced by her commitments.¹³ While such an awareness may contribute to the agent's understanding of *why* a particular course of action seems right or wrong to her, the explanatory value of an appeal to the agent's commitment to a way of life does not translate into justificatory power *for the agent herself*. If all an agent can appeal to in an attempt to justify her judgment is a commitment to a particular way of life, then the agent will actually have reason to doubt the legitimacy (or truth) of her judgment (particularly, when this judgment is under criticism), because such an appeal would appear to be an instance of special pleading.¹⁴ Commitments can *structure* the way a particular agent assesses a situation in ways that are more determinate than a "neutral" perspective, and thus courses of action which have equal value from a neutral perspective may seem unequal from the perspective of the committed agent. While this added weight flows from the fact of commitment, a judgment based upon this additional weight cannot be justified by *appeal* to the commitment, but must make reference to the values and considerations upon which this commitment is based, and which make the commitment a reasonable, permissible one to have. To show that commitments to ways of life can play this shaping-role, and do so in a way that is acceptable to a moral realist, I need to show that when a committed agent judges in accordance with her commitments, the commitment itself, while legitimately shaping the agent's perspective on the situation, does not figure in to the agent's *justification* for her judgment.

Sinnott-Armstrong seems to treat commitments as additional reasons, but this fails to make sense of how the agent deliberates about his own situation. He says of Fritz that, "Fritz believes that his daughter's pain is more important to him than his professional promise, because he chooses to be a family man committed to a family way of life."¹⁵ What role does the *because* play here? On the interpretation

¹³ It is important to distinguish between the claim that one's commitments *produce* reasons and that commitments *structure* the reasons there are. I am making the latter claim here. On my view, the prior claim would entail that there are no moral reasons (or moral values) prior to the adoption of a particular perspective or set of commitments, and thus count as an anti-realistic and relativistic position. The claim I want to advance acknowledges the reality of reasons and values but holds there is no *a priori* means for prioritizing them (all of the time), but that weightings of values and reasons from within particular ways of life (or commitments), can add a layer of determinacy which may be essential to the person's developing and striving toward a particular (permissible) moral ideal.

¹⁴ A similar phenomenon can be observed when celebrities attempt to excuse their bad behavior by reminding us that they are "human beings, like everyone else." Such remarks may *explain* why celebrities make moral blunders (after all, they are human, like everyone else...), but they needn't compel anyone to withdraw criticism of the bad behavior, or of the people who engage in it.

¹⁵ *Moral Dilemmas*, 201.

that construes his choice of way of life as a positive moral reason for going sailing with his daughter, Fritz's commitment to the family way of life would provide a reason for his belief that his daughter's pain is more important than his professional responsibilities. But how can a commitment provide a reason for belief? It may provide a causal explanation of why Fritz believes that his daughter's pain is more important, but to explain the causal source of Fritz's belief is not to justify it. Believing that his daughter's pain is more important than a minor promise is simply part of what it is to be committed to a family way of life; it is not that one *first* makes such a commitment and *then* sees that certain beliefs are mandated by this commitment. Rather, to be so committed just *is* to believe that the pain of one's daughter is more important than other kinds of moral responsibilities. That is, choosing to be a "family man" cannot be separated from believing what Fritz believes. If the commitment cannot be separated from the belief, then it cannot serve as a reason for Fritz's belief, or for the ranking of values which this belief expresses. His belief, then, is expressive of his commitment; it is not that his commitment gives him a reason to believe certain things. Even if Fritz were to appeal to his commitment to this way of life, he would only be elucidating the full nature of his belief and his ranking of values, not justifying it. To see that such an appeal cannot amount to a justification of his ranking of values, we need only notice that Fritz's commitment to a particular way of life stands in need of justification, too. (If Fritz were attempting to justify some judgment by appealing to his commitment to an anti-Semitic way of life, we would notice more easily that commitments themselves cannot justify the beliefs that are constitutive of those very same commitments.)

Since ways of life cannot serve as positive (or additional) reasons that justify an agent's moral judgment in light of his or her particular ranking of values, if they play any positive role in moral deliberation, it is by serving as relevant background conditions which explain why an agent ranks the values (or, sees the situation) as he or she does. It might seem that what I said in the previous paragraph, if true, establishes that ways of life cannot be (realistically) relevant in this sense either, because there is no hard distinction to be made between one's commitment to a way of life and the beliefs that flow from that commitment. If a person's beliefs are not justified at the level at which they inform one's judgments, then they cannot be justified by appeal to the way of life of which the beliefs themselves are constitutive. If this were correct, then commitments to ways of life could not count as realistic factors because it

appears that they cannot be assessed in terms of truth. (At best, they would be part of a psychological explanation of why the agent judges as she does.)

Here, I think, is the false step. The view that commitments cannot count as realistic factors involves the claim that in order for commitments, or the beliefs that both flow from and are constitutive of them, to be realistic, they must admit of truth-assessment. But if Fritz and Pedro's respective ways of life are morally and rationally permissible, as stipulated by Sinnott-Armstrong, then there seems to be nothing else we could demand of their commitments in order to judge the commitments themselves as justified. Of course, this commits me to the claim that different agents may have different moral beliefs which are equally justified (since commitments are comprised of beliefs). Moral realism, it will be said, cannot say such things, since this seems to imply that the agent is justified in believing whatever she believes and in preferring whatever she prefers (within the realm of what is, impersonally considered, morally permissible).

This is not, however, how things seem from the perspective of the agent who must decide what to do. Fritz, if he is morally serious, does not reason, "Since I am a family man, I must go sailing with my daughter." If he has anything to say about his decision, it will surely be something more of the sort, "My daughter's happiness just is more important to me than my promise to finish this project."¹⁶ For Fritz, this claim is *more* than a mere preference. It is, for him, a reason. If we try to appeal to something deeper which justifies it, we will not discover yet another reason. We will discover that Fritz is a dedicated family man, committed to a family way of life, and while this discovery *explains* why Fritz values his daughter's happiness more than the professional promise, it does not justify Fritz's distribution of weight to these goods. Given the moral permissibility of Fritz's way of life and the realistic value of his daughter's happiness, there is no need for further justification of his weightings or the kinds of reasons that flow from them. To echo Wittgenstein, Fritz asserts this reason—that his daughter's happiness is more important to him in this case—without (a certain kind of further) justification, but not without

¹⁶ Joseph Raz makes a similar point in "The Truth in Particularism": "In such a case it is right for people to act as their moral character tells them to act. But their reason is not that that is what they are disposed to do, or that this is more consistent with their past decisions. It is that they can do no other" (in *Moral Particularism*, ed. Hooker and Little, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 75). Raz's whole discussion in this section of his paper (pp. 70-77) expounds upon ideas introduced by Peter Winch in "The Universalizability of Moral Judgments," in *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), whose views on related matters I will discuss below.

right.¹⁷ If he has a right to assert this reason (or, if he rightly asserts it), then we can equally say that he rightly concludes that the course of action that respects this reason is *truly* what he ought to do.¹⁸

It is not simply Fritz's having this commitment which makes it a realistic factor in determining what he ought to do, but rather the fact that this kind of commitment is a genuine way of being responsibly responsive to moral values.¹⁹ Because such a commitment permissibly structures the relevant values, its *validity* does not depend upon the particular agent who adopts it; however, whether a particular commitment is a *relevant* factor does depend upon what commitments the agent brings to the particular situation. None of this requires that we abandon a realist conception of morality (that judgments are made true by considerations that lie "outside us"), but if realism is to survive such considerations, it must be distanced from interpretations of morality as an impersonal decision-procedure, particularly the idea that morality can guide without reference to the commitments of the agent who must deliberate. Importantly, this suggests that one can retain a realist framework without holding that "realistic" moral standards (impersonally considered) must provide determinate guidance at the practical level. Thus, I am proposing a realism which makes room for the adoption of substantive commitments which are, in a sense, validated by their counting as a permissible way of structuring various values (or various demands value makes of us), but which at a fairly determinate level does not mandate which particular commitments an agent must adopt. In the remainder of this paper, I suggest that clarifying the role of integrity in moral deliberation (and exposing misconceptions about this role) can help in making the kind of realist picture I am proposing seem more plausible.

4. Integrity and Commitment

The proposal that "justification runs out" for our moral reasons, and that it runs out in ways that allow for diversity of moral judgment at the practical level, will not be welcomed Sinnott-Armstrong's extreme universal moral realist.²⁰ Let us consider one other way that this extreme realist might attempt to

¹⁷ See *Philosophical Investigations*, §289 (and surrounding discussion).

¹⁸ I assume, of course, that similar claims about Pedro's case can be made.

¹⁹ Recall here that Sinnott-Armstrong allows that there are some realistic factors in his cases – that the generic considerations that produce a conflict (e.g. incompatible promises) count as moral considerations because they reflect real values that generate (conflicting) obligations.

²⁰ For discussion of the idea that our reasons "run out," and that, for example, morality does not admit of *proof*, see Paul Johnston, *The Contradictions of Modern Moral Philosophy*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

account for the influence of ways of life upon an agent's decision about what he or she ought to do, without this influence figuring (directly) into the truth of the agent's moral judgment. The extreme realist might say that when a way of life does make a relevant contribution to moral judgment, it inherits this moral relevance in virtue of activating an objective (true) moral principle. In the cases of Fritz and Pedro, one might claim that failing to judge and choose as they do would involve them both in a compromise of their moral integrity. For the Kantian, there are (imperfect) duties to oneself in addition to our duties to others. The utilitarian, too, must account for the harms which would befall the agent (although these harms have no *special weight*). On either of these general approaches to morality, there might be a place, particularly in conflicts of the sort facing Fritz and Pedro, for commitments and ways of life to have an indirect bearing upon the agent's judgment which would be acceptable to the extreme moral realist. In the Kantian framework, this could be captured by the claim that one has a duty to maintain one's integrity. In the utilitarian framework, one might claim that there is a valid secondary principle that, where two or more actions would have the same utility without reference to the agent who must act, actions that allow that person to maintain his or her integrity are to be preferred over actions that do not, since a compromise of integrity would constitute an additional harm (and would thus give one course of action a slightly lower overall utility).

Sinnott-Armstrong argues that this approach will not work because even if there is some (realistically) true principle about maintaining one's integrity, it would still be the case that a principle of this sort would be instantiated in cases like Fritz and Pedro's because of their particular commitments, beliefs, or personal rankings. So, if the specific judgments that Fritz ought to go sailing and Pedro ought to finish his project are true, these subjective factors still make an essential contribution to the truth of each judgment, even if this contribution is mediated by some integrity principle like the ones mentioned above.²¹

Additionally, it might be thought that the kinds of principles suggested, even if they did solve this problem for the extreme moral realist, do not adequately account for the ways in which moral integrity figures in to an agent's moral deliberation and judgment. For example, Bernard Williams has argued that utilitarian approaches to moral conflicts fail to countenance the agent's integrity precisely because the

²¹ See *Moral Dilemmas*, 211-212.

agent's moral feelings about a case could only make a difference when such feelings (or commitments) do not incline the agent to act in a way that is contrary to utilitarianism.²² This implies that an agent's moral integrity plays a quite limited role in moral decision-making (and, Williams suggests, is simply irrelevant if the agent's moral reservations or convictions run counter to the utilitarian calculus); in effect, integrity serves as little more than a tie-breaker in situations where the objective moral weights and alternatives have already been determined by other procedures. As for the Kantian principle, if the duty to integrity is merely a meritorious (or imperfect) duty, then the same problem arises that Williams attributes to utilitarianism. If the duty to maintain integrity is an inflexible (perfect) duty, then this would mean that we have a perfect duty to act in accordance with our moral commitments. But this does not address the extreme moral realist's concern over whether our moral commitments are valid simply in virtue of our having them. For the extreme realist's purposes of dealing with moral dilemmas, introducing a perfect duty to integrity would be too strong a claim, since it would again seem to allow for special pleading.

These attempts to use integrity to resolve moral dilemmas rest upon a general misunderstanding of the role integrity plays in moral judgment and deliberation. This problem is exposed by Peter Winch in "Moral Integrity." On Winch's view, an explicit appeal to one's own moral commitments or integrity cannot figure among the *agent's* reasons for deciding to act as he does, even though an agent's commitment to a way of life may determine what she has done, or how she must understand the moral status of her action. Winch's view is that an agent may decide that she *must* do such-and-such (or, that she *had to do it*) even though she also judges that, in performing this act, she has done something wrong. He provides the following example, taken from the film *Violent Saturday*²³: a group of bank-robbing gangsters have gone into hiding in an Amish (and thereby, pacifist) community, and not without threat to the members of this community. At the critical point in this story, "one of the gangsters is about to shoot a young girl member of the community in the presence of the community's elder. With horror and doubt on his face, the elder seizes a pitchfork and hurls it into the gangster's back."²⁴ How are we—and more importantly for Winch's purposes, how is the elder himself—to understand what he has done? An

²² See Section 5 of "A Critique of Utilitarianism," *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

²³ Dir. Richard Fleischer (1955). Based on William Heath's *Violent Saturday*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1955).

²⁴ "Moral Integrity," *Ethics and Action*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 185.

unlikely interpretation (according to Winch) involves saying that, faced with this situation, the elder has abandoned the principle of non-violence, or has discovered that there are exceptions to it. Winch finds this interpretation implausible because, “it is quite clear that the elder thinks he has done something *wrong* in killing the gangster.”²⁵ Winch explains, “The whole point of this principle [of non-violence], in the context of the religious life of this community, would be lost if it were thought of as subject to qualifications in this way; and the life of the community still represents the elder’s highest ideal—so he cannot be thought of as having abandoned the principle.” To frame one’s way of life around an ideal of this sort is to conceive of non-violence as good without qualification; if qualifications must be admitted, then this ideal can no longer serve as one’s highest ideal, since qualifications must have their source in some higher, more fundamental moral ideal.

We are not, however, to suppose that the elder’s action is an instance of weakness of will, for if that were the case, then it would not seem problematic to say that the elder thinks that what he did was *wrong*. Part of the problem is that it may seem to us that the elder did the right thing, and that he is not thinking clearly about what he has done. But also, “it is equally clear that the elder would think that in some sense he ‘had no choice’ in the situation. That is how he *had to* act and if he had acted differently he would not have been able to forgive himself.”²⁶ That is, the elder thinks that what he did was wrong and that he had to do it. Winch rejects the suggestion that the “impossibility” of the elder’s acting other than he did is a psychological impossibility, but also holds that it is equally wrong to think of the elder as acting in virtue of a different set of moral principles. The considerations which appear to influence the elder’s action—that an innocent, helpless young girl’s life was threatened by someone with the cruelest of intentions—belong, according to Winch, to the “‘perspective’ of the action.” Winch appears to mean that these features of the situation figure into the situation *as moral considerations*, regardless of the explicit moral convictions or principles brought to bear on the situation by the agent who must choose. The innocence of the young girl and the viciousness of the gangster’s intentions, for example, count as reasons for stopping the gangster, even if the adopted principles of the agent who must act—the elder—would count what is necessary for stopping the gangster as morally wrong. Part of Winch’s point seems to be

²⁵ Ibid., 186.

²⁶ Ibid., 186.

that from the “perspective of the action,” what must be done in this situation must be done for the sake of the young girl rather than for the sake of one’s own moral principles. The elder would not have been able to forgive himself for not killing the gangster because the death of a young girl would have resulted due to his inaction; that is, from the perspective of the action (i.e. *his* action) he would have felt that he was in part responsible for her death because he could have done something to prevent it, and in this case, what he could have done can be concretely described. His regret would not have been a general regret that the girl was murdered, but a regret about what in particular he could have done to prevent it. Thus, it was in some (non-psychological) sense *impossible* for the elder to act in accordance with his own moral principle of non-violence, given his understanding of what was at stake in the situation, but since it is by his principles—his way of life—that the elder understands the moral significance of what he has done, he nevertheless, necessarily, judges that what he has done is wrong.

Winch is aware that some will object to his view on the grounds that it “leaves no room for any discovery of, or decision concerning, ‘*the right*’ thing to do in such a situation and thus makes morality useless as a guide to conduct.”²⁷ Winch’s response is that *it is improper* to conceive of morality as necessarily action-guiding, and that there is no such thing as *the right* thing to do in the elder’s situation. We have already seen this possibility arise in connection with the plurality of options that face us, a plurality which can give rise to dilemmatic situations in which it is unclear whether any moral system can offer fully determinate guidance (i.e. recommend one particular course of action). The elder’s situation is a perfect illustration of Isaiah Berlin’s point that in a world of many, and potentially conflicting, values and ends, “the possibility of conflict—and of *tragedy*—can never wholly be eliminated from human life.” The elder’s case is precisely the kind of moral tragedy Berlin has in mind. What makes the elder’s situation a tragedy is that it is impossible for him to live up to his own (permissible and reasonable) moral ideals without doing (or failing to do) something which would make it impossible (or unbearable) for him to live with himself. In the words of Wiggins, the elder’s case makes it painfully clear that

Not only was the world not made for us or to fit our concerns; we have not made our moral concerns (that the world be thus or so) simply in order to fit the world, or even to perfect the accommodation between our very best intentions and that which we shall

²⁷ Ibid., 186-187.

definitely, despite contingency, be able to achieve. Even if we had the power and the foresight to do this, we might still despise to do so.²⁸

The elder is not willing to claim that the ideal of non-violence to which he is committed admits of qualification; again, he cannot admit this without essentially demolishing this ideal. In his tragic case, maintaining his moral integrity cannot (morally) be bought at the price of a young girl's life, and so the only way for him to keep his integrity *is to judge that even though he acted as he had to, he nevertheless did something wrong*. This may seem deeply paradoxical, especially if our own moral commitments are significantly different from those of the elder and his community. But Winch's point is that if we are to understand the situation *as the elder understood it*, we must take seriously the idea that "he neither abandoned that ideal [of non-violence] nor succumbed to a non-moral temptation."²⁹ Once we do that, we are left with the claim that the elder chose to do wrong because he had to. The world (and the bad people in it), in effect, *removed* the possibility of his acting in a manner consistent with his moral ideals. If Wiggins is correct, then it is not necessarily a *fault* of the elder's moral ideals that they *seem* to fail to tell him what to do in this case. For one could hold that to the extent that his ideals show him how to *understand* the moral significance of what he has done, his moral ideals (and standards) are still doing *something* important.³⁰ Whether it was right or wrong to kill the gangster is not something that can be determined simply by considering how the world actually is, for our sense of right and wrong is not determined by how the world is, but by our very conception of how it ought to be.

If all of this is on the right track, then considerations about a person's moral integrity cannot serve the role of tie-breaker in a moral dilemma. For agents such as Fritz and Pedro, there simply is no moral dilemma, precisely because there is nothing about either of their situations which prevents or forbids them from acting in a way that preserves their respective moral integrity. It is not reasonable in either of their

²⁸ David Wiggins, "Truth, and Truth as Predicated of Moral Judgments," *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 176.

²⁹ "Moral Integrity," 187.

³⁰ This point draws from the ideas of Raimond Gaita, who writes, "Much moral thinking is not thinking *what* to do, and even when it is it is also an attempt to understand the *meaning* of what we do, which is rarely thinking about the empirical consequences of what we do, or about how our principles stand in relation to those consequences and to one another. It is, most often, an attempt to achieve a deepened understanding of the *meaning* of our actions." See, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, 2nd Edition, (London: Routledge, 2004), 264.

cases to think that the end to which their actions are directed has anything to do with the preservation of their integrity; the object of each of their choices is that for the sake of which they act—in Fritz’s case, his daughter; in Pedro’s case, his colleague (or, the promise he made). That each of them acts rightly is made intelligible by the undeniable fact that what they both bring to bear on their situations—their particular ways of seeing the situation—is conditioned in each of their cases by equally acceptable conceptions of the good life.

These considerations suggest that the notion of “the right thing to do” is necessarily vague and indeterminate until we supply a concrete context in which a particular person whose own commitments or ways of life are counted as part of the overall situation. This would imply that the notion of “the right thing to do” is, as Wittgenstein puts it, a chimera, like the notion of an “absolutely right road” along which everyone finds themselves compelled to travel.³¹ Furthermore, this suggests that the conception of moral realism put forward by Foot (above) must be abandoned. However, the absence of certain kinds of moral “absolutes” does not itself imply the absence of realist moral standards (as formal constraints on what counts as a morally permissible system, ideal, or commitment) or the unreality of moral values.

³¹ See “Lecture on Ethics,” *The Philosophical Review*, 74:1, (Jan. 1965), 7.