

## **Moral Emotions, Principles, and the Locus of Moral Perception**

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### ABSTRACT

I vindicate the thrust of the particularist position in moral deliberation. To this purpose, I focus on some elements that seem to play a crucial role in first-person moral deliberation and argue that they cannot be incorporated into a more sophisticated system of moral principles. More specifically, I emphasize some peculiarities of moral perception in the light of which I defend the irreducible deliberative relevance of a certain phenomenon, namely: the phenomenon of an agent morally coming across a particular situation. Following on from Bernard Williams, I talk of an agent's character as a factor that contributes to fixing what situations an agent comes morally across. A crucial point, in the debate, will be how an agent confronts the normatively loaded features of his own character when he is engaged in first-person deliberation.

**Keywords:** particularism, generalism, morality, emotion, principle, perception, guilt, inner figure

In this paper, I vindicate the thrust of the particularist position in moral deliberation. To this purpose, I will bring out some elements that play a crucial role in first-person moral deliberation and argue that they cannot be incorporated into a more sophisticated system of moral principles.

More specifically, I will emphasize some peculiarities of moral perception in the light of which I will defend the irreducible deliberative relevance of a certain phenomenon, namely: the phenomenon of morally coming across. Coming across a particular situation *S* involves not only *S*, but an agent *A* who is placed in a certain location with regard to that particular situation. It is easy to see that, if an agent's actual location is to be at all morally significant, the individuation of such a location must include not only where he is physically, but also what his projects, engagements and commitments are. A doctor is not in the same moral position with regard to a sick person as a layman. Following on from Bernard Williams,<sup>1</sup> I will talk of an agent's character (which includes a rather complex variety of elements, but some clearly with a normative import) as a factor that contributes to fixing what situations an agent comes morally across. A crucial point is how an agent confronts the normatively loaded features of his own character when he is engaged in first-person deliberation. I will argue that he cannot approach them as further elements to be included within a more detailed antecedent of a principle in the light of which he ought to deliberate. This seems to set a relevant limit to the role that principles can play in moral deliberation. I will explore, in the last section, an account of moral emotions that will allow me to point out some aspects of the way in which an agent's character is shaped, and how they affect the nature of moral deliberation. As a result, the phenomenon of morally coming across will acquire a deeper deliberative significance, and the

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<sup>1</sup> See Williams 1981b, p. 5, Williams 1973, pp. 115-116.

generalist picture of moral deliberation will appear as not only partial, but distorting.

## ***1. Moral generalism vs. moral particularism***

It is not easy to identify the precise terms of the current dispute between generalists and particularists. I begin by shortly characterizing two ambitious generalist projects whose eventual success would involve some important metaphysical and deliberative benefits. These projects are, nevertheless, regarded as highly implausible even by those who, nowadays, endorse a generalist view in moral deliberation. In fact, the dominant versions of generalism come up as a result of weakening the initial ambitions in an important way. My purpose in this paper is to vindicate the thrust of particularism by challenging these weaker generalist proposals.

### *1.1. Two ambitious generalist projects*

There is surely an *ambitious generalist project* which aims at rendering the normativity of moral judgements consistent with the disenchantment of the world, that is, with the idea that the world as it is independent of us has no moral (and, in general, no value) properties. This project ought to be able to fix the content of moral judgements and assess their correctness without attributing any moral properties to the world. In other words, the ambitious generalist assumes the central thesis of moral subjectivism (i.e., moral judgements derive their content from the way we respond to a non-moral world) and seeks to show how the normativity of moral judgements is still possible, basically by specifying a set of general principles in terms of which the correctness of such judgements is to be assessed. A crucial feature of this ambitious project is, then, that:

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(AG1) Apart from the non-moral empirical data, *only* principles could help us in our moral deliberations, in assessing our moral judgements<sup>2</sup>

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There is, of course, an even *more ambitious generalist project* according to which

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(AG2) Moral dilemmas<sup>3</sup> are only apparent, since any possible conflict between moral principles may be solved by appealing to another, more general principle that mediates between them

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This proposal brings us close to denying that agents could have good or bad moral luck.

There is serious reason to doubt both (AG1) and (AG2). The latter comes close to denying the phenomenon of moral luck, which few people nowadays would like to deny. For, no matter what the circumstances are, there is always a morally right line of conduct which the agent must adopt and in such a way that it leaves little

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<sup>2</sup> Christine Korsgaard, for instance, seems committed to this view as she distinguishes between procedural and substantive realism in order to defend the former and reject the latter: “The procedural realist thinks that there are answers to moral questions *because* there are correct procedures for arriving at them. But the substantive moral realist thinks that there are correct procedures for answering moral questions *because* there are moral truths or facts which exist independently of those procedures, and which those procedures track.” (Korsgaard 1996, pp. 36-37)

<sup>3</sup> The denial of moral dilemmas may come in degrees. The stronger the denial, the more ambitious the generalist project will be. Strong deniers will claim that, whenever two prima facie moral duties come into conflict, only one of them is really a moral duty. Weak deniers may accept that, even when two prima facie moral duties conflict, each of them is still an active moral duty. They will, nevertheless, stress that there is always a moral principle in virtue of which one of two conflicting principles outweighs the other. Strong deniers leave no room for moral regret while weak ones leave some (but, perhaps, not enough) room for such a moral attitude. The comments that follow try to be neutral between these two ways of denying the existence of moral dilemmas, since I will focus on the role of principles in solving them.

room for moral regret.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, if we stick with (AG1) we may have trouble even coherently fixing the content of our moral judgements. So, to assume that there are moral properties in the world may turn out to be a necessary condition for making sense of that kind of judgment.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2. Weak Generalism

Some philosophers<sup>6</sup> who insist on calling themselves 'generalists' are, nevertheless, sensitive to the kind of worry that presses against (AG1) and (AG2). They acknowledge that not only general principles, but also moral perception plays a crucial role in moral deliberation, whereby they reject (AG1). In a similar trend, they doubt (AG2); for they no longer want to deny that there are real moral dilemmas and, consequently, that there is much room for regret in our moral lives. Hence, the generalist character of their proposal reduces to this:

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(G1) Moral general principles *must* play a *crucial* role in moral deliberation

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<sup>4</sup> See Nagel 1979b, Williams 1981a, Statman 1993, and also Corbí 2003, ch. 5.

<sup>5</sup> See Barry Stroud's detailed case against the subjectivism of color (Stroud 2000), which, as he suggests in an earlier text (Stroud, 1989), could also be applied to reject the subjectivism of moral features. I have tried to develop this suggestion in Corbí 2004.

<sup>6</sup> See Hooker & Little 2003 for the current debate about moral generalism vs. moral particularism. The kind of generalist that I have in mind is usually called '*Rossian generalist*' and his overall view can be summarized as follows: "To conclude, Normative ethics may be seen as the search for the correct principles of prima facie obligation, and an account of our duty *sanse phrase* and how we are to decide what this is in our everyday lives. The Rossian generalist schema is such that many views in normative ethics –including, for example, Rossian pluralism, virtue ethics, and act or rule utilitarianism- may be captured within it. Any such view is likely to give some role to rules in its account of ideal moral agency, but also to allow that judgement is required for the application of any rule and for those occasions on which rules run out. The principles arrived at will be universalizable, since they will describe ultimate grounding reasons. In other words, any ultimate reason that counts in favour of any action counts in favour of any action in which it is instantiated. The central question in ethics is what those ultimate grounding reasons are, and that question is left largely untouched by the debates over particularism." (Crisp 2003, p. 47)

I surely agree that *prima facie* principles must play a role in moral deliberation. What I dispute is the relevance of that role and, in particular, I give reason to reject the idea that the central question in ethics is just to find out those *prima facie* principles. I think that much has to be said about the role of judgment and the non-principled elements that must participate in it. In the coming sections, I will try to take some steps in this direction.

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And

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(G2) All moral principles are *prima facie* principles, that is, principles that can be overridden, on a particular occasion, by other relevant *prima facie* principles

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It follows, from the dismissal of (AG2), that the weak generalist must commit himself to (G2).<sup>7</sup> The problem is that, as they stand, (G1) and (G2) do not look like very interesting philosophical theses; for they are unable to preserve the metaphysical and deliberative virtues of the more ambitious generalist projects. The weak generalist can no longer claim that principles alone will allow us to meet the

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Dancy rejects both (G1) and (G2) (Dancy 2004). For, according to him,

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(P1) moral deliberation *needn't* use moral principles.

Dancy does not think he has shown that there are no moral principles, but claims to have proved, at least, that moral principles are not required to appropriately deliberate on the moral aspects of any given situation. His main line of reasoning for (P1) rests on the claim that moral features may change their moral polarity from one to another situation, so that we cannot even have *prima facie* principles; at least, if we interpret that the '*prima facie*' clause can only be cancelled by a relevant conflicting principle that may override the principle at stake. In other words, Dancy claims:

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(P2) the moral features that figure within the *prima facie* principles may change their polarity from one [situation](#) to another.

But (P1) seems to be incompatible with (G2). For the latter keeps the polarity constant and only admits of situations where a *prima facie* principle is overridden by other *prima facie* principles, but not a situation where a *prima facie* principle turns out to be false.

I must confess that I do not find Dancy's examples and arguments favoring (P2) very convincing. I tend to think that the weak generalist always [has](#) a chance to reinterpret the examples proposed by Dancy in ways consistent with (G2) (see Moreno 2004). Yet, even if he could provide an example that did not admit that reinterpretation, he might fall short of showing that such a case is so relevant that it must permeate our understanding of moral deliberation. Moreover, Dancy accepts that, even if the polarity of a feature may change, it has *default polarity*. Why, then, shouldn't we regard his stance just as a variant of Rossian generalism?

metaphysical demands of moral subjectivism. Some other story needs to be told; or, alternatively, they should give up moral subjectivism and endorse some version of moral realism. In the latter case, they will have to confront the same metaphysical worries as many particularists do; and therefore, they could not support their position to alleged metaphysical advantage. Something similar occurs with the deliberative simplicity of (and the peace of mind provided by) the more ambitious project. The weak generalist can no longer present his account as simpler and obviously more efficient than that of the particularist. In both cases much work needs to be done in order to figure out the different elements that may be involved in moral deliberation and what their respective roles are.

In any event, the weak generalist that I have in mind should be regarded as someone who is not just happy to acknowledge (G1) and (G2), but as someone who has reluctantly given up the more ambitious project and wants his generalism to be as strong as possible. He regards the role of principles as crucial. Hence, he will be inclined to account for any other element that one might point out by means of an increased sophistication in the system of principles. In this paper I accept the burden of proof that, quite often, the weak generalist places on any attempt to limit the role of principles in moral deliberation. So, my line of reasoning will not simply consist in pointing out some *prima facie* non-principled elements that are part of our moral deliberation; rather I will also seek to show why they cannot be accounted for in terms of a more sophisticated articulation of principles.

This line of reasoning will bring to light that the insistence on principles provides a rather distorted picture of moral deliberation. And, certainly, a philosophical theory can be unsatisfactory not just because its claims are false, but because it fails to apprehend the

most relevant facts about the subject matter at issue. It is the latter failure that I mean to stress in this paper. Hence, I may succeed even if my line of reasoning does not force us to deny (G2) and the weak generalist could keep (G1) just by dropping the word 'crucial' from that claim.

It may be also relevant to clarify, at this stage, the philosophical style that inspires this paper. There is a philosophical style where principles, definitions, thought experiments, and exacting qualifications play a central role. I do not deny that such tools are useful in some contexts. I have myself produced some stipulations at the outset. The problem begins when one forgets that these are not the only resources available to a philosopher. Moreover, philosophical reflection could not even exist if everything were just principles, definitions, thought experiments, and exacting qualifications. Philosophy has to do with the discernment of some *facti* and the first obligation of a philosopher is to get in contact with the *factum* whose aspects he wants to discern. This contact is only possible if he explores some paradigmatic cases; if he looks carefully into them. Needless to say, identifying a case as paradigmatic already involves some philosophical abilities. One may resort to the philosophical, scientific or literary tradition to identify them; but it is a philosophical position to claim that some philosophical trends have lost sight of the relevant *factum*, that what they recognize as paradigmatic is not and that this is a consequence of a philosophical style which disregards the relevance of some tools.

One particularly significant way of losing sight of the subject matter is by pressing too much in the direction of clarity or raising questions which, even if they are well-entrenched in the philosophical tradition, may not be relevant to the issues at hand.<sup>8</sup> In the lines that follow, I

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<sup>8</sup> See Williams (1985, preface).



have tried to avoid these pitfalls. They constitute both a vindication of, and an exercise in, a philosophical style which distrusts an excessive emphasis on principles, definitions, thought experiments, and qualifications, but insists on looking into paradigmatic cases, drawing connections and taking them just to the point at which they stop being illuminating. In this respect, I have tried in this paper to bring together issues that usually remain apart by gesturing at some paradigmatic cases which I have explored in more detail on some other occasions.<sup>9</sup>

More specifically, I will begin my challenge to the weak generalist by pointing out a feature (only a feature; I do not aim at answering all the academic issues here) of moral perception, which I regard as central, namely: the locus of moral perception as placed in an intermediate position between being exclusively concerned with the particular situation that the agent has come across and being concerned with that situation just as a mere instance of a certain moral kind. Given that the weak generalist denies (AG2), he is bound to acknowledge that there is no principled way of fixing that intermediate position. In sections 3-5, I will explore the ways in which that position could be fixed and, as a result, the thrust of particularism will be stressed.

## ***2. Perceiving a particular moral case and perceiving a case of a certain moral kind***

### *2.1. An initial approach*

Consider the following picture:

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<sup>9</sup> See, among others, Corbí manuscript/a, Corbí manuscript/b.



We may ask why this image traveled around the world and shook the moral conscience of Western people. It seems clear that they were not just concerned with the fate of the girl who walks naked in the middle of the road (or with that of the rest of the children that we can see in the picture). Nor do we see anything specifically perverse in the particular American soldiers that figure in the picture. The picture shook our moral conscience because it expresses a more general fact: the cruelty of napalm bombs.<sup>10</sup> Yet, it seems that the capacity to express this general fact in such a way that the moral conscience of many people would be shaken, is not unconnected to the fact that the picture displays the suffering of particular people.

Our moral conscience was not actually shaken to the same degree by reporters telling us that thousands of children were being burnt by napalm bombs. By focusing our attention on a particular girl<sup>11</sup> the picture induced us to have a *more vivid experience* of her suffering. Yet, this experience (and the response that it favors) would not count as moral if we were *exclusively* concerned with the suffering of *this* particular girl and neglected that of other people in a relevantly

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<sup>10</sup> Some may be worried as to what *exactly* is the moral feature that one is perceiving. I assume that some of my comments in this section suggest how little content this 'exactly' may have. There are, needless to say, several other issues that could legitimately be raised in this respect, but are left aside in my discussion because we cannot illuminatingly address all vexed issues at the same time.

<sup>11</sup> This is, needless to say, a standard technique by which NGOs try to motivate people to get involved in the suffering of some other people. Think, for instance, on how Amnesty International encourages people to be committed to the fate of a particular person or a particular country. As we shall see, this is something more than a technique. It expresses a crucial feature of morality.

similar situation.<sup>12</sup> And this is consistent with the intuition that it may form a part of an appropriate moral response that Western people were *especially* interested in this girl. In the light of this, we may provisionally say that when we take a moral look at the picture:

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(a) we focus our attention on the suffering of particular people, and

(b) we project our concern onto the suffering of other people that may be in a relevantly similar situation.

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## 2.2. *The relevance of coming across*

One could reply, however, that condition (a) is just a mere incentive to reach a moral outlook, but not a constitutive part of it. For a moral outlook must go in the direction of generality, so that no particular person is constitutively involved in it. Yet, on this interpretation of the notion of moral generality, we may become unable to provide an *appropriate moral response* on any particular occasion. For, trivially, each single individual cannot provide the moral response that *every* particular occasion demands and, therefore, we need some means to select *a particular occasion* as the one to which a given individual must respond.

If we regard our *coming across* the picture of the Vietnamese girl as morally significant, then we have some orientation as to how to identify the particular situations to which a given agent ought to respond. The Vietnamese girl came into our view and we could not turn away our eyes without feeling the sting of degradation. There were many girls in the world who were suffering, who ran away from

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<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, I am referring here only to those moral kinds that are individuated without taking into consideration the specific relation that the moral agent bears to the particular situation at stake. In any case, a particular situation may belong to different moral kinds; among other things, because moral kinds may bear a determinable to determinate relation.

their burning villages, but we responded to this particular situation because this girl came into our view. From this perspective, the formation of a moral perception involves precisely the constant search for some balance between the attention to the harm caused to a particular person and the projection of our response to other people in a situation that we identify as relevantly similar from a moral point of view. An excess in the former direction cancels out the moral character of our response, while an excess in the latter direction excludes the possibility of a response. Of course, both excesses are morally significant and, surely, the idea of a totally general response is incoherent with some general facts about human condition.

A generalist may attempt to defend the role of principles in moral deliberation by providing a principle in the light of which such intermediate position could be fixed. An initial problem with this strategy is that the weak generalist accepts that (AG2) is false and this provides a general reason as to why he must also grant that there is no principled way of fixing that intermediate position. This is because the situation at stake constitutes a case where different moral demands enter into conflict and, therefore, a moral dilemma.<sup>13</sup> Yet, in the coming section, I will raise a more specific worry against any principled way of fixing this intermediate position. I will argue that the *coming across* factor cannot be approached as an additional feature to be added to the antecedent of a supposed moral principle, so that this more sophisticated principle might help us to select the particular moral situations to which a particular agent must respond. To this purpose, I will introduce the notion of *character* and sketch the role that an agent's character plays in the determination of his moral oughts. At a later stage, I will explore some features of moral emotions like guilt and shame, which will allow us to highlight some

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<sup>13</sup> We tend to keep the moral significance of this dilemma out of sight. But it has been forcefully argued that (see, for instance, Eatherly & Anders 1989, and Anders 1988.) this kind of blindness constitutes the most serious plight of technologically developed societies.

crucial aspects of both the phenomenon of morally coming across and the way in which the intermediate position is to be fixed.

### **3. Agents with a carácter**

#### *3.1. General vs. active oughts; the notion of character*

A conception of a moral agent as someone who ought to respond to all moral demands is certainly inconsistent with some general facts about human condition. Yet, the truth of this claim depends on how we interpret 'ought' in the previous sentence. It is clear that *any* moral agent ought to be sensitive to all such demands to a certain degree. At least, he ought to care about their satisfaction and, therefore, he is committed to providing a minimal response to those demands: namely, recognizing both that such demands ought to be fulfilled and also that, if he were in a different situation, he ought to contribute to its fulfillment. In other words, this picks up a sense in which any moral agent ought to recognize some *general (moral) oughts*. There are, however, some other moral oughts that are more directly connected with action and, therefore, must be constrained by the particular situations and persons that we come across. Let's call them '*active (moral) oughts*'.

The fact that an agent A comes across a particular situation S depends on A's location with regard to S. But, inasmuch as this location is to be morally significant, it cannot be merely individuated in physical terms. For, trivially, a doctor is not in the same moral position with regard to a sick person as a layman. A USA citizen is not placed with regard to the picture of the Vietnamese girl in the same moral place as a Morocco citizen.<sup>14</sup> And a German citizen is not

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<sup>14</sup> See Nagel 1979a.

exactly in the same moral situation with regard to the Holocaust as an Italian one. So, we can say that the particular situations an agent comes morally across, are conditioned by the engagements, commitments, and projects that articulate his life; by what, according to Bernard Williams, we may call '*his character*'.<sup>15</sup> This notion of character is meant to involve a variety of elements. Becoming a doctor is, in Western societies, usually the result of a personal decision, whereas being a citizen of a certain State is more a matter of course, even though one can, eventually, change his citizenship. On the contrary, one cannot change, for instance, the fact that one was a USA or German citizen when certain events took place. A change in citizenship, or a change in the way a bond is experienced and expressed, may be the result of a reflection as to how to respond to some facts. These changes and decisions contribute to shape the agent's character and, in a more or less articulated manner, must be backed up (and, therefore, can be challenged) by reasons.<sup>16</sup>

In the light of all this, I should say that the phenomenon I am talking about is not so much that of *coming across* but that of morally *coming across*. I was reluctant to use the latter expression because it suggests that the agent is sensitive to the moral significance of his location (where, as I have just stressed, more than spatial aspects are included) with regard to a particular situation. And, surely, this is what happened when the conscience of Western people were shaken by the picture of the Vietnamese girl. But an agent might be in a morally significant location with regard to a particular situation and,

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<sup>15</sup> "I am going to take up two aspects of this large subject. They both involve the idea that an individual person has a set of desires, concerns or, as I shall call them, projects, which help to constitute a *character*." (Williams 1981b, p. 5) See also Williams 1973, p. 115-116.

<sup>16</sup> These comments may suggest a rather rationalist picture of an agent's character. The fact that reasons and normativity are involved does not mean either that the agent may easily alter his character or that all features of his character are equally sensitive to reasons. We will see some of these limits as we explore the structure of some emotions, like shame and guilt (see Corbí 2007). Moreover, any agent's life is anchored to some facts about the past to which he must morally respond. He cannot alter these facts, but he can modify, upon reflection, his response to them. One extreme case concerns survivors and perpetrators of massacres and genocides.

nevertheless, be insensitive to that fact. One could even say that this is the most common situation with regard to certain forms of harm. So, let me use hereafter the expression 'morally *coming across*' to refer the fact that the actual location of the agent with regard to a particular situation has a certain moral significance, whether or not he is sensitive to that significance. In any case, I will focus on how an agent may determine whether he has morally come across a particular situation, for this paper is mainly concerned with first-person deliberation. Now, the question is whether we can account in a principled way for the significance that the traits of his own character may have for the agent when he deliberates as to how he ought to morally respond to a particular situation.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.2. *Principles and Character*

Apparently, a generalist could easily accommodate the fact that the right moral response of an agent is conditioned by his character. The generalist could interpret the agent's character as a further circumstance to be included in the antecedent of the conditional that states the principle. Yet, this approach misinterprets the way in which an agent relates to his own character. The agent cannot coherently regard his character as something that he *just has*. His character includes, among other things, projects, engagements, and values he is *bound* or *committed* to. The mere fact that he is committed to a certain project leaves room for dropping or altering such a commitment, on reflection. To put it another way, we would completely misrepresent the nature of an agent's character if we interpreted all its features as *facts* about himself that the agent must

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<sup>17</sup> The deliberative significance of such traits may be rather different from the third-person perspective. For, in that context, they can be treated as further circumstances that a third person must take into consideration in order to fix the agent's active oughts. This fact, however, does not conflict with my claim. I am just stressing that, when the agent reflects upon his own line of action, he cannot approach the traits of his own character just as additional circumstances because he may alter them as a result of his reflection upon the particular situation that he has come morally across.

simply take into consideration in his moral deliberation. The agent must reflect upon his moral response *in the light of* his character; his character is not just an additional circumstance. His character is partly constituted by some projects that *he endorses* and, in the process of his moral deliberation, they may be called into question and revised.<sup>18</sup>

The moral principles that an agent endorses certainly contribute to shaping his character. We cannot, however, generate a set of principles that *every* agent would endorse just by including in the antecedent considerations about differences in character. That set of principles could not be coherently applied *from a first-person perspective*, since that would require that the agent relates to his own character as a further circumstance to take into consideration in his deliberation. The openness to reflection that is constitutive of the way in which an agent relates to his character, makes room for the agent to re-examine his life in the light of the moral tension produced by the fact that some moral demands are left unfulfilled.<sup>19</sup> And this insoluble tension is constitutive of the position of any agent in the moral world. So, my point is not that, given that there are no moral principles fixing our response to the morally significant situations that an agent comes across, such decisions should be considered a matter of personal commitment or preferences. This move may be regarded as a desperate attempt to preserve the relevance of principles in moral deliberation, but it is hard to see how the weak generalist could

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<sup>18</sup> See Moran 2001, where Richard Moran carefully distinguishes between the deliberative and the theoretical attitude towards oneself. The former involves the idea of a commitment or endorsement which is responsive to reason. One cannot take any such commitment as *just* a further fact about oneself to be discovered from the theoretical attitude. And, according to Moran, the interplay of both attitudes is constitutive of our identity as agents (see Corbi 2007 for a discussion of this proposal)

<sup>19</sup> If an agent makes up his mind to do A, this is a result of his previous deliberation; but the fact that he has decided to do A cannot play, in a further deliberation, the same role as the reasons that led him to that decision. Relatedly, the fact that I accept premise p does not form a part of the argument that leads to conclusion c out of premise p in combination with some further premises. It is only p that forms a part of the argument.

The kind of practical necessity that an agent's active oughts express, is closely related to the kind of necessity that Williams ascribes to Ajax in Williams 1993, ch. 4, which differs for the kind of necessity associated with the Kantian categorical imperative or a hypothetical imperative.



obtain any benefit from such a move. For it goes against the intuitions that led him, in the first place, to try to incorporate the agent's character into the antecedent of a more complex set of principles, namely: that an agent's character is relevant to fixing how he ought to morally respond to a particular situation. And this is exactly my point, together with the claim that there is no-principled way of fixing how the features of an agent's character may contribute to articulate his moral deliberation.

In the coming section, I will sketch a view of the structure of moral emotions in order to unveil some aspects of an agent's character that play a crucial role in moral deliberation. And this will reinforce the deliberative significance of the phenomenon of morally coming across.

#### ***4. Moral emotions***

The generalist is tempted to claim that, even if at early stages of an agent's development he may feel guilty just at the accusation of someone endowed with authority, this is not the kind of guilt that can be identified as a moral emotion. From this perspective, guilt comes up as a moral emotion only when, at a later stage, the agent feels guilty at the infringement of a moral principle. One could then conclude that moral principles play a crucial role in the individuation of guilt as a moral emotion. There is, however, serious reason to discredit this picture of guilt.

To this purpose, I will, firstly, describe the structure of guilt in those cases that the generalist would identify as non-moral and, secondly, argue that such a structure is also present in those cases that the generalist identifies as moral. A consequence of this line of argument

will be that principles play an ancillary role in the fixation of the content of the moral judgements that give rise to guilt. For the crucial fact about guilt is not that I have infringed a principle, but that *I am accused* by a certain critical figure of having infringed a principle. The way in which such a figure is formed suggests that guilt arises out of an accusation issued by a voice that embodies many other voices. Such voices form a part of the agent's character and play an essential role in fixing his active oughts and, correspondingly, in articulating our moral perception. Let us, then, begin by shortly characterizing the structure of guilt.

#### *4.1. Heteronomy, and guilt*

Shame is typically associated with being seen by an external observer. The observer needn't be critical with the agent: someone may feel ashamed of someone else's recognition.<sup>20</sup> The observer in front of which the agent feels ashamed needn't be an *actual* observer. The agent may feel ashamed of his situation or action even if he is not actually being observed by anyone. In such cases, we need to appeal to an idealized inner observer, which does not fully identify with any particular person or even with any specific group, like one's neighbors or fellow countrymen.

The generalist argues that, in contrast with shame, guilt is an autonomous emotion and, as a result, a genuine one. It is true that guilt at early stages of the agent's moral development may just be as heteronomous as shame. Yet, once the agent reaches the stage at which he just feels guilty at the infringement of principles that he

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<sup>20</sup> In contrast with Williams, I tend to think that a critical idealized observer is always required. Feeling ashamed of someone else's admiration requires a third party who would critically look at that recognition.

autonomously endorses, then guilt must be recognized as a fully moral emotion.<sup>21</sup>

I will argue, however, that the *mere* infringement of a principle that the agent endorses cannot account for guilt and that, consequently, guilt is as heteronomous as shame.<sup>22</sup> More particularly, I will try to show that guilt essentially involves a voice that condemns the agent for what he has done. Like in the case of shame, no actual external critic needs to voice the condemnation for the agent to hear the accusation. The agent will not experience the judgment of an inner figure as the condemnation by any particular person or group, but it will still come up as the judgment of an agency.<sup>23</sup>

An initial point is that the agent may feel guilt at the infringement of principles that he does not endorse. Of course, some may retort that, in such circumstances, we are not really confronted with a case of moral guilt. Yet, this very possibility brings to light that the mere association of guilt with the infringement of principles, does not by itself ensure the autonomy of such an emotion. The principles at issue must be principles that the agent endorses. Yet, once (AG1) and (AG2) are dropped, the very idea of endorsing some principles rather than others involves the constitution of a character.

To put it another way, the weak generalist, in order to reinforce the role of principles in guilt (and, relatedly, the autonomy of such an emotion), must make use of the notion of endorsement. But, given

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<sup>21</sup> In Rawls 1999, par. 72, John Rawls seems to take for granted that, at least at the most sophisticated stage, guilt is just linked to the breach of some moral principle and not due to the condemnation of any sort of agency: "Once a morality of principles is accepted, however, moral attitudes are no longer connected solely with the well-being and approval of particular individuals and groups, but are shaped by a conception of right chosen irrespective of these contingencies." (Rawls 1999, 416)

<sup>22</sup> See Taylor 1985, ch. 4, Williams 1993, ch. 4, and Wollheim 1999, ch. 4 for a defense of this view. The parallel between shame and guilt that I have stressed, leaves untouched some other features in virtue of which such emotions differentiate. For a careful description of such features, see Taylor 1985, ch. 3-4, and Wollheim 1999, ch. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Yet, in the case of guilt, the images that accompany such experiences, the particular people that were at the origin of the inner figure, come up recurrently.

that he assumes that there is no principled way of solving value conflicts, he is forced to conceive moral agents as agents with a character. And, as I pointed out in the previous section, an agent cannot relate to his character as if it were a further circumstance that any sophisticated general principle ought to take into consideration.

A second worry is that the impact that the infringement of a principle (no matter whether it is endorsed by him or not), can hardly be explained without assuming that the agent experiences the situation as the attack of an agency, as the accusation being voiced by an idealized other; by an inner figure. We feel guilt not so much at the mere infringement of a principle, but at being accused by someone with authority over us of having infringed that principle. That accusation, as we have seen, needn't come from an actual external figure, but typically from an internalized accuser. This conclusion can be reached by bringing out some features of the impact under consideration.

Guilt, like shame, involves a *global* attack on the value of the agent's life, whereas remorse has a more *localized* impact. When the agent feels guilt, he does not launch an attack on some aspects of his life, he does not simply feel remorse at having infringed a certain principle; on the contrary, he feels a fall in his value as a person; he will eventually feel that his life is not worth living. If we just focus on the infringement of a principle, it is difficult to understand how the response of the agent to something that he has done, and that transgresses a principle that he endorses, can be so global and not just a more localized emotional response, like the one that is specific of remorse.<sup>24</sup> To put it another way, even if we can identify the infringement of a principle as the triggering cause of guilt, the reach of such an emotion is clearly *out of proportion* with regard to that

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<sup>24</sup> For the difference between guilt and remorse, see Taylor 1985.

infringement. This holds for guilt no matter whether the principle is endorsed or not.

In the coming sections, I will make a few remarks to motivate my approach, although I am well aware that a more detailed account is needed if my position is to be at all convincing.<sup>25</sup> My purpose is not, in any case, to sketch an account of the psychological structure of guilt, but vindicate the *deliberative* (and, thereby, *normative*) significance of some features of that structure. My line of reasoning goes like this: they are normatively significant because, among other things, there is no other way in which an agent could fix his active oughts. And our examination of the way Western people looked at the picture of the Vietnamese girl, suggests that the ability to fix such active oughts is constitutive of the *factum* of morality.

One cannot simply object to my line of reasoning on the basis that I am confusing contingent psychological facts with normative ones. For part of my point is to show that some psychological facts are normatively significant. Moreover, the kind of psychological fact I am appealing to, already has a normative import, namely: an agent's engagements and commitments. Once again, I am defending an understanding of 'psychological' which does not oppose 'normative'. Hence, in this paper, I am not claiming that non-normative psychological facts are normatively significant, even if they might be. My point is rather more modest: there are some psychological facts that can only be individuated in normative terms. I am just trying to fix the role of some such facts in first-person moral deliberation.

#### *4.2. Inner figures and the global attack*

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<sup>25</sup> See, among others, Corbí manuscript/a, manuscript/b.

Suppose that, in contrast with the generalist proposal, we interpret guilt as the product of being accused by an inner figure of having infringed a certain principle. In that case, we can easily understand how the infringement of a principle can have a global (and sometimes devastating) effect on the agent, how it can give rise to disproportionate anxiety.

To illustrate my point, let me consider a story that I was told by a student of mine, call him Will. When he was a boy, he had to take a train to get to school. One morning he was late and didn't have time to buy the ticket at the train station. So, he got onto the train and, immediately afterwards, he approached the conductor and explained to him his situation. Will was ready to pay the ticket. The conductor handed him the ticket and, looking at him, said 'What you should have done is to have got up earlier'. And, at these words, Will felt the sting of guilt. The conductor has some authority upon him as a train traveler, but he has none concerning what time Will is supposed to get up. Nevertheless, the conductor's words had a certain impact on him. Instead of replying with anger at the conductor's interference, his emotional response was guilt.

It is difficult to understand this case if we do not assume that Will had been brought up in a rather authoritarian social setting, where a conductor might feel authorized to make that sort of remark and a boy might react with guilt to it. One way to understand how an authoritarian social setting favors these two attitudes is by a process of internalization through a sequence of introjections and projections. The example at hand struck me initially as a case of projection: Will was projecting upon the conductor a kind of authority that the latter does not have. However, this projection can only take place through a previous process of internalization, which one may easily associate with the attitude of my student's parents and relatives, whose views

are active within him even if they are not present. So, we could say that Will feels guilt because the conductor's words echoes what his parents would have said and, as matter fact, what they are internally telling him. For, otherwise, he wouldn't have felt guilt.

So we can see that an inner voice is not a voice among others, but a voice where many other voices are personified through a complex sequence of introjections and projections. The agent feels condemned not by a particular member of what he recognizes as his human environment, but by all its members. As a result, such voices are endowed by the condemned self with the power to judge and condemn him to be expelled from a world where he may feel recognized and protected by others.<sup>26</sup> This global condemnation is (a) experienced via the condemnation of the inner figure whose voice personifies all voices, and (b) confirmed each time he hears an actual critical voice insofar as his interpretation of those voices is already tinged with his inner figure's view.

A lot more needs to be said in order to render this approach convincing, but, unfortunately, there is no room in this paper to explore it in some detail.<sup>27</sup> Let me then just assume that this approach to guilt is correct and proceed to explore some of its implications for moral deliberation.

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<sup>26</sup> This threat is constantly present in Kafka's writings (See Kafka 1974 and Kafka 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Let me address, though, a rather standard objection. Some may stress that my claim that guilt involves a global attack is only true in rather extreme or pathological cases and, therefore, that inner figures may only play a role in such cases. For, in standard cases of guilt, there is no hint, either phenomenological or otherwise, of the role of such inner figures. In fact, I could add, Will felt guilt, but he didn't report to have heard any accusing inner voice.

I agree with my opponent that, in general, it is only after some extreme or pathological situations that an agent may phenomenologically experience his guilt as related to the accusation of an inner voice. And, therefore, I accept that it is relatively easy that people that have not gone through those situations are alien to that phenomenological experience. Yet, in these more moderate cases, the relevance of the accusation and their global character is revealed by some nuances in gestures and behavior and also by the fact that, after those extreme or pathological experiences, the agent can phenomenologically experience their presence in rather standard cases of guilt.

## ***5. Inner voices and practical deliberation***

Let us then assume that guilt involves the accusation of an inner figure, just as shame requires the look of a critical observer. This may lead people either to discredit guilt as a moral emotion or to revise the notion of autonomy that is at play in our moral lives. The second horn may be motivated by a number of independent considerations, including a certain understanding of the phenomenon of moral luck. However, I will skip such considerations and focus on the picture of first-person moral deliberation that follows from accepting that guilt is still a moral emotion, even if the accusation of an inner figure forms a constitutive part of it.

### *5.1. Guilt and principles*

We have already seen that, for the weak generalist, the autonomy of an agent cannot simply lie in his ability to act in the light of some principles that the agent endorses. For he acknowledges that there is more than principles to moral deliberation: for instance, moral perception. I have already argued that moral perception must search for a balance between the concern for the particular case and the concern for all cases of a relevantly similar moral kind. Yet, my previous considerations bring to light a neglected aspect of perception, namely, that we *not only look at people and make claims, but we are also looked at and talked to*. And this fact will bring out a new aspect of the phenomenon of morally coming across, which, if I am right, turns out to be of most significance in moral deliberation. To see this, let us focus on the role of the voice that issues the accusation in the case of guilt.



Guilt arises, as we have seen, when an inner figure accuses the self of having done something wrong, which, in some cases, consists in his having infringed a certain principle. His condemnation is presented as being backed up by some principles or reasons. To simplify, we can say that, in the case of guilt:

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The agent A is accused by one of his inner figures of having done D, which is wrong because D infringes principle P and this principle ought to be respected.

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It is clear that, in claiming that principle P ought to be respected, the inner figure is not just claiming that P is a *prima facie* principle. For, in that case, P could have been overridden by another principle, say P\*, so that infringing P may come out as what A ought to do. Hence, the inner figure must be making a stronger claim:

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'All things considered, P is the principle to be respected on this particular occasion and you failed to do so.'

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This reveals that the role of the inner figure is not so much to state general oughts, but to fix the agent's active oughts. Guilt comes out precisely as an emotional response to the accusation of having failed to honor such active oughts.

We can now see the way in which inner figures may make a rather treacherous use of principles. Inner figures needn't be consistent deliberators. They may accuse the agent of having infringed a principle P that defines his active ought on a particular occasion. Yet, it may occur that, in issuing this accusation, the agent's inner figure just tracks the principle that the agent has *actually* infringed and,

then, defines it as the one which ought to have been respected in that particular situation. To put it another way, inner figures may articulate a complex system of principles such that, even if each particular principle could be respected, no agent could reasonably honor the whole set. So, no matter what the agent does, inner figures can easily induce guilt by picking up the particular principle that, on the given occasion, the agent has infringed. And the agent is prone to accept his inner figures assessment of what is the relevant principle on each occasion precisely because he has previously endowed them with the power to fix his active oughts, that is, to assess what are the most salient features (and, therefore, principles) on each particular occasion.

### *5.2. How does this structure apply to the nature of deliberation?*

The previous remarks have some implications as to the significance of an agent's character for first-person moral deliberation. An agent's character will surely include his projects and commitments, but also what we may call '*a landscape of inner figures*'. This landscape will typically include a number of different inner figures bearing complex relations among them. Some such figures may be rather threatening, while others will have a more positive profile. We could thus say that each inner figure has a certain *profile* and, therefore, plays a specific role in the way the agent assesses his actions and his life. Here we come to a second implication.

In the agent's search of his active oughts, as opposed to the mere identification of general oughts, the judgment of inner figures plays a crucial role. Their voices embody that of many other people, namely: those that the agent has somehow endowed with authority to judge about the right and the wrong. And, as we have seen, this is so in

virtue of the way in which inner figures are set up. Needless to say, the agent may relate to each of his inner figures in a different manner. The agent may identify with some of his inner figures and call into question the judgment of others. The agent may try to patiently (and always by rather indirect means) modify some aspects the landscape of his inner figures. A crucial point is that, in order to determine what modifications he *ought* to introduce (and also in order to carry out any such alteration), the agent must rely on some other aspect of his landscape of inner figures and, in general, of his character. It follows from my line of reasoning that there is no deeper fact that may challenge or justify the inner figures' judgment about the agent's active oughts. The ultimate fact is the interplay of voices that constitute the agent's inner landscape, which bears complex relations with external critics. For, as we have seen, the appeal to principles does not allow us to fix our active oughts. And the appeal to other features of our character such as our commitments, projects, and so on, only provides *prima facie* principles, but we are still in need of a further step to reach our active oughts. The agent needs somehow to decide what he ought to do on this particular occasion, and the answer to this question is supplied by the interplay of his inner figures.<sup>28</sup>

So, we can now go back to the phenomenon of morally coming across. It follows from my recent remarks that the particular people and situations that an agent has *come across* throughout his life and, particularly, during his childhood, significantly contribute to shape his moral sensitivity and, in the end, his landscape of inner figures. One

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<sup>28</sup> A crucial (and complex) question I will not address here is how the ultimate character of this interplay may be consistent with my defense of the objectivity of moral features (see Corbí 2004). On the other hand, the previous considerations suggest that a certain sort of *passivity* is involved in moral deliberation. It is true that the agent may be quite active in trying to obtain a proper representation of the morally relevant aspects of a given situation. In this activity he will be certainly influenced by his inner figures; but, once this representation emerges, he must stop and listen to the judgment of one or another figure. He may come up with conflicting judgments, he may be forced to discern, to move from one to another figure, to challenge one figure and rely on other. In this process, even more passivity will be involved (see Corbí 2007).

could say that this is possible because the agent came across them in such a way that he attached a specific normative significance to the judgements and attitudes of those people about the situation at stake.<sup>29</sup> The phenomenon of morally coming across is surely involved in this process. An inner figure's judgment is meant to fix the agent's active oughts, but this is equivalent to claiming that such a judgment is meant to fix when the agent has come morally across a certain situation. In other words, part of what the agent is supposed to learn from his tutors (or, in general, from the voices that he has endowed with authority), on any given occasion, is whether he has actually comes morally across a particular situation and, therefore, whether he must morally respond in a certain way. Needless to say, shaping one's moral sensitivity involves more than that. The agent must learn to project such particular cases onto some other past or future case and, relatedly, being able to identify some such cases as paradigmatic ones.<sup>30</sup>

So, I can conclude that the phenomenon of morally coming across is relevant for the dispute between the weak generalist and the particularist because (a) there is no principled way of fixing the conditions under which an agent comes morally across a particular situation; and (b) this phenomenon plays a crucial role in the way an agent shapes his landscape of inner figures and, in the end, his moral sensitivity. And, if all this is right, the generalist picture of first-person moral deliberation seems to be not only partial, but distorting. Its insistence on the role of principles leaves aside some other aspects which, as we have seen, are central to cases of moral

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<sup>29</sup> Of course, the normative significance the agent attached to those people is not independent of their actual power upon him. This is a relevant issue which, unfortunately, I cannot discuss here (see Corbí manuscript/b)

<sup>30</sup> The fact that the agent as a child came across some particular people and situations is certainly a morally significant fact. For, as we have seen, they relevantly contributed to shape his moral sensitivity. Yet, this coming across should not be confused with the phenomenon of morally coming across. We could say that an agent's coming across certain people and situations makes it possible that he comes morally across a given particular situation.

conflict, that is, to those cases where moral deliberation is most required.

Some may be tempted to object that my position is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, my emphasis on perception seems to be connected with a vindication of moral realism; but, on the other, my defense of the indispensable deliberative role of inner figures, which may vary from one to another individual, seems to lead me into utter subjectivism and relativism. I do not think the latter follows, but, I agree, I need to tell a story to explain why I am not trapped in wild subjectivism. Fortunately, I have some elements of such a story, but they should be left for another more favorable occasion.<sup>31</sup> \*

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<sup>31</sup> See Corbí 2004.

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