THE POWER OF CONTEXT IN SHAPING MORAL CHOICES

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I intend to argue that the nature of all moral states fundamentally involves a contextualized element that is historical and situational. I will propose that any moral viewpoint that functions as an objective principle, i.e. one that appeals to principles and values that are trans-historical and to authority that is outside the context of some human culture, is misconceived. My position, however, does not lead to a naïve relativism, but rather it is one that seeks to mediate what I contend is a false dichotomy between objectivism and relativism.

I believe that all moral principles are situational and historically contextualized and therefore that the power of context in shaping moral choices is fundamental to how we live in the world. Throughout this thesis I develop the distinction between the possibilities for universal moral principles, those applicable in all cases, and the effect of context in limiting the universality of a given principle in a particular situation.

The dominant theme of this study is based on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of hinges, as the non-experiential, non-epistemic beliefs manifested in our everyday practices. I chose moral hinges as the basis of my study because, like the material hinges on a door that allow it to open and close, moral hinges are what enable the
possible choices that are open (or closed) to a person in a particular, localized moral order. The case study in which I examine the concept of moral hinges is focused on supererogatory acts; those actions that are considered to be ‘above and beyond’ a person’s expected duty. These are acts that are not required or expected and because of that they offer unique insights into the role of moral hinges.

In order to explain the basis of my argument regarding the role of hinges I first present Aristotle’s concept of phronesis and Kant’s concept of the categorical imperative as examples of meta-theories of human behavior. Their moral philosophies provide a foundation from which to understand the relationship between objectivism and relativism and the place of moral hinges in the mediation between the two. I argue against Kant’s categorical imperative as a non-contingent universal principle, applicable in all cases of human behavior regardless of different circumstances and cultures. Instead I advocate for a model of a contingent universal moral principle, which is applicable and practiced in all cases, but only in a particular culture.

In support of my argument for the fundamental role of historical and situational context I will introduce Positioning Theory, an innovation in social psychology, focusing on the works of Rom Harre’ and Fathali Moghaddam. Positioning Theory explores the way a person’s rights and duties are accrued to and dependent upon the context of the local situations we create in going about our daily lives. The case study I present is the dialogic exchange on the Internet between a potential terrorist and his recruiter.
Throughout this thesis I advocate for the point of view that all moral acts, which are intentional behaviors that affects persons, are grounded in moral hinges. To that end I will take into account the writings of philosophers Rush Rhees, James Edwards and Nigel Pleasants. I will also incorporate research by the cultural psychologists Richard Shweder and David Wong in arguing against a singular universal rationality, which is a presupposition for the existence of non-contingent universal moral principles.

In keeping with the central theme of the power of context, I propose an approach to understanding moral choice that is based on the historical and situational context in which people make ethical decisions. The actions and practices that stem from those decisions manifest the moral hinges that individuals have implicitly or explicitly accepted. Those moral hinges also reflect the relative nature of rationality in a philosophical context that rejects essentialism in favor of ethical normativity.
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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS v
INTRODUCTION 1
CHAPTER 1. ARISTOTLE – PHRONESIS AND MORAL CHOICE 31
CHAPTER 2. KANT AND THE SYNTHETIC A PRIORI 54
CHAPTER 3. WITTGENSTEIN – HINGES AND MORAL PRINCIPLES 78
CHAPTER 4. WITTGENSTEIN’S ETHICAL JOURNEY 100
CHAPTER 5. RELATIVISM AND OBJECTIVISM 125
CHAPTER 6. CULTURE AND MORAL CHOICE 141
CHAPTER 7. POSITIONING THEORY – RIGHTS AND DUTIES 152
CHAPTER 8. HINGES AND RATIONALITY 165
CHAPTER 9. MORAL HINGES AND SUPEREROGATORY ACTS 176
CONCLUSION 191
REFERENCE LIST 197
INTRODUCTION

Problem and Context

In this thesis I deal with the problem of understanding the power of contexts of action in limiting and shaping the range of possible moral choices. I define contexts of action as including the conditions, both standing and ephemeral, which are operative for a person in a given situation. These conditions include the systems of meanings and rules in the local moral order in which that person lives. Fundamentally, I contend that the relationship between context and moral choice is synergistic and matters deeply in our day-to-day lives. In this thesis I will advocate for a nuanced model of understanding about how we make moral choices that accounts for the many influences that inform those choices. Included in those influences are the ways and means that a person uses in framing the choices available to them in a particular instance and on a particular occasion.

Moral Philosophy

This study is concentrated primarily in the field of moral philosophy although I include excursions into the realm of moral psychology. In the course of my examination of the power of contexts, I explore the concepts of relativism and objectivism as models for framing moral choices. My examination draws on foundational texts in philosophy from Aristotle to Kant to Wittgenstein. Also included in my research are models in moral thinking taken from the disciplines of social psychology and cultural anthropology. In the course of this project I continue
to address the question of why we make the moral choices we do. My project is
designed as an interdisciplinary approach to exploring the role of context, in its
most inclusive sense, in determining the range of a person’s moral choices. When
discussing moral choices, within the framework of moral philosophy, it is instructive
to begin by defining the elements of moral philosophy. Broadly, the realm of moral
philosophy as discussed in this thesis covers three areas. One area is metaethics,
another is normative ethics and the third is applied ethics. The latter is also within
the prevue of moral psychology (Tiberius 2015, 3).

As a point of clarification about moral choices and moral practices, I would
propose the following definitions. Moral practices are characterized by at least one
or at best all of the following three qualities: 1. They are person preserving (moral)
or person destroying (immoral) practices 2. They are person enhancing (moral) or
person disdaining (immoral) practices 3. They permit autonomous choices (moral)
of action or they deny autonomous (immoral) choice. (Harre’ 2012)

Metaethics

In the area of metaethics we are focused on the conceptual framework that
provides the basis for our moral worldview. Specifically, metaethics is the study of
the grounds and meaning of ethical questions (Miller 2013, 2). For example,
metaethics would be concerned with questions such as: “What is the function of
moral discourse? Do moral facts exist? Are moral qualities ‘out there’ in the world?
Can we work towards finding out the moral truth?” (Ibid.). Metaethics is that branch
of moral philosophy where we address questions about whether moral theories and
judgments are the results of human reasoning or whether they come from some other source and if so what is that source (Shafer-Landau & Cuneo 2007, 1)?

Metaethics is concerned with the study of two foundational concepts, whose relationship is a central theme in this thesis—relativism and objectivism. One concept, relativism, holds that the moral actions or behaviors of individuals can only be judged to be acceptable or unacceptable in the context of a particular local moral order. The other concept, objectivism, holds conversely that there are human behaviors or moral actions that would always be considered right or wrong in any situation and in any culture or society.

To a relativist what is considered to be morally right or wrong is contingent upon the context of the local culture in which those actions are performed. One can imagine, however, that there are moral principles that are treated as universal within a particular culture but that are not common or universal across all cultures. Those moral principles I will call contingent universals. To an objectivist on the other hand, there are moral actions and moral judgments that are always acceptable or morally permissible and others that are unacceptable or morally forbidden across all cultures, in all contexts and in all timeframes. These actions and judgments (viewed by an objectivist) are informed by moral principles that are not contingent upon local norms or context; I will refer to these as non-contingent universals. In this study I will explore the relevant research literature and empirical data in order to gain deeper insight into possible characterizations of moral principles.
Normative Ethics

In addition to metaethics there is another field of ethical investigation that is part of what we consider moral philosophy and that is *normative ethics*. Normative ethics is concerned with the rules that serve as a litmus test for discerning appropriate or permissible behavior. In other words, normative ethics helps us understand what it would take to lead a moral life, i.e. what actions are morally ‘right’ and what intentions are morally ‘good.’ For example, “… devising a set of ideas to show why it is *these* sorts of actions – stealing, lying, killing that are wrong, whilst *those other* types of action – sharing, caring, aiding – are morally right (Kirchin 2012, 2). Inside the field of normative ethics I will present examples of theories that deal with showing why some actions are considered morally right and others are considered morally wrong.

The first of these theories associated with normative ethics is *virtue* theory or virtue ethics. Virtue theory emphasizes the development of good habits of behavior such as kindness, courage, temperance, etc. Aristotle’s ethics is an example of virtue ethics in which he proposes that a person must habitually act in a virtuous manner if they are to behave virtuously all the time. For instance, a person would have to act bravely in all cases and at all times in order to be able to act bravely when it is most appropriate to do so and most challenging to one’s health and well being. I will examine a central part of Aristotle’s ethics in this thesis, focusing on his concept of phronesis and the ‘mean’ from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. 
The second theory associated with normative ethics that I will explore is a *duty*-based theory of ethics, specifically the duty-based theory of Immanuel Kant. Kant emphasized a single principle of duty called the categorical imperative, which mandated acceptable or permissible actions on the part of an individual regardless of the context in which that action takes place. The categorical imperative also mandated actions to be done regardless of the individual desires of the person performing the action. Human reason, according to Kant and not emotion or desire, should be the guide to morally correct actions. For Kant the test of whether an action was morally appropriate or permissible was based on the results of applying this single principle of duty, the categorical imperative, against the activity and the rationale for that action.

Along with this duty-based theory of ethics there is the opposing notion, which is a *rights*-based theory of ethics. A rights-based ethic is one in which people believe there are rights owed to them as individuals that take precedence over any obligation or duty to others. In the course of this thesis, however, I will focus primarily on duty as the foundation for moral choices and subsequent actions.

Duty is essential in any moral life and I will concentrate my attention on the connection between the different possibilities for understanding what one’s duty *is* and the critical reflection on what that duty *ought* to be. To begin, I would propose that there are fundamentally different kinds of duties. One type of duty is one that is gladly *accepted* by an individual based on their *position* in their local society. That duty could be assigned by others or chosen by them. For example, whether a person
chooses to be a fireman or a doctor there are both similar and different duties that accrue to those positions in their community. An individual accepts these duties if they wish to live in that position in their community.

Alternately, another type of duty is a duty that is imposed on an individual by others. While not always cheerfully and willingly accepted, those duties are taken on because of a sense of obligation, or perhaps the conventions of proper conduct associated with a certain social position or post. The duty of the eldest son regarding the execution of his father's estate, even if he is not the primary beneficiary, is but one example. So we see that duties can either be accepted enthusiastically or with resignation born of a sense of obligation to live up to the position one has or aspires to have in their local community.

So where does a person’s sense of duty come from? I would propose that moral duties are the manifestation, in practice, of unexamined grounds for living in a certain way. In making this case I will examine those supererogatory human actions that are considered in a local context as ‘above and beyond’ duty. These supererogatory actions are of interest to us because when we reflect upon their moral force and their place in our lives; they bring to light what Ludwig Wittgenstein called hinges.

Applied Ethics

Finally there is a third field of moral philosophy and that is the field of applied ethics, which is also in the realm of moral psychology. Applied ethics is concerned with behavioral moral issues that arise on reflection on the propriety of such
practices as abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, etc. These are issues that highlight the metaethical and normative ethical beliefs of a culture; those beliefs in turn are manifested in human actions and practices.

In this area of applied ethics I will present a case study on the terrorist use of the Internet. This study is conducted using Positioning Theory to evaluate the way rights and duties are ascribed to the actors involved and the positions they take or that are assigned to them in the course of going about their day-to-day activities. Although my thesis is predominately focused on the metaethical and normative issues of moral philosophy, I will show that the two fields of study, moral philosophy and moral psychology, are clearly intertwined (Tiberius 2015, 4).

**Moral Principles**

I will continue to explore the problem of understanding the power of contexts by developing a methodology for addressing the influence of context on the moral choices we face. This methodology also helps answer the larger question implicitly posed in this thesis: what does ethical normativity mean within a philosophical context that rejects essentialism (objectivism)? I intend to illuminate this relationship between normativity and essentialism by exploring the tension between purportedly universal moral principles such as ‘human life is sacrosanct’ (the prohibition against the destruction of persons) and the application of those principles in contextualized practices as norms of thought and action in local moral orders.
An example, in practice, of the aforementioned moral principle (the prohibition against the destruction of embodied persons) might be the characterization by a particular culture of the wickedness of an act of murder. Interestingly one possible punishment for murder, i.e. jailing someone for life with no chance of parole, could also be morally problematic if one believed that the quality of a person’s life was an inextricable part of the sanctity of human life. In this case the *non-contingent* belief that ‘human life is sacrosanct’ is an example of essentialism.

In this example, the purportedly universal moral principle, ‘human life is sacrosanct,’ results (in practice) in the prohibition against killing another human being. However, as seemingly straightforward (and universal) as this principle appears, it quickly becomes obfuscated when applied to the actions of soldiers in combat with the enemy or actions taken by a person in self-defense. In other words, what at first appears to be a non-contingent principle does in practice actually become a contingent one.

Another example of a seemingly non-contingent principle might be the universal moral principle; ‘truth is sacrosanct,’ which results (in practice) in the condemnation of outright lying or perhaps at least condemnation of the milder case of not being completely truthful. Lying was something that Kant interpreted very strictly and made an example of in his development of the case for the categorical imperative. He proposed that lying was wrong because it would mean that an individual would *will* that everyone should take as his or her maxim that lying was acceptable. If that were the case then you would never know when someone else
was telling the truth and whether or not anyone would ever do what he or she had promised.

We see, however that the admonition against lying, like the admonition against killing other humans, is not as easily made determinate, as it might seem at first. For instance, let’s say that one is faced with the moral choice of either lying to save an innocent person’s life or telling the truth and effectively sentencing that person to death. In this case the supposedly universal moral principle against lying becomes fuzzy and situation dependent, i.e. it becomes contingent. This is because it clashes with another seemingly categorical prohibition, against the destruction of human life.

Throughout this thesis there is a continuous focus on what I contend is a symbiotic relationship between relativism and objectivism. This relationship is explored while evaluating the tension between a seemingly universal (i.e. non-contingent) principle and the effect on that principle of historical and situational contexts of action. It is my contention that taking into account discrete context will limit the universality of a given principle. That limitation will generally confine the strict applicability of that principle to the particular situation in which it is viewed and then only when it is applied in concrete cases.

As I pointed out in the beginning of this thesis I will, in the course of this study, further clarify my position on the relationship between relativism and objectivism by developing the idea of contingent and non-contingent universals. In this case, a contingent universal would be a universal principle, but one whose content is a
moral principle that is accepted and practiced only in the particular culture of a certain local tribe. Within that tribe the principle is treated as if it were universal but is ‘contingent upon’ being accepted by everyone who wishes to remain a faithful member of that tribe. On the other hand, there would be non-contingent universals, which would apply in all possible cases across every tribe regardless of the cultural and societal distinctions between those different tribes. The distinction between contingent and non-contingent universals is a useful heuristic when examining the concepts of relativism and objectivism because it is a ladder that provides useful scaffolding from which we can better view the landscape of Wittgenstein’s hinges.

**Hinges**

Wittgenstein’s hinges, like the material ones on a door, are the beliefs on which our form of life turns. They remain stable even while the contexts of action change, and they are the imperatives upon which the practices in a local form of life depend. They are rarely explicitly formulated and even more rarely commented upon or tested empirically. As Wittgenstein suggested they are something like hinges on a door that remain in place while the door turns (Wittgenstein 1969, 341, 343). Hinges are non-epistemic and non-experiential and are manifested in the way we act as we go about our lives, if we are to be an accepted part of a local moral order.

Thinking back to our previous discussion about the relationship between context and moral principles I would suggest that a universal idea or principle does not exist on its own waiting to be discovered or reasoned about. It may in fact begin among a small number of people, perhaps even just one – who treats a certain
practice as mandatory (for that individual). Those practices are also manifestations of Wittgenstein’s hinges. As part of this study I will also examine the regulative and constitutive characterization of hinges. Additionally I will explore the relationship between the prevalent rationality of a local moral order and the hinges of that culture.

**Supererogatory Acts**

A major focus of this thesis is on supererogatory acts and as part of that focus I will also explore the concept of and origin(s) of supererogatory duties (Moghaddam 2010, 58). Supererogatory acts are those moral acts that are considered good to do but not necessarily bad not to do. For example, the act of risking one’s own life to save a stranger is good to do but would not necessarily be condemning if one did not attempt a risky rescue.

As to the origin of a supererogatory duty, one possibility is that it could start as one person’s hinge. This might begin with an individual who develops a practice that is normative but not (initially at least) part of the local moral order. The first person (who develops a practice) presents his hinge to others in the form of a doppelganger proposition. That proposition “explains” a certain practice, i.e. the proposition “refugees fleeing from a violent revolution in their own country should be helped” would explain the practice of sharing your food with refugees. Consequently, in practice that first person would reach out and offer them a meal.

The second person (who next conducts the practice developed by the first person) then makes this hinge hers based on accepting that proposition. She would
then accept the proposition that “refugees fleeing from a violent revolution should be helped” and in practice she would also reach out and offer them a meal. We can see from this example that doppelganger propositions not only express the inexpressible, but they also serve as a bridge to other people whom, if it were presented to them, would adopt that hinge.

While hinges are exhibited in the performance of any human actions, moral hinges are exhibited in the performance of moral acts. As I pointed out previously the category of moral acts of interest in this study is the one that I have called supererogatory and defined as ‘above and beyond’ duty. Supererogatory acts are by my definition moral acts because they are acts relating to qualities and values of certain human interactions. For example, painting a door is not a moral act, whereas painting one’s face before embarking on a wartime mission in enemy territory is a moral act because it enhances my safety and the safety of everyone else on the patrol – it is person-preserving.

Having defined supererogatory acts as actions that are considered above and beyond duty, I would now propose that supererogatory acts are grounded in moral hinges. These moral hinges are like the hinges on which our material way of life turns – do we ever for instance, question the nourishing qualities of our ‘daily bread’? In a similar manner, regarding moral (as compared to material) hinges, we rarely question the wrongness of inflicting unnecessary pain on another person or an animal nor the agency and hence responsibility of every human being we encounter. It comes as a surprise if we discover that someone we know turns out to
be a paranoid schizophrenic. That is because the belief that he was not (a paranoid schizophrenic) was an underlying assumption in our relationship, a hinge we accepted without thinking when we interacted with him.

Importantly, hinges are never formulated in the local moral narrative that presumes them. They are however, manifested in moral actions, as a way of showing moral conviction. In this study I propose that a hinge's functionality is an example of a non-contingent universal. At the same time the context in which we understand a hinge is an example of a contingent universal because it is a local belief that is ‘contingent upon’ the discrete context in which the hinge is understood.

Rights and Duties

As I mentioned at the beginning, my study will be situated primarily in the realm of moral philosophy. As part of my investigation I will also examine, in the field of normative ethics, the tension between rights (as owed to an individual by the collective) and duties (as owed by an individual to the collective). I will do this through the evaluation of supererogatory acts, i.e. acts (intended human actions), which helps illuminate the role of duty in limiting and/or expanding possible moral choices.

Another point to be developed is the question of how a person comes to accept his or her duties. In answering this question I introduce the idea that supererogatory duties are possible because of a common belief in a contingent universal principle, even though those supererogatory duties are considered ‘above and beyond’ what is expected of a person in a particular situation. They
(supererogatory duties) are also duties expected of an individual by the local culture because of that person’s position in that culture, for example, as a firefighter, a policeman, or a soldier.

In the first chapter of this thesis I introduce Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis*, i.e. the mediation (by way of reasoning) between a general or universal principle and its application in a concrete or particular situation. This concept provides a foundation from which to better understand the synergistic relationship between objectivism and relativism. Throughout my examination of the relationship between context and moral choices, I continue to highlight this relationship between moral objectivism and moral relativism.

Fundamental to this discussion is my belief that the local culture in which we live shapes our lives is composed of a web of mostly unexpressed norms. These norms comprise the collective principles that inform and guide our human beliefs and behaviors. This thesis explores the development of a collective sense of duty and its manifestation in moral actions. As we do this we realize that the development of this sense of duty is best understood when viewed in the context of individuals going about their everyday practices. Those individuals are continuously interpreting duty, theirs and others. One’s duty it seems is not always constant.

Illuminating the relationship between duty and action is especially relevant in helping us understand the context in which we make deliberate moral choices. Examining supererogatory acts also offers opportunities for insight into acts done *from* duty, if not always *in* accordance with duty. For example, if a person jumps into
a fast moving river to save a drowning child she is acting from a sense of duty to save any child. However, in this case she would not be acting in accordance with her duty to protect and care for her own children who could be without a mother if she were to die trying to save a stranger’s child.

Interestingly, duties and the complimentary idea of rights are explored in the disciplines of both philosophy and social psychology. The relationship presented earlier between the normative ethics of moral philosophy and the applied ethics of moral psychology also shows us how these disciplines are intertwined. In order to provide a common foundation for my study I have defined a duty as something that we owe to others, whereas a right is something that we believe others owe to us. As I pointed out earlier, the concepts of rights and duties are usually considered in the field of normative ethics. However, in this thesis the concepts of rights and duties are also examined within the realm of applied ethics and linked to the discipline of social psychology. Within this discipline are both the theoretical discussions and empirical research. In the course of my project I will briefly address the empirical research in this field, an example of which is found in The Psychology of Rights and Duties (Finkel & Moghaddam 2005). Additionally, this book contains not only a discussion of rights and duties, but also the results of empirical research that illuminates the relevance of postulated universal principles to the everyday practices of individuals.
Moral Principles

In The Psychology of Rights and Duties there is an in-depth presentation of two primary questions. The first question is – “does there exist in the attitudes of people towards rights and duties a sense of the force of universal principles?” And the second question is – “are there universal principles evident in the actual behavior in the domain of rights and duties” (Finkel & Moghaddam 2005, 272)? In other words, are people’s attitudes toward rights and duties reflective of a belief in universal moral principles? Furthermore, if there is evidence that people’s attitudes towards rights and duties reflect a belief in universal principles, does that belief in turn affect their behavior as they act in accordance with their perceived rights and duties (Ibid.)?

In answering the first question the authors make the case that there are universal attitudes that people from different cultures hold toward rights and duties. Those attitudes however, are evident in the rhetoric about rights and duties across cultures, if not in the acts they do in accordance with rights and duties (Ibid). They cite, as an example, what they consider to be a universal attitude held by the majority-ruling group in any culture toward the priority of duty as the most desirable attribute of their citizens. On the other hand the authors propose, based on the data they collected that the minority party in any culture is always more concerned with their rights rather than their duties to the government of the majority ruling party (Finkel & Moghaddam 2005, 273).
We could infer from this example that there is the possibility that rights reflect felt vulnerabilities and duties reflect presumed powers and capacities. Historically, the notion of rights is a recent concept in Western political life. The Feudal system in Europe, which was the dominant form of governance until the time of the Enlightenment, was based on the concept of duty. Both the ruled and the rulers shared the same concept of duty in that system. For example, when a vassal swore allegiance to a knight he was duty-bound to serve him, conversely, the knight was duty-bound to care for and protect the vassal and his family.

Beginning however, with the Enlightenment movement in Western Europe came an increasingly widespread belief in the power of individual reason and the privileging of personal freedom. Subsequently, the concept of individual rights began to take hold. The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, for example, proposes: “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights . . . That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed . . . ”. Interestingly, in the United States there is a “Bill of Rights”, but there is no “Bill of Duties.”

In addressing the second question about universal moral principles and their possible role in influencing human behavior, the empirical data cited in *The Psychology of Rights and Duties* does not support a compelling case for evidence of such universals. In fact the data shows that there are at times significant difference between cultures in terms of the way people in one culture or another view their
moral rights and duties (Finkel & Moghaddam 2005, 140-143). While there is a body of empirical data in this book that seeks to address the question of universal moral principles in human behavior, it is clearly an area the authors and contributors to *The Psychology of Rights and Duties* believe needs even more attention.

**Hypothesis and Questions**

In the course of this thesis I am focusing on the role and influence of contexts of action in shaping moral choices. One of the ways in which I do that is by highlighting the relationship of moral hinges to human actions, paying particular attention to those actions that I have characterized as supererogatory. In striving for a better understanding of the power of context in shaping moral choices I first develop an understanding of the role of Wittgenstein’s hinges in affecting human actions. All those ordinary and extraordinary moral human actions, which are manifestations of moral hinges and occur innumerable times a day, are evidence of our moral choices. Consequently, we can identify moral hinges by examining the practices of our everyday life.

Keeping in mind that the thrust of this dissertation is to illuminate the power of contexts of action in shaping moral choices, the central question I will address is: *How is it that moral acts come to be grounded in moral hinges?* More specifically, how do moral hinges affect (a priori) a moral act, an action that clearly involves a moral choice? Furthermore, what is the role of a moral hinge (as a context of action) in shaping moral choices?
The hypothesis I will examine is this: If supererogatory acts are grounded in moral hinges and these hinges function like a priori principles in shaping human practices, then those acts are subject to interpretation and characterization by local, normative criteria.

A supererogatory act can be seen as an act, which by being above and beyond duty is also an act beyond the bounds of the contingent universal moral principles of a local tribe. In examining the origins of supererogatory acts I will also investigate the possibility that moral hinges are examples of non-contingent universals. The characterization as universal in this case would not apply to the hinge itself, but rather to the fact that there was a hinge at all.

As I suggested earlier, I am pointing out in this study that there are two types of universal principles – contingent and non-contingent. A contingent universal is a universal principle that is context dependent and limited in the scope of its application. On the other hand, a non-contingent universal principle is context independent and applicable to everyone and at all times.

Taking into account Wittgenstein’s view that hinges are non-epistemic and non-experiential, the notion of the existence of a hinge per se, could be seen as an argument for the existence of non-contingent, i.e. context independent universal principles. We need to keep in mind that it is the power of context that shapes the universality of any moral principle. Those principles in turn, are universal only inside a particular moral order and compatible with local customs and practices. Whether any of those universals, expressed as hinge propositions, could ever be in
the form of a moral principle is an implicit question that is addressed throughout this study.

The relationship between contexts of action as normalized constraints on particular human behavior and moral principles as reasoned, universal and context independent guides to moral choice is examined throughout my project. My thesis is also concerned with the relevant and crucial relationship between concepts (as a priori categories that inform and constrain) and acts (in the context of moral duties). Fundamentally, I will make the case, with Wittgenstein, that it is the acts exhibited in what he calls hinge practices that come first, even before concepts, in characterizing our behavior in a given venue or activity. Said differently, Wittgenstein is inverting the Biblical dictum – in the beginning was the act, not the word. It is the interpretation of the way we act not the things we say that are the clearest indicator of the existence of moral hinges.

**Methodology**

This thesis is organized in the following manner:

**CHAPTER 1.**

In this first part I begin by presenting Aristotle’s notion of phronesis as a way of building a foundation for understanding the relationship between universal ideas in concept and particular practices in action. This relationship between universal and particular is also explored in the work of Hans Gadamer. As part of this foundation of understanding I develop Aristotle’s portrayal of moral virtue as found between the extreme forms of generic human attributes. For example, consider the virtue of
generosity as an attribute between the extremes of avarice and extravagance. This place between the extremes of a character attribute is not discovered as the result of a geometric calculation meant to determine a notional center point along the spectrum of human behavior. Rather, the mean is the ‘place’ where virtue flourishes between the extremes.

The mediation of those extremes to the mean is informed by practical wisdom or phronesis and is the realization of a particular virtue. This process of mediation is one in which reason plays an explicit role (along with experience) in creating choices specific to the unique circumstances of a given ethical situation. In Aristotle’s view reason’s role is one of mediation, since it (reason) does not govern our actions. In this chapter I also make the case (with Gadamer) that there is no purely objective point of view from which a subject can come to understand the world.

CHAPTER 2.

In this chapter I continue to look into the role of context in influencing human actions, while expanding my view to also account for the role of reason. Concurrently, I explore Kant’s idea that there is a universal moral principle and it is discoverable by application of the categorical imperative. In the course of this chapter I present Kant’s notion of the synthetic a priori proposition. Later in my study I will make the case that the propositions corresponding to Wittgenstein’s hinges are examples of such propositions.
Furthermore Kant’s categorical imperative is examined with an eye toward understanding the possible connections between his idea of duty and the idea of duty I will subsequently develop in my presentation of Positioning Theory. I will take issue with the Kantian sense of a universal moral law and the implicit idea of a universally shared rationality. Furthermore, the notion that a rational agent is the sole determinate of moral action does not account for the influence contexts of action have on human behavior. Reason’s role is also examined in the context of regulative and constitutive actions.

In this chapter I also present the Kantian synthetic a priori concept as referring to the role of presumed but unexamined empirical facts in the grounding of moral judgments. Those facts also play a role in a priori discourses, such as the ones that shape Wittgenstein’s hinges. This chapter lays the foundation for my presentation of the concept of duty as being relative between cultures and objective within cultures. Throughout this study I will continue to look to uncover any universal commonalities in the concepts and interpretations of duty. My focus here is to build on Kant’s concept of duty, making the case that it is the a priori hinges that influence a person’s interpretation of his or her duty in a particular situation and in a specific context.

CHAPTER 3.

In this chapter I present Wittgenstein’s thoughts from his later work On Certainty in which he introduces the notion of hinges and I explore their implication for moral philosophy. I begin with a discussion of contingent and non-contingent
universal principles then develop his characterization of hinges as synthetic a priori propositions. In this chapter I will also introduce Wittgenstein’s concepts of rule following and language–games as those concepts pertain to my study of contexts of action.

Wittgenstein's hinges are among the implicit and rarely examined beliefs that play the role of synthetic a priori propositions in shaping our life in a local community. His idea of a hinge is developed in On Certainty where he helps us understand that the hinges of a culture are neither conceptual nor experiential in their origin. They reflect the need for a priori certainty as grounds for moral action and fundamentally as grounds for a moral life. They do not come from knowledge of something gained by reasoning nor do they come strictly from one’s empirical experiences in the world. Instead they are tacit beliefs that are usually not formulated in language nor examined explicitly but are manifested in hinge practices. These practices are acts performed in a manner that is in accordance with the norms of a local community.

In addition to hinge practices I also present hinge propositions as the discursive doppelgangers of those practices and as the wherewithal for the empirical foundation of defenses of those practices should they come into question. Daniele Moyal-Sharrock first proposed the idea of a hinge proposition as the doppelganger of a hinge practice (Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 66). I will also explore her views in more depth in this thesis. Hinge practices are not just grounded in local customs; they are the grounds of actions that define a moral order. Hinge practices are therefore not
necessarily rational activities since they are not derived from reasoning about the moral or prudential character of a potential activity. Instead they are simply the things (practices) we do if we are to live easily in a particular form of life without attracting criticism for the way we act.

CHAPTER 4.

In this chapter I explore Wittgenstein’s ethical journey from the Tractatus to his later works, concluding with On Certainty. I will focus on what I believe is a central theme of his journey, which was first evident in the Notebooks 1914-1916. That theme is the idea of mystery. I will make the case that the transition of his thought from his ostensibly positivist position in the Tractatus is not as severe as it might seem at first. One of the themes in the Tractatus, “what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” foreshadows his later insistence on the prevalence of mystery (Wittgenstein 2009, 82).

The concept of hinges, introduced in On Certainty is a manifestation of his belief in mystery as the foundational hard rock against which his spade can no longer turn. Hinges also indicate Wittgenstein’s continuing effort to challenge the traditional concept of the role of philosophy (as the most literal representation of the real), of rationality (as representation) and of the self (as an entity). These hinges, as we will see in more detail in a following chapter, are non-epistemic (meaning they don’t come from thinking, i.e. reasoning) and non-experiential (meaning they are a priori influencers of our actions). They are neither true nor false but are manifested in our actions and practices. However, as I introduced in the
previous chapter, hinges have doppelganger propositions. Those propositions on the other hand, could be either true or false.

In this chapter I will also explore Wittgenstein’s distinction between *saying* and *showing* with an eye toward uncovering the relevance of that distinction in our study of contextualization and its affect on moral choices. Lastly, in this chapter I will also examine the ways in which we assign value to actions and objects in the world, thus continuing my emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between relativism and objectivism. With that symbiotic relationship in mind I intend to refute what I believe is a false dichotomy between objectivism and relativism.

**CHAPTER 5.**

In this chapter I examine in more depth the moral space between objectivism (moral realism) and relativism (moral subjectivism). While continuing to make the case for a contextualized and nuanced approach to ethical issues, I present David Wong’s concept of moral value pluralism. This is the idea that there is a plurality of basic moral values that are not reducible to a single moral value or universal moral principle. This is a relativist position but one that allows for both rights-based and duty-based moralities to coexist in the same culture although one of these moralities will generally be favored over the other. The implicit tension between a rights-based and a duty-based morality is explored throughout this chapter.

Wong also proposes however, that there are universal constraints on any adequate morality. While making this point he also suggests that there are locally contingent criteria that function as normative constraints on the value assigned to
individual rights and duties in that culture. I will evaluate the points that he is making through the lens of contingent and non-contingent universal principles.

CHAPTER 6.

In this chapter I examine recent developments in the fields of cultural and social psychology. This chapter examines the work of anthropologist Richard Shweder in his book, Thinking Through Cultures. In his book he discusses the central role that context plays in our understanding of others and ourselves. He makes the case, with Gadamer, that our prejudices and traditions are what make it possible for us to not only interpret our world but to see the difference with another’s world. They are the things that ground the possibility for our moral judgments and choices. I will present examples from Shweder’s research to support his position and illuminate further the distinction between rights-based moralities and duty-based moralities. In this book Shweder makes the point that there is no “homogenous back cloth to our world.” At the same time he allows for the possibility that the worldview and moral values held by others are available to us should we choose to try to understand the others perspective.

CHAPTER 7.

This chapter examines the social psychological innovation of Positioning Theory, focusing on the works of Rom Harre’ and Fathali Moghaddam. I will present Positioning Theory as a tool for use in exploring the role of rights and duties in shaping life’s activities and as a means of understanding moral choices.
Positioning Theory is the study of the way rights and duties are ascribed, attributed and justified to and by individuals in local social groups. It includes the discursive development of the shared assumptions that influence those duties and that consequently shape the development of individual selves and the action patterns they undertake. I account for the concepts of rights and duties by examining what they mean in different situations and how they are assigned to and by people in a particular moral order. My examination focuses on supererogatory acts because those acts provide a more timely and intense environment in which to examine the attributes of rights and duties. I will propose that the nature of supererogatory acts transcends the traditionally accepted boundaries of human actions in a local community.

The shaping of the rights and duties taken up by individuals results from the development, intentionally or otherwise, of positions created or changed through the interaction of those individuals with others in their local group. The ascription of rights and duties is the outcome of these interpersonal communications and is the common cognitive activity through which shared assumptions are manifested. This chapter concludes with a case study using Positioning Theory to examine terrorist use of the Internet as a means of recruiting new terrorists to the cause.

CHAPTER 8.

This chapter connects Wittgenstein’s idea of hinges with a particular culture’s concept of rationality and subsequently to a culture’s characterization of what constitutes a supererogatory act. I will make the case that there is no universal
objective rationality and hence no universal and objective set of moral principles that are not contingent on local context to give them value and meaning. This chapter will also touch on the concept of rationality as contextualized limits on moral choices and human behavior.

In this chapter I will focus on illuminating the origin of hinges and propose that Wittgenstein’s hinges are the roots of a culture’s rationality. I will also show how hinges, as they are manifested in practice, affect our daily lives. Continuing, I make the case that moral hinges are constitutive of our worldview and regulative of our behavior and as such they are manifested in moral practices.

CHAPTER 9.

In this chapter I explore in depth the notion of supererogatory acts, which are grounded in moral hinges, as a way of closely examining the concept of duty in making moral choices. Specifically, I will make the case that supererogatory acts are grounded in moral hinges. My examination of the concept of duty focuses on using the methods of excavating moral hinges to illuminate moral choices and actions. I will also explore the connection between the Wittgensteinian ideas of language-games and hinges in the context of my discussion about contingent and non-contingent universal principles. The concept of universal and local hinges is also reviewed.

This chapter also presents Nigel Pleasant’s concept of basic moral certainty and the foundational role it plays in our moral practices and choices. Furthermore I incorporate my analysis of positions as developed in the previous chapter on
Positioning Theory in order to provide another perspective from which to understand the countless moral choices we make every day. Throughout this chapter the relationship between the universal and the particular remains an area of focus.

**CONCLUSION.**

This final part of the thesis summarizes my proposal for understanding the role of contexts of action in shaping and limiting moral choices. The effect of context on moral choice is explored through the characterization of moral hinges as the grounds of moral acts. Finally I present insights from my examination of the power of contexts of action in limiting and shaping the range of possible moral choices. This chapter also brings together the varied perspectives on rights and duties discussed in this thesis, and concludes with the idea of a symbiotic interconnectedness between moral objectivism and moral relativism.

In the end I will also address the existence of non-contingent universal principles. Throughout I have implicitly investigated the possibility of whether or not there are universal moral principles or standards of behavior. The answer is, I would suggest, not a sharp and distinctive yes or no that is found on diverse sides of the spectrum of possibilities. There are for example, moral principles that are non-contingent universal principles, but their universality is evident only when considered in the context of a local moral order. Moral principles, it seems, are found in an ephemeral place along a nuanced *mean* of possibilities.
I am proposing an approach to moral philosophy that is based on the notion that our moral actions and practices are grounded in moral hinges. My moral philosophy is best characterized as based on the symbiotic nature of the relationship between relativism and objectivism. From that foundation I will advocate for a moral philosophy based on duty. Our sense of duty is founded on the moral hinges we tacitly accept if we are going to live as members in good standing in a particular local moral order.
CHAPTER 1
ARISTOTLE - PHRONESIS AND MORAL CHOICE

In this chapter I introduce Aristotle’s concept of \emph{phronesis} beginning with his presentation of the concept in Book VI of the \emph{Nicomachean Ethics}. My intent is to develop his notion of the relationship of the universal to the particular and to do this in the context of his interpretation of practical knowledge. In my discussion of phronesis, I will also touch on the interpretation of Aristotle’s concept by Hans Gadamer and show how Gadamer’s ideas about phronesis and hermeneutics are relevant to my investigation into the status of what we often take to be or regard as universal moral principles.

In Book VI of the \emph{Nicomachean Ethics} Aristotle defines phronesis or practical wisdom as an “end in itself” (Aristotle 1947, Book VI 1140 lines 5-6). It (practical wisdom) is a “true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man” (Ibid.). He goes on to develop the notion that phronesis involves the mitigation between universals and particulars. He says “nor is practical wisdom concerned with universals only—it must also recognize the particulars; for it is practical and practice is concerned with particulars” (Aristotle 1947 Book VI 1141, lines 15-17). Aristotle is introducing the idea that there is a need for both universal (theoretical) and particular (practical) knowledge. However, he believes that if a person is compelled to make a choice between the two they should privilege the practical over the purely theoretical.
He gives a plain and simple example of these two kinds of knowledge as they relate to eating healthy foods. In the first case he presents a man who knows that ‘light’ meat is better for his health but does not possess knowledge of any examples of light meats. On the other hand he presents a man who knows that chicken is good for his health but doesn’t know why. If this second man eats chicken he will be promoting his own good health regardless of whether he knows why chicken is good for him. The first man however, cannot promote his own good health because he has no practical knowledge to identify the light meats that he needs to eat in order to be healthy. Aristotle goes on to state that “Practical wisdom is concerned with action; therefore one should have both forms of it (knowledge), or the latter in preference to the former” (Aristotle 1947, Book VI 1141, lines 22-23).

At this point it is useful to clarify how Aristotle believed practical wisdom was attained and its relation to moral virtue and for that we go to Book II of the Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle presents the notion that there are two kinds of virtue, intellectual and moral, then defines them: “…intellectual virtue owes its birth and its growth to teaching…while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit…” (Aristotle 1947, Book II 1103 lines 15-17). For example, in order for a person to be courageous they must be disposed or habituated to do brave deeds. A person is brave when they act bravely in a situation that calls for brave action.

Conversely, a person is not considered brave if they don’t act bravely when they have the opportunity or when they act bravely ‘by accident.’ The moral virtues, as habits or dispositions are clearly connected with a choice (to act bravely) and an
action (the brave act itself). As is the case for any habit the more a person performs an act the more easily the action becomes for her to perform. In the case of bravery, the more a person acts bravely (that is - practices being brave) then when the opportunity is presented, it is easier for them to act brave. Consequently for Aristotle to have the virtue of bravery, i.e. to be considered brave, is to choose to act in ways that are indicative of and appropriate to the virtue of bravery. Having established what a moral virtue is, the next section clarifies how a moral virtue is attained.

To begin, the moral virtues are not innate in humans although we do have some natural capacity for their development. Aristotle says: “...none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature ... nor contrary to nature ... rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit” (Aristotle 1947, Book II 1103 line 20-25). The virtues then are attained like all habits by practice, “...we learn by doing them...we become brave by doing brave acts” (Aristotle 1947, Book II 1103 lines 37-39). There is a connection here between the development of a habit and the ease with which a person is able to behave in that manner.

We become virtuous by practicing virtuous behavior and when that behavior becomes a habit, we are more apt to make the choice and then act in a manner appropriate to that virtuous behavior. Aristotle gives as an example the virtue of bravery, “...similarly too in the case of courage; for by being habituated to despise things that are terrible and to stand our ground against them we become brave, and it is when we have become so that we shall be most able to stand our ground against
them” (Aristotle 1947, Book II 1104 lines 37-40). The implication of this discussion is that Aristotle believes that moral virtues can be taught. “For moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from the noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up . . . to both delight and be pained by the things we ought . . .” (Aristotle 1947, Book II 1104 lines 12-15). In other words humans are neither good nor bad, we have the capacity to be either and it is through the right kind of education that a person attains virtues such as bravery, moderation, justice, generosity, etc. Aristotle however, does not mean by this passage that virtues are simply the result of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain but rather they are the result of habitually practicing virtuous behavior, which may in fact not be pleasurable and may even be painful.

The foundation of this education is finding the mean, that point of moderation between the extremes of behavior possible in the practice of a virtue. It is the exercise of reason or practical wisdom that provides this foundation. Returning to the virtue of bravery Aristotle give this example as a way of presenting his idea of the mean. “. . . it is the nature of such things to be destroyed by defect and excess . . . so it is in the case of courage . . . For the man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes out to meet every danger becomes rash . . .” (Aristotle 1947, Book II 1104 lines 21-23).
The mean is that point at which the virtue is realized, the point at which it flourishes in the sense that the mean is not too much or not too little. To possess a virtue consequently means to have as a habit that which keeps one from becoming, in the example of bravery, either rash or cowardly. The mean is not a point in the geometric middle; rather it is a point relative to the virtue and relative to us; the mean is context dependent. In the case of bravery (presented above) Aristotle portrays it as being on a scale between the extremes of fear. Too much fear and a person is frozen and cannot act and is considered a coward, too little fear and a person acts foolishly and is considered reckless.

The extremes in this case are the vices of cowardice and recklessness and mean between them is the virtue of bravery. However the mean is not necessarily in the middle per se, it is context dependent and as such varies in each situation and for each person. Finding the mean in a given situation is the practical role of reason in Aristotle’s ethics. The virtuous person is the one who rationally discovers the mean relative to herself, her habits and her actions. Aristotle makes the point, “Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it” (Aristotle 1947, Book II 1107 lines 1-3).

The difficulty in discovering the truly virtuous action occurs because the process of discovery never yields a stark black and white distinction but is always couched in many shades of gray. It is hard, Aristotle says, “... to find the
middle...anyone can get angry—that is easy—or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy . . .” (Aristotle 1947, Book II 1108 lines 26-28).

The capacity of reason to find the mean is what Aristotle calls practical wisdom or *phronesis*. A person that possesses practical wisdom uses reason to determine the mean whenever there are choices to be made. Since virtue, as we have seen, lies in the mean and the mean is determined by reason, we can say that virtue is a habit informed by reason in the form of practical wisdom. Aristotle says that virtue is “. . . that which is in accordance with the right rule; now the right rule is that which is in accordance with practical wisdom” (Aristotle 1947, Book VI 1144 lines 21-23). He does not however, provide a formula for determining what choices are to be made in order to be a virtuous person.

There is no Kantian imperative or utilitarian test for moral actions proposed in Aristotle’s ethics. The standard, if there is one at all is the good or virtuous person. This is not a form of relativism where anything goes and all is simply relative to everything else. Aristotle is proposing that there are objective facts of a situation that should inform the choices one makes. In every ethical situation virtuous actions are defined by the mean, which is different in each case. The mean is subsequently discovered by practical wisdom through the process of deliberation.

In this passage Aristotle says that one needs to possess both theoretical knowledge from study and practical knowledge from experience and deliberation in
order to apply universal principles to particular situations. In other words, realizing the process of phronesis, i.e. mediating the universal and the particular requires both kinds of knowledge. To the example in the previous paragraph about eating healthy foods, phronesis would be exemplified in a person’s understanding that light meat is more easily digested and therefore healthier and that chicken is a type of light meat. As he says in that earlier passage it is more important for one’s good health to know that chicken is good for you and not know why, than it is to know that light meats are good for you but not know of any particular kinds of light meats.

In fact there are two related definitions of phronesis in the Nicomachean Ethics. In the first instance Aristotle says “It is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself…” (Aristotle 1947, Book VI 1140, lines 26-28). Man, according to Aristotle, is capable of deliberating (reasoning) about things that are potentially good or bad for him in the context of leading a good life. Therefore, good actions can have no end other than the act itself since good actions are never a means but always and only an end.

The second definition of phronesis that Aristotle presents is in the context of the question about the relevance of the good act itself to the reason that one conducted the act in the first place. He says that “The work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as moral virtues; for virtue makes us aim at the right mark and practical wisdom makes us take the right means” (Aristotle, 1947, Book VI 1144, lines 7-9). Aristotle is saying that the “work of man”
his moral virtue, is characterized by doing not just the right thing but by doing that thing for the right reasons and by choosing the right means. That choice is a function of the process of deliberation, i.e. reasoning about what ought to be the mean in terms of moral behavior in a particular situation.

Moral virtues then are the habitual inclinations to choose and to act in certain ways in accordance with practical wisdom or phronesis. If a person acts in accordance with phronesis and the moral virtues, they are considered good, if not then they are considered bad in the sense that they are judged by their virtues and vices. According to Aristotle however, there are situations in which a person doing something bad should not be subject to blame. “Since virtue is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary passions and actions praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are involuntary pardon, and sometimes pity . . .” (Aristotle 1947, Book III 1109 lines 30-33).

There are two types of action, voluntary and involuntary, the focus here is on the involuntary actions. Aristotle believes that involuntary actions occur under two conditions that factor into our characterization of the acts as virtuous or not. Those conditions are: “under compulsion or owing to ignorance” (Aristotle 1947, Book III 1110 lines 35-36). The involuntary actions from compulsion are of interest in this project because they occur from outside the individual, forcing choices on him. Additionally the characterization of an individual’s decisions in light of those involuntary actions is very much contextually dependent.
That context can be different depending on the cultural and situational factors influencing the decisions by the actors in each case. In some seemingly involuntary situations the individual is not a passive actor but indeed contributes to the outcome of the situation by his decisions. Aristotle uses as an example a ship captain throwing goods overboard to lighten the ship to keep it from sinking. In this case the captain’s decision to throw the goods overboard was voluntary but he was forced into that choice because of the external (to him) presence of the storm. So an action that is under normal conditions inexcusable, throwing goods overboard, is under the particular circumstances of the storm, excusable or even admirable. This situation is an example where the application of practical wisdom (phronesis) helped us understand or make sense of the circumstances that influenced the captain’s decision and also influenced our assigning blame or praise to his actions.

Aristotle is here introducing the role of reason in deliberating about right moral actions. I do not take this to mean that phronesis does or is intended to govern moral actions in the sense that Kant proposed for the categorical imperative (Kant 2012, 429). Rather, phronesis is the mediation of the universal, which in this case is reason, and the particular - by choosing the means between extremes - e.g. too much vs. too little. It is this mediation that brings about the capability for a person to pursue the moral life with a reasoned approach. That approach however, is not one informed solely by theoretical reason, as is the case with the categorical imperative, which seeks a universal application in all instances of an objective moral code.
Phronesis implies that we cannot be virtuous by education alone; we must in fact deliberate about such things as how we ought to act in a certain situation and about both why and how an appropriate moral reason for acting applies in that situation. In other words the essence of phronesis is the application of universal principles in a particular setting and it is this process of application that is manifested in the acts and practices we exhibit as we go about living in the world. Aristotle says, “... it is impossible to be good in the full sense of the word without practical wisdom or to be a man of practical wisdom without moral excellence or virtue” (Aristotle 1947, Book VI 1144, lines 31-32).

Phronesis then is not something produced anew, (like poetry) but rather it is the application of universal values to a particular situation. That process and the practices inhering reflect those beliefs, unstated or even unknown (to the subject) about the human condition in the local moral order in which the subject lives. In other words, phronesis is not innate in us; rather, it reflects the moral character that is a disposition of nature developed by habit to become ‘second nature’ in each of us. How that moral character comes to be formed and then manifested during interaction with others is a theme that I will continue to develop in this study.

On my view phronesis is a moral activity, distinct and inexorable as the means by which we live and act in the local culture to which we belong. It is “the kind of reasonableness that is fitted to our finite mode of being, and it puts no a priori restrictions on just how resourceful this finite human reason may show itself to be” (Dunne 1993, 381). Phronesis rehabilitates reason from its tending toward the
severe and limited interpretation that Kant would have us follow. I would contend that reason should be understood not as a sterile, detached and wistful objective force that can be exercised in isolation. Instead reason is always mediated by its confrontation with particulars in a local context. Reason can never be understood, much less invoked in ethical matters, apart from it’s grounding in the deliberations of a cognizing subject.

Reason is not and cannot be detached from its historical situation because it only develops and exerts its power from within a local tradition (Bernstein 1983, 37). Evidence of that power is seen in the everyday practices of a local culture. Reason’s power is felt in the application of universal to particular since reason is informed by the local tradition and not realized as a detached and objectified rationality. Hans Gadamer says of Aristotle’s notion of phronesis that he (Aristotle) is concerned with “reason and knowledge not detached from a being that is becoming but determined by it and determinative of it” (Gadamer 1975, 289). The interplay of practical reason and theoretical knowledge and ultimately technical skill is what defines phronesis. Importantly it is not the subsuming of one into the others but the continued interaction of all three that exemplifies the means by which we make moral judgments.

In many ways the postmodern movement in the 20th Century was a reaction to the Enlightenment belief, which privileged objective, theoretical reason. Inherent in this Enlightenment belief was also the idea that technique, i.e. technical skill could be learned in a predictable analytic process and that those techniques would take
priority over practical knowledge acquired through experience and deliberation. This prioritization of technique was done at the expense of the central idea in phronesis, which is mediation (deliberation) of the relationship of the universal to the particular, central to the idea of phronesis. Richard Bernstein summarizes this point when he states “Phronesis is a form of reasoning that is concerned with choice and involves deliberation . . . in which there is mediation between general principles and a concrete particular situation” (Bernstein 1983, 54).

He goes on to elaborate more on this relationship and the development of ethical knowledge or ‘know-how.’ This relationship is exemplified in mediation and is “. . . not accomplished by any appeal to technical rules or method (in the Cartesian sense) or by the subsumption of a pre-given determinate universal to a particular case” (Bernstein 1983, 146). This mediation results in a type of ethical knowledge or ‘know-how’ in which he says, “what is universal and what is particular are co-determined” (Ibid.).

We understand phronesis in this case as practical moral knowledge, which arises from a process whereby universal and particular are characterized as developing together and concurrently. In the course of becoming, the subject relates both being and knowledge to her moral choices in the culture in which she choses to live. The process of becoming, in the case of an individual person, comes from a sympathetic understanding of other human beings. This understanding is informed by the idea that one cannot understand another person simply by looking at them from one’s own individual, subjective point of view. Instead we must attempt to
understand the point of view of others while admitting to our own prejudices and through that process of admission, relate to others. The process of phronesis, i.e. the application of ethical know-how, is enabled by the presumptions and prejudices, which we as unique subjects bring to this process of deliberation.

It is not possible therefore to bracket or parse out our prejudices to arrive at some purely objective knowledge of the ‘thing in itself.’ In fact the opposite is the case. It is those prejudices that enable us to understand another being at all. For when we engage in open discourse with others our prejudices are subject to scrutiny and are in turn challenged. In this process of challenging our prejudices, our horizon of possibilities expands. Bernstein says that this understanding (resulting from open and dialogical discourse) is “a form of phronesis, is a practical-moral knowledge which becomes constitutive of what we are in the process of becoming” (Bernstein 1983, 149). So phronesis is realized, because it presupposes prejudices, in a community of shared ethical principles and norms by human beings, who are in the midst of becoming within the tradition in which they live.

Here we find common cause with Gadamer who in Truth and Method says of the Enlightenment; “The fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is its prejudice against prejudice itself, which deprives tradition of its power” (Gadamer 1975, 239-240). It is the case that prejudice is simply unavoidable, it is already always there whenever a person seeks to understand anything. In this case Gadamer is discussing prejudice and contrasting it with the Enlightenment idea that we can somehow step away from our prejudices. The context in which Gadamer is making his case is in the
realm of hermeneutics or interpretation. His idea about the importance of understanding the necessary role of prejudice is equally applicable to phronesis as the process of mediation of universal and particular. This is because a person can never understand anything as a pure object, shorn of its subjective perceptions.

This is important background for my study because as we explore further the relationship between universal and particular it becomes apparent that we cannot remove the subject from his own historical context. From Martin Heidegger we get the idea that it is *temporality* that is the fundamental structure of Dasein (human being) (Dunne 1993, 110). Heidegger believes that Dasein is *thrown* into the world and in this state of *thrownness* brings with him all the prejudices of his historical condition. It is in the context of those prejudices that Dasein realizes his place, in time – i.e. his temporality.

Furthermore, Dasein exists as a being that projects itself onto the possibilities of its being. In other words Dasein is always in the process of becoming and this process is symbiotic with Dasein’s projecting his prejudices into the world. So when we speak about phronesis we are coming to grips with the notion that the mediation of universal and particular into practical knowledge is rife with the projection of our prejudices into the discourse. The participants in the discourse in turn, come to a common understanding of phronesis or practical know-how in the specific context of those prejudices. This notion is at odds with the idea that we can somehow get outside our historical situation and, in spite of large disparities in time and culture, understand the distant ‘other’ because of an ill defined but pervasive concept of a
common human nature. In fact there is no common human nature that stands aside as an objective filter through which to compare one culture with another.

Phronesis, in the way Gadamer interprets Aristotle, is fundamentally concerned with the interplay between reason, tradition, and the historical situation. This interplay is opposed to the stark dichotomy of the two positions that is a central tenet in Enlightenment thought. As I develop this theme of interplay between universal and particular in phronesis (presented as the coming forth of practical, moral know-how) I continually highlight objectivist attempts to maintain a seemingly strict distinction between the two (Dunne 1993, 111).

Gadamer's interpretation of hermeneutics, i.e. the activity of understanding a text, is also relevant to the search for universal moral principles. Importantly, those principles can never be objective in the sense that they are outside the tradition of the interpreter. The point here is not, as Edmund Husserl proposes, to ‘bracket out’ all the preconceptions of the investigating subject (Husserl 1982, sections 30-31). Instead Gadamer says, “The abstract antithesis … between history and knowledge must be discarded. The effect of a living tradition and the effect of historical study must constitute a unity” (Gadamer 1975, 251). In line with this thought, Joseph Dunne’s observation is that reason is not outside tradition where tradition is a condition of its possibility as human reason (Dunne 1993, 113).

Gadamer is sympathetic to this observation of Dunne's and also states, “… that which has been sanctioned by tradition has an authority that is nameless … and this authority has power over our attitudes and behavior…” (Gadamer 1975, 249). This
idea is similar to the one presented by Ludwig Wittgenstein wherein he assigned the power over attitudes and behavior to hinges. He defined hinges as non-epistemic and non-experiential beliefs manifested in the practices we undertake as we go about living in a local moral order. I will explore this idea in-depth as I develop this thesis.

There is another and related point that is central to my argument and that is, that the characterization of a universal can only be realized when it is applied in a particular situation. Additionally, according to Dunne’s interpretation of Gadamer, it is not only a particular situation that is illuminated but the “meaning-potential of the text itself is realized” (Dunne 1993, 123). Dunne goes on to suggest that the dialectic of universal and particular operates in all interpretation and that there is no one transcendent universal meaning to a text but rather the meaning is understood in every particular situation in a new and different way (Ibid). This same thought applies to the concept of practical knowledge (phronesis) since it is the mediation of universal and particular, in the context of moral judgments.

It is here that Gadamer brings up the idea of practice in the application of the universal in a particular situation. Practice for him cannot be something accomplished at a distance through the application of an objective method. Instead, Gadamer, as interpreted by Dunne, believes that practice “must remain rooted in the being of a person . . . and incorporate within itself the knowledge which guides it” (Dunne 1993, 125). Accordingly, Dunne also proposes that “Praxis (practice) was always a realization of the person himself, and the knowledge which guides it, i.e.
phronesis (emphasis added) was inseparable from the kind of person he had become” (Dunne 1993, 126).

Fundamentally then phronesis is always and only realized in historical applications of the universal. It can never be realized in any form of knowledge apart from these applications. The process of phronesis necessarily causes a person to bring their prejudices and preconceptions to any mediation of the universal and the particular. A final point to be made in this section is about the relationship of experience to practical wisdom. Aristotle first presents that relationship in Book II of the Nicomachean Ethics when he talks about how one acquires moral virtues through practice until acting according to a particular virtue becomes habit. Although it is not enough to simply practice a virtue like bravery, one must also act bravely in a way that accords with the mean and not the extremes, neither cowardly nor reckless.

Discovering the mean comes from deliberation informed by practical wisdom. Since practical wisdom comes from experience and since a young person has as yet no experience in life it is necessary for them to be taught how to be virtuous. Young people can only have wisdom gained from books, whereas practical wisdom, i.e. reasoning about finding the mean is something that only comes with habitual experience. Aristotle explores in more depth the notion of experience in Book VI of the Nicomachean Ethics. He first clarifies what he means by practical wisdom saying that “... a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found ... wisdom is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar from
experience, but a young man has no experience” (Aristotle 1947, Book VI 1142, lines 13-15).

Dunne presents a most powerful metaphor when he is presenting Aristotle’s image for exploring the development, also from particular experience, of universal concepts. This image traces the ultimate development of coherent experience from myriad perceptions to the eventual consolidation of those perceptions into an experience and then into a universal concept (Dunne 1993, 129). Aristotle compares this process to the way a scattered and retreating army coalesces into an army that eventually stands firm against an advancing enemy force. This happens when first one soldier makes a stand, then another, and another until ultimately the army as a whole stops retreating and comes together to repel the enemy. According to Dunne the importance of this metaphor is that it portrays the seemingly irrational behavior that leads to the development of universal concepts from individual experience (Dunne 1993, 130). There is no sovereign and overarching reason that controls human experience; in fact what controls human experience is nearly incomprehensible. Imagine the difficulty in trying to find a rational reason for an individual soldier to stop running for his life and take a stand, at great risk to his own life and possibly certain death, against an attacking enemy.

The non-rational nature of the universalizability of experience presented in this example is one possibility that points to the limits of reason’s influence on human actions and behaviors. It appears that what Aristotle is proposing (Gadamer would agree) is that the truly experienced person, i.e. one who has lived long
enough to have known happiness and tragedy, realizes there are limits to what reason can do to explain the things that happen in our lives. Randomness and chance are constant reminders of the irrational or unreasonable forces that are an inexorable part of the human condition.

We now return to the central relationship in the dialectic between universal and particular. Dunne portrays universal ideas, those that inform our daily moral practices, as ones that cannot be stamped on each situation (Dunne 1993, 272). Those ideas such as justice, bravery and truthfulness do not provide in their universal context enough specificity to enable them to be applied without deliberation. Gadamer further attributes to Aristotle the notion that “the guiding principles cannot be taught, they only have the validity of a schemata, they always have to be made concrete in the situation of the person acting” (Gadamer 1975, 236). Dunne very clearly defines phronesis in this context as not just knowledge of ethical ideas but instead as the character of an individual subject’s mind that develops for each particular situation, an application of those ethical ideas (Dunne 1993, 272). This concept of phronesis is reinforced by Aristotle when he states that a “Man has phronesis not by knowing but only by being able to act” (Aristotle 1947, Book VI 1152, lines 8-9). This then is the unity of phronesis – universal and particular – knowledge and acting.

Phronesis or practical wisdom is also about pursuing what is good not just for the individual but also about what constitutes leading a good life in a more general sense (Aristotle 1947, Book VI 1139, lines 25-30). However, that which is good
cannot be determined prior to the mediation of the universal and the particular. Phronesis is realized in an act or practice and is different for every situation even if we are applying what appears to be the same moral principle. It is also the case, according to Dunne, that phronesis is sensitive to a perceptiveness regarding concrete particulars as opposed to simply having knowledge of universal principles (Dunne 1993, 273). This means that we must now look at phronesis as a process of mediation that prioritizes experience and perception above simply formulated knowledge (Ibid.). It follows from this explanation that phronesis is not the discrete intellectual activity of an individual person. Rather it is something inextricably tied up in a person’s being, which is always in the process of becoming through experience in the context of a particular society.

Dunne brings the relationship between universal and particular, which is a theme throughout this project, into clear relief regarding moral issues. He contends that “practical-moral universals” cannot in and of themselves cover all particular cases. This is because moral universals such as justice and courage are indeterminate until they are applied in a particular instance for a particular situation (Dunne 1993, 311). He goes on to suggest that Aristotle’s concept of moral universals (virtues) is the same, i.e. that they are made determinate through their application to a particular situation. This application is part of every moral principle and is the essence of phronesis.

Aristotle’s point in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he is discussing virtue is to relate the idea of phronesis to the virtuous life. He develops the notion
that in order for a person to be virtuous they must actualize a virtue as opposed to merely possessing theoretical knowledge of that virtue (Aristotle 1947, Book VI 1144, lines 10-22). Phronesis is the process by which a person applies that theoretical knowledge to a given situation and as Dunne proposes it also “...allows for the exercise of a particular virtue” (Dunne 1993, 311). He also suggests that phronesis plays a role in mediating conflicting virtues in the same sense that I have presented phronesis as mediating the universal and the particular. Dunne gives as examples of this mitigation of conflicting virtues – justice and kindness, and loyalty and fairness (Ibid.).

It is in this context that Aristotle’s concept of the mean can best be understood. The mean is not a predetermined standard against which one uses the criteria of a virtue in order to discern the proper action in a particular situation. Instead, coming to the mean is finding the middle, defined as a unique possibility, different for every situation and arrived at through phronesis. Importantly, the perspective from which we interpret the mean and ultimately determine its character is always founded in the first person point of view. Phronesis is thus always subjective and cannot be otherwise. A person could never stand outside of him or herself and hope to determine precisely what another person might do in a certain circumstance by applying an objective criterion.

The point here is that phronesis does not disregard reason or a rational principle but mediates them in the context of a specific situation. It is not just theoretical knowledge or merely practical knowledge (gained strictly from
experience) rather it is both kinds of knowledge. It is not informed by reason alone and could even be characterized as irrational when viewed from a perspective outside of an individual’s situation in their local tradition. Any perspective is always informed by a person’s experience and accepts that we always carry with us the history of our past. As a being (Dasein) who is always projecting onto the world, our past history becomes for us the foundation from which and by which we view and interpret the world. We can never escape our history for it is attendant to our being and to who and what we are as Dasein.

Our language also shapes the perspective from which we mediate the universal and the particular in the process of phronesis. The words constituting any language get their meaning from use. Importantly, language is not a means of expressing a thought after it has been formed in our mind. Instead we should understand our thoughts as already in our language, both constrained and enabled by that language. Trying to escape from language in an attempt to find some stark, unchanging, and objective tenet of knowledge is futile because it does not take into account the discursive tension between universal and particular. Universals are always being modified in light of their continued exposure to, i.e. their application in, discrete situations. Therefore, there can never be an unchanging and objective universal moral principle, which is applicable and appropriate in all situations. This continuous modification of universals, this to-ing and fro-ing with particulars is the process by which they are both co-determined.
This chapter on phronesis has laid the foundation for the notion that there is no purely objective point of view from which a subject can understand the world. We carry with us the prejudices of our past whether or not we are conscious or aware of them and their influence is always evident. Rather than seeing prejudices as exerting an unwanted influence on a search for knowledge we learn to recognize and accept them for what they are, the means by which we interpret and understand the world. These prejudices, which in turn form our perspectives, are expressed in the language we use as we interact with other beings while projecting ourselves onto the world.

Prejudices are not a simple restriction on the bounds of human reason but in the course of their being examined and challenged are foundational to expanding the horizon of possibilities for Dasein. Those possibilities are informed by reason through the practical application of universal to particular. The next chapter will explore Immanuel Kant’s ideas about synthetic a priori propositions with the ultimate goal of deepening our understanding of the relationship between universal and particular.
CHAPTER 2

KANT AND THE SYNTHETIC A PRIORI

The central idea in Kant’s moral philosophy is that there is a universal moral principle and it is the categorical imperative. This idea is based on the notion that a particular agent or person is obligated to adopt a given maxim only if everyone else is so obligated. In other words a person would adopt, for example the maxim of never telling a lie only if it would be a maxim by which everyone else would also live his or her lives. It is easy to imagine how the reverse of this maxim about lying would be incoherent because if everyone in a culture adopted the maxim of always lying then no one would ever trust anyone else to ‘tell the truth.’ Indeed, the very idea of telling the truth would disappear from that culture. According to Kant the categorical imperative is the universal principle that should be the test of all our moral actions.

Categorical Imperative

The relationship of a moral agent or person to the maxim of the categorical imperative is one whereby her actions are such that they should be done from duty. In order for an action to have moral content Kant believes that it must be performed from duty, not merely in accord with duty or merely from inclination (Kant 2012, 397-398). An action done from duty is an action done for its own sake. He goes on to say in the Grounding “an action from duty has its moral worth not in the purpose to be attained by it but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon” (Kant 2012, 399). Here he is saying that a morally good action is one done from duty
in accordance with respect for the moral law or categorical imperative. In the case of the categorical imperative Kant proposes that it is both a necessary and sufficient condition for the permissibility of that maxim (Guyer 1998, 190).

Kant believed that the social conditions in a given culture are given by the laws of human nature alone and are relevant for developing the context for moral action. In other words, there is an objective and universal set of attributes that make up what we call human nature. Those attributes remain constant regardless of variation in local cultural practices. The requirement for the universalizability of the maxim of the categorical imperative must, according to Kant, be applied against these common laws of human nature. Kant is after a pure philosophy of morals, i.e. a metaphysics of morals separate and discrete from an applied philosophy of morals. He says, “... moral principles are not grounded on the peculiarities of human nature but must also subsist a priori of themselves and that from such principles practical rules must be derivable for every rational nature, and accordingly for human nature” (Kant 2012, 410n). Kant seems to be saying here that moral principles are universal and unchanging and that from those a priori universal rules we can discern practical moral actions.

This is opposed to the Aristotelian notion that the universal is always influenced by its application to the particular. Aristotle’s idea of the symbiotic relationship between the universal and the particular and the role of phronesis or practical wisdom is one with which Kant would not agree. Aristotle holds that the application of the universal in a particular situation will always be unique in the
sense that the social and cultural norms in discrete local moral orders are different. Those differences will exist regardless of whether the cultures are displaced in space (geography) time (history) or both. Kant, on the other hand believes, that the universal and binding maxim of the categorical imperative remains true and relevant regardless of the uniqueness of the situation in which it is invoked or the diverse culture in which a person’s moral acts are taking place. That is because the maxim is a synthetic a priori proposition, meaning that the attributes of the concept are not contained in the predicate (synthetic) and that is prior to (a priori) any experience.

For example in the proposition “every event has a cause” the concept of having a cause is not part of the concept of being an event. This makes the proposition synthetic and because we know it to be true (that every event has a cause) independent of experience, it is therefore a priori. In order to accept that there are synthetic a priori propositions we must first suppose that the objects we sense in the world are the way they appear to us because they (objects) are structured in certain ways by our mind in the act of knowing them.

In the case of Aristotle’s philosophy, experience is a central and necessary part of his ethics, whereas with Kant experience is not a necessary condition for determining the virtuous course of action. Aristotle’s conception of virtue is one that is manifested in behavior that is not innate in a person but rather is learned like a habit over time. He believed that following the mean was the epitome of virtue and the mean was to be found between the extremes of human behavior, not too little,
not too much. Finding the mean was a process guided and informed by phronesis, which is the application of the universal, to a particular situation, in a manner that reflects practical, not theoretical wisdom. Experience is the necessary condition that enables practical wisdom to be the best guide to finding the mean. The mean is where virtue flourishes and is made evident to others as an example of good, i.e. virtuous behavior. Kant’s idea of the categorical imperative on the other hand is a construct that relies on the notion of synthetic a priori knowledge, i.e. understanding gained prior to experience to guide a person’s moral actions.

The categorical imperative, according to Robert Johnson in *The Moral Law as Causal Law* (2010) contains a central point of ambivalence that makes it difficult to grasp the extent of the universality of this fundamental principle of morality. That difficulty is the need to conform to “universally valid laws” while at the same time acting only on a maxim that one could rationally will all other rational agents to act on the same maxim (Ibid.). He makes the case that the requirement that “the rational must conform their will to universally valid laws” is not based on the fact that rational agency is rational but on the fact that it is agency (Ibid.). In other words, I interpret Johnson as proposing that the universality of Kant’s moral law does not come from grounding in the rationality of an autonomous will, per se. Rather, it comes from agency, from the causality of an individual’s will.

This concept is important to this discussion of Kant’s philosophy because it helps us understand what he meant by the categorical imperative grounding our moral actions. I would propose, with Johnson, that Kant is not saying that rational
agents act on universal principles because they are rational. Instead I believe that because rational agents are the autonomous causes of action they must operate in a manner that is in accordance with universal laws seen as valid by all other rational agents. The rationale for the categorical imperative, according to Kant, is based on the idea that causation, not rationality is what brings with it the notion of universally valid laws (Kant 2012, 446).

If we follow the argument I previously laid out then one is drawn to conclude that because of causation, universal laws bind rationale agents. These universal laws are not “natural” laws but “immutable laws of a special kind” (Ibid). Furthermore, if rational agents are causes, then they must be causes that result from a free and autonomous will. If an individual is acting because of a free will then they are a self-originating cause. As such, according to Johnson one must act under the idea that “. . . one’s actions are the upshot of one’s will in an essentially repeatable way” (Ibid., 10).

Essentially if something is repeatable it must be in accordance with a universal law in that the rationality of the universality of a particular law would have to be a continuously repeatable guide for all rational agents. A rational agent therefore would be committed to acting in accordance with a universal law because it (the law) is the self-originating cause of their actions.

Finally, Johnson contends that in Groundwork I the categorical imperative is identified as the fundamental principle of morality because of the nature of causality in the action of a rational agent (Johnson 2010, 12). The cause of those actions
should be, according to Kant, from duty i.e. respect for the law. He says, “an action from duty is to separate off entirely the influence of inclination...and hence the maxim of complying with such a law even if it infringes on all my inclinations” (Kant 2012, 441). Only a rational agent with a free and autonomous will can make a decision to act in accordance with duty, which in this case is in compliance with the universal law in spite of a person’s subjective desires. Kant continues the discussion about causality when he claims that “Everything in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the capacity to act in accordance with the representation of laws, that is in accordance with principles, or has a will” (Kant, 2012, 412).

Johnson makes the case that the moral law is a causal law (Johnson 2010, 16). His argument is that the moral law operates in accordance with the causality of a rational will and that moral law must therefore be universal because the idea of a casual law, i.e. one that come from the exercise of autonomous rational agency must be valid universally for all such agents. It is instructive at this point to identify a problem with the implicit assumption that a deep sense of rationality underwrites this application of universal law. The argument goes something like this: a universal law to be valid for all rational agents must be predictable and repeatable and therefore must follow a discernable pattern. That pattern is informed by a universal rule, for example about counting 1, 2, 3, etc. and gives a sense of where one is in the sequence, for example number 4 tells me I am between 3 and 5. In the Philosophical Investigations Wittgenstein uses the example of counting in a sequence to make the
point that following a universal rule or formula is not alone a sufficient guide to understanding the meaning of that sequence (Wittgenstein 1958, 184-187).

In his essay *Virtue and Reason* John McDowell says:

Rationality requires consistency, a specific conception of rationality in a particular area imposes a specific form on the abstract requirement of a consistency in a specific view of what counts as going or doing the same thing here. The paradigm is the idea of acting in the light of a specific conception of reality must be explainable in terms of being guided by a formulable universal principle. (McDowell 1979, 337)

The last sentence contains a concept that Wittgenstein scrutinizes in the *Philosophical investigations*. In that work he makes the point that the algebraic formula for counting cannot be the only determining factor for the formula’s use. The question he poses is: “What is the criterion for the way the formula is meant” (Wittgenstein 1958, 190)? He then answers that question by saying: “It is for example the kind of way we always use it, the way we are taught to use it” (Ibid.). We see here that even a seemingly straightforward universal principle or law, in this case an algebraic formula, has different meanings in use for different applications in varied scenarios. The meaning of a universal, either a contingent or a non-contingent universal is after all, tied to the context in which it is applied and the words used to describe that context. Stanley Cavell wrote in, *Must we mean what we say?*

We learn and teach words in certain contexts and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that the projection will take place (in particular the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules) just as nothing insures that
we will make and understand the same projections.
(Cavell 1969, 52)

Cavell goes on to say that it is only what Wittgenstein called the “shared forms of life” that gives a common context to these projections. Including, I would suggest the context surrounding the sequence of numbers in the aforementioned algebraic formula. Cavell believes that all human activity includes our sense of community, and that our thoughts and beliefs about our world all flow from these “forms of life” (Ibid). He strikingly says about this notion “It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying (Ibid.). The terror Cavell speaks of is caused by the understanding that it is not our created mythology of reason about a group of objective rules ‘out there’ (ready to be discerned) that guide our moral actions (Cavell 1969, 339). This myth was created because of our inability to deal with the terror of knowing the limits of objectivity and consequently the power of relative contexts of action in shaping the moral choices in our lives.

In this discussion I have pointed out the weakness of believing in the primacy of a rational autonomous agent as the sole determinate of our moral actions. This belief doesn’t account for the forms of life or the contexts of action, which impose upon groups of individuals a common view from which their moral outlook emanates. McDowell summarizes this thought saying, “The rationality of virtue, then, is not demonstrable from an external standpoint . . . It is only an illusion that our parody of reason, deductive argument, has its rationality discernable from a standpoint not necessarily located within the practice itself” (McDowell 1979, 346).
The next part of this chapter examines in more depth the role of reason in rational agency. I approach reason’s role by first establishing a foundation in Kant’s concept of synthetic a priori propositions. Secondly I develop reason’s role in the context of regulative and constitutive actions as developed in Kant’s philosophy. This exposition builds the foundation from which we will come to better understand Wittgenstein’s hinges and their manifestation in moral acts.

Kant introduces the possibility of synthetic a priori propositions by distinguishing between analytic and synthetic propositions. He defines **analytic** propositions as those in which the predicate is contained in the subject; he gives as an example: “All bodies are extended (take up space)” (Kant 1965, A7/B11). This can be termed *explicative* because the predicate does not add anything to the concept not already contained in it, but simply explains it further, i.e. a body is necessarily extended if it is to be considered a body (Copleston 1994, 219).

Kant then defines **synthetic** propositions as ones in which the predicate is not contained in the concept of the subject; he gives as an example: “All bodies are heavy” (Kant 1965, A7/B12). These propositions can be termed *ampliative* because they add something to the concept of the subject (Kant 1997, 4:267). In this case the notion of weight is not contained in the concept of body, but is indeed additive. Synthetic propositions, which are our concern in this chapter, are those that add to the concepts of a particular subject by synthesizing previous or less developed concepts.
Within the area of synthetic propositions there are two types, *a posteriori*, i.e. given through experience, and *a priori*, i.e. not given through experience but necessary and universal. Kant uses as an example of the former *synthetic a posteriori* the expression ‘All bodies are heavy’ because “The possibility of the synthesis of the predicate ‘weight’ with the concept of ‘body’ thus rests upon experience” (Kant 1965, A8/B12). He then uses as an example of a *synthetic a priori* proposition the following: “Everything which happens has its cause” (Kant 1965, A9/B13). This proposition is synthetic because the predicate (having a cause) is not contained in the concept of the subject (everything which happens). The predicate in this case is clearly additive or ampliative to the subject. The proposition is *a priori* meaning that we know prior to the experience of an event that it will have a cause. We may not know what that cause is but we know that an event must have a cause. Kant, believing that he has established that synthetic a priori propositions are possible, then poses the question that defines the focus of his First Critique: “How are synthetic propositions a priori possible” (Kant 1997, 4:276)?

In order to get at that answer Kant builds a case for the function of the categories and the principles of the understanding that make possible, a priori, our experience and knowledge of objects. This construct is not unlike the proposal discussed in the previous chapter concerning the means by which we understand the world through the context of our prejudices. These categories exercise a *constitutive* function that makes objects known to us. They are like a pair of blue colored glasses worn by someone who consequently always sees a blue world. If a
person never took off the glasses she would not know if all the objects she was viewing were blue in and of themselves (all blue objects). Conversely if she kept the glasses on she would not know if the objects she was viewing were actually many different colors in and of themselves but simply appeared blue to her when she was wearing the glasses. The categories, in this simple example, constitute our knowledge of external objects; in this case they make them all seem blue.

**Reason’s Role**

Apart from the categories are the ideas of pure reason, and unlike the categories of the understanding are not innate and not derived empirically. They do however, direct the understanding toward unity and synthesis and in that role they are *regulative*. Kant explains that reason is transcendental, i.e., it goes beyond experience. He identifies the ideas of pure reason as the soul, causality, and God. He proposes that these ideas are transcendental because they pass beyond or transcend experience. Reason’s regulative role therefore makes synthetic a priori propositions possible since it unifies the conditions of experience by moving to the unconditioned, i.e. proceeding beyond experience (Copleston 1994, 283).

Kant defines the terms constitutive and regulative in more detail in the context of their relationship to the understanding and to reason. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant first discusses these terms in the section on the *Analogues of Experience* where he distinguishes between mathematical and philosophical analogies. Of the mathematical analogy he says: “... they are formulas which express the equality of two *quantitative* relations, and are always constitutive; so
that if three members of the proportion are given, the fourth is likewise given, that is, can be constructed” (Kant 1965, A180/B222). Therefore, characterizing something as constitutive in this context means that from it we can infer the next instance in a series.

Kant goes on to explain that in the philosophical analogy, “the analogy is not the equality of two quantitative but of two qualitative relations; and from three given members we can obtain a priori knowledge only of the relation to a fourth, not of the fourth member itself” (Ibid.). This a priori knowledge is regulative because it “... yields, however, a rule for seeking the fourth member in experience, and a mark whereby it can be detected” (Ibid.). Therefore, characterizing something as regulative means that from it we can only recognize the next instance if and when it occurs. To summarize then, we can draw from these definitions that characterizing something as constitutive is to say that it creates the perspectives of our experience. In contrast, characterizing something as regulative is to say that it identifies rules that provide unity to our experiences.

A.C. Ewing in his Commentary interprets the difference between the two as follows: “If we are told that A is equal to or twice B in quantity or degree we can deduce a priori what B is in these respects. This is constitutive. If A is caused by B we cannot deduce a priori anything about B. This is regulative” (Ewing 1938, 148). Alternately, Susan Neiman in Unity of Reason explains that: “Regulative principles are concerned not with what is but what ought to be, they are not concerned with
objective reality. Constitutive principles tell us what the world is like, they must therefore be grounded in an object” (Neiman 1994, 89).

In section 8 of the chapter in the *Critique of Pure Reason* entitled *The Antinomy of Pure Reason*, Kant discusses the regulative principle of Pure Reason. He had previously laid the groundwork for reason’s regulative use by his definition of it in the context of contrasting it to the understanding. Reason, according to Kant, is similar to understanding in that they both have the capacity to judge. Understanding, however, is also the facility of cognition as well as judgments; its function is to unify appearances within the range of possible experience.

Reason on the other hand is the facility of syllogistic or logical reasoning and while its function is also to unify, reason is not tied to conditions of possible experience. It is free to act according to principles that are independent of nature (Caygill 1995, 349). In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant explains, “Understanding may be regarded as a faculty which secures the unity of appearances by means of rules . . .” (Kant 1965, A302/B359). These rules come from reason’s regulative capacity and are applied directly by reason only to the understanding. Kant goes on to say about reason that it is, “. . . the faculty which secures the unity of the rules of the understanding under principles. Accordingly reason never applies itself directly to experience or to any object, but to understanding . . .” (Ibid.).

Kant is setting the stage for his argument that reason can only appropriately be regulative and cannot be constitutive. He begins by postulating that: “The principle of reason is thus properly only a rule prescribing a regress in the series of conditions
of given appearances ... It is not a principle of the possibility of experience ... Nor is it a constitutive principle of reason, enabling us to extend our concept of the sensible world beyond all possible experience” (Kant 1965, A509/B537). The regulative function of reason then is to prescribe: “what we ought to do ...” (Ibid., emphasis added) not to determine what makes up the object about which we are concerned. He clarifies reason's role further by explaining that: “It does not, therefore create concepts (of objects) but only orders them, and gives them unity ... with a view to obtaining totality in the various series” (Kant 1965, A644/B672). This is properly the regulative role of reason, i.e. ordering concepts into an identifiable and predictable sequence or series. This definition of the term regulative can also be applied universally to concepts other than reason.

Kant goes on to clarify the role of understanding by explaining that it, “... does not concern itself with this totality (of the series of the conditions that reason’s regulative function ordered) but only with that connection through which, in accordance with concepts, and such series of conditions, come into being” (Ibid.). The role of the understanding is properly constitutive, i.e. it is not concerned with ordering concepts, but rather with their creation. Understand in fact unifies the constituents of experience in an object through concepts, while reason unifies the many or manifold concepts through ideas. So reason regulates (apply rules to) the concepts and presents them to the understanding. The understanding then constitutes (creates) the totality of our experience by unifying the concepts with experience.
Kant believed that problems arose when we confused the regulative and constitutive functions of reason (in this case) and tried to attribute “objective reality to an idea that serves mainly as a rule” (Ibid.). For example trying to attribute objective reality to the soul or to God would be to confuse reason’s regulative role. That regulative role (in the case of hypothetical reason) is to bring unity to concepts (of objects) and “approximate the rule to universality” (Kant 1965, A647/B675). To approximate a rule means to make it applicable universally and we determine a rule’s universality if it, “appears that all particular instances . . . follow from the rule, we argue for its universality” (Ibid.). Therefore we can conclude that a regulative function directs an idea toward universality. It does not, however, include bringing objective reality to an idea. Reason, according to Kant tends toward universalizability in its regulative function.

He continues to further define the constitutive function as one that “… we can regard as proving the truth of the universal rule which we have adopted as hypothesis” (Ibid.). Summarizing this line of thought Kant says, “The hypothetical employment of reason has, therefore, as its aim the systematic unity of the knowledge of understanding, and this unity is the criterion of the truth of its rules” (Ibid.). In other words, reason’s function is regulative in that it aims through rules given a priori to bring a systematic unity to the understanding; while understanding’s function is constitutive in that it creates the foundation of knowledge and the criteria by which to evaluate the adequacy of the rules employed by reason. Along this line of thought is a connection to Wittgenstein’s concept of
*hinges*, which are regulative and I would propose both synthetic and a priori. There is also an aspect of universality that characterizes the fact that there are hinges (moral and material) at all, the evidence of which is in their manifestation in practice.

Reason’s function is an enduring subject for Kant and he proceeds from this discussion of hypothetical reason to a discussion of reason as a *logical* principle. He says that, “… the systematic unity of the manifold knowledge of understanding, as prescribed by reason, is a *logical* principle” (Kant 1965, A648/B676). The function of reason is, in this case, to provide, “unity to the diverse rules of the understanding under a single principle, and thus to secure coherence in every possible way” (Ibid.). This is reason’s regulative function, bringing unity to the functions of the understanding and thereby giving coherence to the employment of the understanding. Without reason’s function there would, according to Kant, be no “… sufficient criterion of empirical truth” (Ibid.).

He continues by proposing that this logical principle is transcendental, meaning that it is not realizable in experience. He goes on to make the case that even if some philosophers have denied this principle (as transcendent); they have at the same time implied it in their works. By this he means that perhaps without even being conscious of it, we seek a “… systematic unity of all possible empirical concepts, in so far as they can be deduced from higher and more general concepts …” (Ibid.). In line with our earlier discussion about reason’s regulative function regarding the relationship between universality and the particular, Kant again
restates that relationship: “...we can conclude from the universal to the particular, only in so far as universal properties are ascribed to things as being the foundation upon which the particular properties rest” (Kant 1965, A652/B680).

There is a symbiotic relation between the universal and the particular as I presented in the previous chapter on Aristotle’s concept of phronesis. On Aristotle’s view, reason is just one of the inputs, along with experience and context, that helps us understand the distinctive and symbiotic relations of universals to particulars. Kant agrees that the relationship exists between universal and particular and further that they have similar foundational properties. He (Kant) does however, have a different view of Reason's function. His view is that is it regulative and guides the rules that the understanding employs. Reason alone, according to Kant, is therefore what informs our knowledge of the distinction between the universal and the particular and not practical knowledge or phronesis.

Kant believes that the understanding, which is the faculty that forms or creates concepts, focuses on discovering the unity in experience. Reason provides assistance to the understanding by applying rules to integrate varied and different concepts. The regulative function of reason is dependent on the constitutive principle of the understanding in order to function. Reason, however, also has an a priori normative role that informs the constitutive principles and is grounded in the possibility of a unified experience. This a priori normative role for reason is one that Wittgenstein also agrees with and is evident in his development of the concept of hinges as
synthetic and a priori. This normative role for reason is also one, which in Kant’s philosophy provides for the grounding of duty in morality.

Said differently, the *constitutive* principle of the understanding provides a framework, which allows us to attain knowledge of external objects, whereas the *regulative* principle of reason directs us toward a systematic unification of all aspects of experience. Finally, a synthetic *a priori* proposition shows how a proposition can be both necessary and universal while being a priori and beyond experience. A synthetic a priori proposition could also be viewed as constitutive of the external phenomenal world. Following this line of reasoning Wittgenstein’s hinges can also be seen as constitutive of the world we choose to live in as moral agents. Reason’s regulative role in this case is synthesizing with the categories of understanding in order to “…contribute to the extension of empirical knowledge,” in other words, to move *outside* the limits of experience (Ibid.).

Kant’s goal is to find the supreme principle of morality, the moral rule that comes from reason alone. In order to do that he must find a proposition, which is first of all synthetic, meaning that the predicate is not included in the subject but is additive to it’s qualities. Secondly, the principle must be discoverable a priori, meaning that it is not derived from empirical evidence. Thirdly, if the principle meets the first two criteria then it will be an example of pure reason and therefore it will be an imperative, something that I must do regardless of the circumstances. The categorical imperative is such a principle. It is not conditional or *contingent* because it always-legislates the actions of rational, autonomous individuals.
Since Kant believed that humans are innately rational, the categorical imperative could be applied to all people. It is in a word, universalizable. Kant explains: “There is only one categorical imperative, and it is this: Act only according to the maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should be a universal law” (Kant 2012, 5). This leads Kant to the conclusion that each one of us is autonomous in that we give the moral law to ourselves and that the moral law comes from within us. Further, if there is a law that I cannot rationally accept in accordance with the universalizable principle of the categorical imperative, is can not be a moral law. Therefore if it is not a moral law I am not bound to obey it as such. On the other hand if it is a moral law then it must be universal and applicable to all rational persons and one that I therefore have the duty to obey.

Contained in this idea is the belief that all actions have an *end* in that we always act to enable that goal or *end*. Our acts are thus *intentional* in that they are directed toward some end. Kant is careful to differentiate ends that have relative value (such as jewelry or Ducati motorcycles) from ends that are the source of value (persons). He says in the *Grounding* “Now I say that man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will” (Kant 2012, 35).

**Autonomy**

People have value according to Kant, which is not relative to what someone else wants of them nor is it reliant on the extent to which someone else desires them. Rather, persons all have value as ends in themselves. Kant characterizes this
idea in this statement of the categorical imperative “Act in a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means” (Kant 2012, 36). This idea is convergent with the Christian notion that one should do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. The central point here is that the categorical imperative is a form of universalization; it is a universal principle. It is universal because when you act in a way that you would will all others to act, you are according to all persons the dignity of being an end and not merely a means. You are also restricting a person’s particular activities to being in strict accordance with a universal and unchanging principle. The way I read Kant’s point here is that the universal is a theoretical construct from reason, which is not mediated by its application to the particular in the way that, for example Aristotle envisioned in phronesis.

Kant’s other notion that converges with this one is that man is neither good nor bad. Man can be either; the determination of whether we call a man good or evil is based on his actions from maxims, i.e. the principles by which he conducts his life. Kant is developing the theme of the conflict between acting according to the moral principle and acting in a way that subordinates morality to human desire. He believed than man has the free choice to be either good or evil. He says that, “... man as a species is neither good nor bad, or at all events that he is as much the one as the other, partly good, partly bad” (Kant 2001, 370).

Further on he clarifies what accounts for characterizing a man as evil. “We call a man evil, however, not because he performs actions that are evil but because these
actions are of such a nature that we infer from them the presence in him of evil maxims” (Ibid.). In other words a man's actions are not intrinsically evil but are evil because he was acting in accordance with an evil maxim, i.e. pursuing sensuous desires. On the other hand if he were acting in accordance with duty, i.e. the moral law, then his actions could not at the same time be in accordance with an evil maxim. Therefore, if a person acts in accordance with the moral law, they are morally good, if they do not act in accordance with the moral law, then they are morally evil. Kant’s distinction implies that the same person could in one situation be morally good and in another situation be morally evil; the result of man's free will.

As I pointed out previously Kant believes that what distinguishes man from other “possible rational beings is innate in him” (Kant 2001, 372). What he considers innate in man, however, is not the characteristic of good or evil but the capacity to be either. He expands on this point by clarifying the roles of the capabilities under discussion. “... nature is not to blame (if it is evil) or take credit (if it is good), but that man himself is its author” (Ibid.). Kant believed that man has the free choice to live by maxims that are good or evil and that this choice is not made evident through experience but in fact exists a priori to experience. This is the reasoning of an autonomous agent, which is man.

This a priori idea is also at odds with Aristotle’s idea of the mean as being achievable only through either first hand personal experience, or second hand experience, passed down from a teacher. Kant goes on to conclude that the free
choice to adopt, “...this or that maxim with reference to the moral law... is antecedent to every use of freedom in experience and thus conceived of as present in man at birth” (Ibid.). According to Kant, it is this ability to choose, not a predetermined and unchangeable nature, that is responsible for making men morally good or morally evil.

Kant believes in the primacy of man as an embodied person whose sense of self is uniquely understood in the context of his moral actions. The source of those moral actions is not material but immaterial; it is the will informed by reason. For Kant, man’s reason is what separates him from the lesser animals not because it allows him to make choices that prolong his biological life (like eating light meats) but because it allows him to make ethical choices in order to live a moral life. On this view it is ethical knowledge from reason, i.e. the moral law embodied in the categorical imperative that is superior to empirical knowledge (preparing for the winter because we know the weather will be cold).

This view is opposed to Aristotle’s, who would argue that theoretical reason should not be privileged over practical knowledge. However, Kant would counter that both kinds of knowledge are necessary since we are driven by our biology to live a pleasurable life and at the same time driven by our reason to make ourselves deserving of such a life. Aristotle not Kant shows us how to achieve that balance by finding the mean through the process of phronesis.

The impact of Kant’s idea were profound, he was the clearest voice of the Enlightenment. His advocacy for personal freedom and moral autonomy were
unquestionably a break from the contemporary thinking. No longer was it necessary to think of a person’s worth as being tied to the desirability of their kind of personhood by others, whether that was a secular or ecclesiastic person or institution. Clearly Kant’s moral philosophy had significant implications for the political landscape of Western Europe. Among those implications were the concepts of individual freedom and rights, which in some cases would come to be privileged over duties to the collective society. The notion that people have the freedom to choose a form of government was derived from his philosophy. In this sense Kant could be considered as the philosopher of the French Revolution. It should be noted however; that if man’s “innate reason” fueled the French Revolution, then it should also be accorded responsibility for replacing the monarchy with the Reign of Terror and ultimately with an Emperor.

From Kant’s account we see the privileging of the individual and the rationality that he believed was inherent in each one of us. Kant is also the force behind the Enlightenment notion that people can by themselves, i.e. without clergy to guide them, live a moral life. That is possible of course if they live their lives according to the synthetic a priori rule of the categorical imperative. The concept of morality and question of moral action are central to Kant’s philosophy. The central idea in his moral philosophy is that moral principles must be universal. Furthermore that we act on them as free, autonomous and causal agents. A person, according to Kant, however is only obligated to adopt a universal principle as a maxim if he would will that every other person also adopt that same maxim. The categorical imperative
therefore is a necessary and sufficient condition for the permissibility of adopting maxims from universal principles (Guyer 1998, 190).

The categorical imperative is not so much a way of determining practical moral action on the part of an individual, as it is a way of framing an individual’s moral horizon. It does however, stretch even reason’s credulity by attributing to reason a capacity beyond its reach or influence. Reason alone cannot account for the myriad social conditions that influence human behavior. Especially since such human behavior as manifested for example in the Reign of Terror, although widespread and seemingly common, was at the very least, unreasonable. That behavior was certainly not in accordance with the categorical imperative. In order to better understand the limitations of reasons influence on human behavior we will turn to Ludwig Wittgenstein and his concept of hinges. Hinges are manifested in empirical and moral practices that demonstrate or show the influence of our non-epistemic beliefs on human behavior.
CHAPTER 3

WITTGENSTEIN - HINGES AND MORAL PRINCIPLES

In this chapter I will connect Kant's thoughts about synthetic a priori propositions with Wittgenstein's postulation in On Certainty of a priori hinges. In the previous chapter I presented Kant's ideas about synthetic and analytic judgments and pointed out the distinction between the two. Now I wish to come back to the concept of contingent and non-contingent universal principles, which I introduced at the beginning of this thesis. I proposed that contingent universals were those that were contingent upon the context in which they were given in order to be valid (in that context). Non-contingent universals, on the other hand are those universals that are valid regardless of the particular situation in which they are applied; they are context independent vice context dependent.

Kant's Legacy

In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant presents the idea of two different types of universality, which aligns with my idea of contingent and non-contingent universals. He starts by pointing out the distinction between a priori and a posteriori judgments and does this in the context of distinguishing between pure and empirical knowledge and judgments. Pure judgments are synthetic a priori propositions and are the only type that could be universally valid, i.e. non-contingent. Empirical judgments on the other hand can only ever be a posteriori propositions and as such are valid as contingent universals. Kant points out that “If, then, a judgment is thought with strict (what I have called non-contingent) universality, that is, in such a
manner that no exception is allowed as possible, it is not derived from experience, but is valid absolutely a priori” (Kant 1965, B4). He goes on to say “Empirical (what I have called contingent) universality is only an arbitrary extension of a validity holding in most cases to one which holds in all, for instance, in the proposition, “all bodies are heavy” (Ibid.). We can see the contingent nature of empirical universality because the proposition ‘all bodies are heavy’ makes no sense without additional context. That context comes in the form of answering the question (among others): what bodies are we talking about, do they take the form of bricks or feathers? In other words compared to what, are ‘all bodies heavy?’

An example of a non-contingent or strict universal proposition would be, “All events have a cause.” This proposition makes sense and is true a priori, regardless of the context in which it is used because we simply understand that an event of any sort must have a cause. This does not mean that the cause is necessarily linear. It could be in the form of causal probability, e.g. The Uncertainty Principle vice a distinctive casual prediction, e.g. Newtonian Mechanics. The point here is that we believe a priori that an event is caused by something and as such is a non-contingent universal. When Kant states “Experience teaches us that a thing is so and so, but not that it cannot be otherwise” he is saying that an empirical universal is only ever contingently valid (Kant 1965, B3). Thomas Morawetz in his essay *Wittgenstein and Synthetic a Priori Judgments* observes that, “A true judgment, which is empirically universal is contingently true” (Morawetz 1974, 429).
The distinction between empirical and what Kant calls pure knowledge is not clear-cut. Kant points out that a very sharp distinction between the two is not always evident. He says, “A priori modes of knowledge are entitled pure when there is no admixture of anything empirical” (Kant 1965, B3). However, he goes on to say “… the proposition ‘every alteration has its cause,’ while an a priori proposition, is not a pure proposition, because alteration is a concept which can be derived only from experience” (Ibid.). The important point to be made here is the need to establish a foundation for certainty. Morawetz says, “An investigation of synthetic a priori knowledge is an investigation into its certainty” (Morawetz 1974, 430). When Kant exclaims, “… no exception is allowed as possible” he is saying that there is a non-contingent certainty that is necessary for the possibility of experience (Kant 1965, B4).

This idea is one that Wittgenstein will later explore in On Certainty and one that has linkage to his concept of hinges. The point to be made in this discussion of the Kantian synthetic a priori is that Wittgenstein’s hinges are similarly synthetic a priori certainties. Furthermore, Wittgenstein proposes hinges as the a priori beliefs that are indubitable in order for us to live in, and make sense of, the world. In this case we understand that the possibility of any a posteriori judgment is contingent upon some certain a priori judgments.

I would agree with Morawetz when he states that, “… a priori judgments are like rules of experience” (Morawetz 1974, 430). The following from The Critique of Pure Reason supports my claim. “ For whence could experience derive its certainty,
if all the rules, according to which it proceeds, were always themselves empirical, and therefore contingent" (Kant 1965, B5)?

This discussion of Kant’s synthetic a priori propositions is meant to draw a linkage to Wittgenstein’s hinges. It is also intended to establish a commonality between my proposed definitions of contingent and non-contingent universals and Kant’s notion of strict and empirical propositions. As we have seen in the discussion so far, Kant distinguishes between non-contingent universal synthetic judgments such as ‘every event has a cause’ and contingent universal judgments such as ‘all bodies are heavy.’ Wittgenstein is sympathetic to this distinction, as evident in the following passage from On Certainty, “Is it not difficult to distinguish between the cases in which I cannot and those in which I can hardly be mistaken? Is it always clear to which kind a case belongs” (Wittgenstein 1969, 673)? He (Wittgenstein) is referring to cases that are non-contingent universals (those about which no doubt is possible) and contingent universals (those about which doubt is possible). For example a universal belief in one culture about the need to physically punish children for disobeying a rule, ‘sparing the rod spoils the child’ may not be a universal belief or practice in another culture.

Wittgenstein also makes clear the idea that there must be some beliefs that we hold to be certain in order for any other beliefs (or propositions) to make sense and to increase our knowledge in a particular area. He uses the apt metaphor of a scaffold to describe the process of grounding our convictions. “Now it gives our way of looking at things and our researches their form. Perhaps it was once disputed. But
perhaps for unthinkable ages, it has belonged to the scaffolding of our thoughts. 
(Every human being has parents)” (Wittgenstein 1969, 211). The hinge (belief) –
every human being has parents – is never questioned as we come to understand our 
way of looking at everything else in our world. For instance, how else could we come 
to interpret Darwin’s theory of evolution if we didn’t take as certain the idea that we 
humans come from the combination of male and female parents? Wittgenstein 
however does make evident a distinction between propositions that appear to be 
empirical or contingent and those that are non-contingent.

He uses the example of the belief that “All human beings have parents” (Ibid.). 
This example is instructive because it could naively be assumed to be an empirical 
or contingent proposition. This is because the basis of our belief in the proposition is 
ostensibly empirical. Wittgenstein says in On Certainty “What is the belief that all 
human beings have two parents based on? On experience. And how can I base this 
sure belief on my experience” (Wittgenstein 1969, 240).

However he says elsewhere “…we are interested in the fact that about certain 
empirical propositions no doubt can exist if making judgments is to be possible at 
all. Or again: I am inclined to believe that not everything that is in the form of an 
empirical proposition is one” (Wittgenstein 1969, 308). Morawetz asserts that 
propositions such as the example above – all human beings have parents or all 
objects may exist unperceived, are examples of propositions, which “appear to be 
empirical propositions, but they lack the contingency of empirical propositions” 
(Morawetz 1974, 431).
Another example of Wittgenstein’s thought on this notion of certainty is that of a pupil questioning everything the teacher is trying to explain. “. . . imagine that the boy questioned the truth of history (and everything that connects up with it)—and even whether the earth had existed at all a hundred years before” (Wittgenstein 1969, 311). There can be no progress in the schoolboy's learning if he doesn’t accept as certain some things such as the earth has existed for many thousands of years. Wittgenstein presents another example to make the case that these indubitable propositions also have normative functions. “It would be as if someone were looking for some object in a room; he opens a drawer and doesn’t see it there; then he closes it again, waits, and opens it once more to see if perhaps it isn’t there now…He has not learned to look for things” (Wittgenstein 1969, 315). The pupil obviously has not learned the game of “looking for things.”

Similarly, the pupil who is asking all the questions has not learned how to ask questions. “He has not learned the game that we are trying to teach him” (Ibid). According to Morawetz the pupil is “. . . treating how we think about history (that it is continuous, not systemically delusive, etc.) as if it were an empirical proposition within history” (Morawetz 1974, 431). In other words the schoolboy is thinking about history in terms of contingent empirical propositions that could be doubted. Instead he should be thinking about history with a foundational understanding of non-contingent universal principles (that the earth has existed for thousands of years), which are not subject to doubt.
These non-contingent propositions function like 'hinges' on which the door that in this case is historical knowledge is supported and on which it can swing open, or closed. In order to doubt an empirical proposition there must be other propositions on which the one in question is based, which are immune to doubt. For example, a pilot can only doubt the accuracy of his altimeter if he does not doubt that airplanes can fly. Famously Wittgenstein says, "That is to say the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn" (Wittgenstein 1969, 341).

In this part of the thesis I have attempted to draw a bridge between Kant and Wittgenstein in terms of their approach to the matter of universal certainty. The concept of certainty is important in this study because it is foundational in the way it influences how we think about the distinction between contingent and non-contingent universals. The extent to which Kant and Wittgenstein think about the issue of certainty is explained by examining the following points of similarity. To begin with there are empirical (contingent) propositions that at first seem contingent upon certain experience. However, as I highlighted earlier, what seem to be empirical propositions are not necessarily what they appear. Kant presents as an empirical proposition the idea that "every event has a cause." This is a proposition that is indubitable and one, which is based on deep empirical facts.

Wittgenstein makes the following observation about empirical propositions: “Our empirical propositions do not form a homogeneous mass” (Wittgenstein 1969, 213). He means by this that there are two different kinds of empirical propositions,
those that can be doubted and those that are beyond doubt. The latter, those beyond doubt, are necessary if we are to have any doubts at all. Those propositions (beyond doubt) also function as rules, which have a normative affect on our thoughts and behaviors and in that sense are foundational to the way we live our lives.

In order to be certain about any contingent proposition we must understand certainty in terms of the role those propositions play in inquiry and thought (Morawetz 1974, 433). To be certain about a contingent universal also requires that we must be certain about some foundational property or belief.

A point to be made here is to explore the power of contexts in determining the extent to which a position is certain. Propositions, which at one time seemed indubitable, can become invalid over time. Wittgenstein unwittingly provided a great example when he said, “. . . we all believe that it isn’t possible to get to the moon . . .” (Wittgenstein 1969, 286). In the context of the historical time in which he was writing *On Certainty* that proposition was taken as certain. It was a deep empirical fact that was in effect beyond doubt. However, twenty years after he wrote those words it was taken as an empirical fact that it was possible to “get to the moon” since humans had by then walked on the moon. To a schoolboy in the twenty first century human travel to the moon is a hinge on which his knowledge of our Solar System turns.

We can however see here a point of divergence between Kant and Wittgenstein. Kant believes that synthetic a priori universal judgments allow for no exceptions; they are inherently valid in all cases and are in fact, non-contingent
universals. Wittgenstein, on the other hand leaves open the possibility that propositions or judgments, which in one time are thought to be non-contingent universals (humans have never been on the moon) can change over time and may more appropriately become context dependent, i.e. contingent universals.

While Kant believes that all such universal synthetic judgments are context independent, Wittgenstein observed that while there are some propositions that “remain fast and are exempt from doubt” the possibility remains that that might not be true in all cases. Wittgenstein says, “…the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing” (Wittgenstein 1969, 98). In other words in one context and at one time a proposition may be tested by experience – man has never been to the moon. Yet in another context, at another time it is used as a rule of testing –humans cannot live for more than six months in the low gravity on the moon.

The most important thought to take forward from this discussion is the importance of an a priori certainty as grounds for moral actions based on duty. Moral hinges provide that certainty. Having explored the characterization of certainty and the role of certainty in our understanding of our world, I now continue with a deeper examination of Wittgenstein’s hinges as he developed the concept in On Certainty.

This part of the thesis begins with an analysis of selected passages from On Certainty with a view towards developing a richer understanding of the relations between hinge concepts, practices and propositions. These practices and
propositions are characterized in the context of Kant’s definitions of regulative and constitutive principles, which I presented in the preceding chapter. I will take a decidedly Kantian view of the notion of a concept as something under which these practices and propositions lie. The following illustrates my proposed framework for understanding the relationship between hinges as concepts, practices and propositions.

![Diagram](attachment:diagram.png)

Concepts, as understood in this project are instruments of understanding, and as such have a heuristic function – that of sense-making when applied to our experiences in the world. They are active and changeable, not passive and static. They provide the framework in and through which we “... express, channel, and sometimes transform our interests and investigations” (Brenner 1999, 72). Concepts are formed by language and from our participation in language-games, which is the foundational activity that leads to concept development. Concepts can and will change based on the narrative of a particular language-game. That narrative, much like the process of mediation that yields Aristotle’s mean is influenced by both empirical facts and non-empirical, i.e. hinge beliefs.
Practices are human activities; they have a normative function, which is in part constituted by linguistic propositions. Practices are nested under concepts and in the course of the human activities they become associated with those concepts; it is concepts that enable us to make sense of those activities. Practices, in this context, are regulative because they provide for what we ought to do and are in turn informed by concepts. For example the practice of providing food and shelter to refugees is a regulative practice, which manifests the concept of “helping people fleeing from violent and oppressive regimes.” Even if one has no experiential evidence that refugees always require assistance, nor any evidence that such an idea can be reasoned logically, there is still a certain belief, a hinge that is immune from doubt and manifested in that practice. This concept of “helping people who are fleeing from violent and oppressive regimes” is therefore a hinge since its origins are non-epistemic and non-experiential. It is both reinforced and manifested by repetition of the practice of offering refugees food. For example the conversation might sound like this: “Does he believe in helping refugees? Well yes, he always offers them a meal.”

Another example of a hinge practice would be manifested in a culture that abides by a law that condones the practice of publically stoning adulterers to death. Participating in that act would require no deliberate thought on the part of those throwing rocks. They simply act that way as realizations of a hinge, expressed as the hinge proposition “adultery is a shameful and evil deed.” Whether it is true or not that adulterers exert a baleful influence on that culture is irrelevant since the role of
propositional doppelgangers of dutiful actions (the aforementioned hinge proposition) is normative. However, hinges can be treated as empirical and assessed as such if the rationality of the practice is challenged, bearing in mind that what counts as a challenge to rationality might also be situational dependent.

Propositions are the linguistic manifestation of hinge beliefs or concepts. They can be evident in a universal form such as “cats don’t grow on trees” or in a personal form such as “I am German.” The meanings of the propositions themselves are inseparable from the language used to express them. Importantly these linguistic propositions have a constitutive function in the same sense that the categories did for Kant. An example of this constitutive function of the categories is the way in which a pair of blue glasses would make our world appear to us to consist of different shades of blue. The constitutive function of propositions is similar in that the language of the propositions is like the blue glasses, constituting our blue world. For example, the proposition: “There are substances” is constituted in the practices of treating the world as a material system.

Another example of a hinge proposition is “cats don't grow on trees.” This is a proposition that is certain and ineffable and constitutive of the concept of “catness” as long as one lives according to the rules of a particular natural order in which cats don’t grow on trees. Is it possible to imagine a world in which cats grow on trees? Surely it is, but it is a world much different in every way from the one we live in. Furthermore, that world would not be informed by the same hinges that guide our
sense-making in the world in which we live. So the proposition “cats don’t grow on
trees” constitutes, like the blue glasses, the bounds of sense-making in our world.

The framework I am proposing illuminates the typology of hinges by showing
the relationship between hinge concepts, practices, and propositions. There is a
fundamental and symbiotic relationship that constitutes a hinge. That relationship is
between hinges concepts and the regulative practices and the constitutive
propositions with which they are associated. Each of these exerts influence on the
other through a discursive process that continuously shapes and conditions both
concepts and practices through linguistic propositions.

That influence is also manifested in everyday language, which makes
intelligible the ongoing language-game in the local moral and natural orders in
which we live. Wittgenstein’s concept of a language-game is central to his
philosophy as he defines it in the *Philosophical Investigations,* “I shall also call the
whole, consisting of language and actions into which it is woven, the ‘language-
game’” (Wittgenstein 1958, 7).

In the next part of this chapter I discuss selected passages from *On Certainty*
with a view toward examining them in the context of the hinge framework
previously presented. The first passage I examine is number 24.

The idealist’s question would be something like: “What
right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?” (And
to that the answer can’t be: I know that they exist.) But someone
who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt
about existence only works in a language-game. Hence, that we
should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like?, and
don’t understand this straight off. (Wittgenstein 1969, 24)
To understand this passage we refer to a previous one where Wittgenstein tried to clarify G.E. Moore’s use of the expression “I know.” He believed that Moore was mistakenly using the expression “I know” to mean something beyond doubt, something that is certain. However, since his use of “I know” brings with it the possibility of asserting that “I thought I knew” there now exists the possibility of doubt. So if I say that I know something, according to Moore it means that I can’t have any doubts about my knowing it.

Wittgenstein’s issue with the expression “I know” is an epistemological one and concerns the category confusion caused by the inappropriate use of language, in this case the expression “I know.” He thinks that there are some things about which we act with certainty and that are immune from doubt, i.e. never come up for doubt and that as beliefs, implied in the expression “I know,” do not come from reasoning or experiencing.

In reference to knowing whether someone has two hands or not (a point Moore had previously made) Wittgenstein says, “My believing the trustworthy man stems from my admitting that it is possible for him to be sure. But someone who says that perhaps there are physical objects makes no admission” (Wittgenstein 1969, 23). He is making the point that we need to come to grips with the concept of doubt. I suggest that we could do that by applying the hinge triangle framework I presented at the beginning of this chapter. To understand something, in this case doubt, involves mastering the concept of that thing. That mastery or possession (cognitively) of the concept in turn requires that we learn the word or words
Doubting is a hinge cognitive practice and as such in the context of the hinge triangle framework is therefore regulative in its interaction with a proposition. An example of a proposition would be Descartes’ proposition: “I think (doubt) therefore I am.” In the context of the hinge triangle framework I would suggest that Descartes’s proposition has a constitutive function. Finally, and for Wittgenstein most fundamentally, to understand something requires a practical ability to express the concept in use. A concept is informed by and influenced by regulative practices (in this case doubting) and constitutive propositions (“I think therefore I am”). It is through use that the meaning of concepts, practices, and propositions is accrued, changed, and modified within a particular language-game.

Wittgenstein goes on to question what it is about a rule that could or couldn’t preclude one from making a mistake in its application. This is an important question because in this thesis I am investigating a moral philosophy based on ethical normativity. Normativity implies adherence to rules, those rules of behavior in turn make up the foundation on which a moral philosophy based on duty is built. It is appropriate then that we establish a fundamental grounding in Wittgenstein’s understanding of rules.

In On Certainty he says: “But can it be seen from a rule what circumstances logically exclude a mistake in the employment of rules of calculation” (Wittgenstein 1969, 26)? The conclusion he suggests is “Practice in the use of the rule also shews
what is a mistake in its employment” (Wittgenstein 1969, 29). In other words, only a rule shows what a mistake is, therefore there would be no mistakes in the absence of rules. He is making the case for grounding our understanding, as a concept, within linguistic practices. We see here the relationship I proposed in the hinge triangle between a concept, in this case doubt, and a linguistic proposition of ‘learning a rule’ or ‘making a mistake in applying it’ and the ultimate arbitrator of our doubt, which is the rule’s use in practice.

The next passage we examine is focused on the proposition, “There are no physical objects.” Wittgenstein questions whether or not this sentence is an empirical proposition or a piece of instruction. He says that this proposition is nonsense, connoting in this case that it is meaningless since it is really only about instruction in the use of words to include those of a physical objects (Wittgenstein 1969, 36). In order for the expression “There are no physical objects” to not be nonsense there needs to be an understanding of what that object referred to in our language game. Continuing on Wittgenstein says:

But is it an adequate answer to the skepticism of the idealist, or the assurances of the realist, to say that “There are physical objects” is nonsense? For them after all it is not nonsense. It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite is a misfiring attempt to express what can’t be expressed like that. And that it does misfire can be shewn; but that isn’t the end of the matter. We need to realize that what presents itself to us as the first expression of a difficulty, or of its solution, may as yet not be correctly expressed at all. (Wittgenstein 1969, 37)

It seems clear that he does not think that by pointing out the nonsense in the statement “There are physical objects” that either the realist or the idealist will be
swayed since neither sees it as nonsense. They see that statement as empirical or factual, Wittgenstein implies however that it is neither but rather it is simply a loose semantic entity. It is merely grammatical and does not, in his mind, point to the concept of a kind of object, like a cat.

Therefore the statement “there are physical objects” is meaningless except in the context of understanding the use of the words contained in it and not as a refutation of idealism, which it seems is what Moore intended. In order for a statement to be meaningful it must have a use in the language-game, it must in fact, make a point. This is an example of the distinction Wittgenstein makes between what is spoken and what is said. That is, between groups of words that are merely spoken and groups of words that have meaning, which are said (Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 44).

The next passage in On Certainty I want to examine is one in which Wittgenstein makes several points about the meaning of words. Beginning with passage number 61 and continuing through number 65, he makes the case that the meaning of a word is tied to its employment. Since employment or use of words is informed by rules, he sees a relationship between rules and meaning. That is, if meaning comes from use and rules govern use, then there is consequently a symbiotic relationship between the two since a change in rules will most likely change the meaning. Conversely as a word is used it’s meaning may change and therefore the rules governing its use will change as well. For example, to one generation of Americans the word ‘bad’ means something that is the opposite of
good as in “I have a bad cat” meaning a misbehaving feline. To a more recent
generation the word bad means something that is desirable and the same as good as
in “My cat is bad” meaning that I have a very hip feline.

Ultimately Wittgenstein contends that the meaning of a word can be compared
with “… the ‘function’ of an official. And ‘different meanings’ with ‘different
functions” (Wittgenstein 1969, 62). I understand him to be saying that an official has
a function, which is imparted to him by the organization in which he serves. His
functions are also imparted to him or assimilated by him based on the work that he
does in concert with his fellow officials. An example of this idea can be seen in the
organizational chart for any sort of institution. Most times that chart is little help in
discerning the real relations and authorities that actually make the organization run
on a day-to-day basis. In other words, the work that is being done and the influence
that is being exerted by the ranking officials in an organization is what truly
determine the relative authority of their position. Furthermore, the key to
understanding the statement about comparing ‘different meanings’ to ‘different
functions’ is similarly the result of the same process. That is, that the functions of
words and their meanings are inextricably and symbiotically linked.

The passage that portrays this idea best is the following: “When language-
games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the
meaning of words change” (Wittgenstein 1969, 65). To begin, it is necessary to
understand that by language-game Wittgenstein means a rule-guided activity that is
learned through participation in that activity. The meaning of words is similarly
understood by using them in a language-game. The rules, which guide the game, are those of grammar and in this case those rules could be considered constitutive since they constitute or create the game that they also regulate. The rules are not given in the sense that they are a determinate of success or failure of our participation in the game. Rather, they are indicative of what is deemed correct or what makes sense to the participants in the game. So the meaning of a word is not understood as the object that it might represent but the meaning is instead determined by the rules governing the operation of the language-game (Glock 1996, 193).

In order to examine the passage more fully, I begin by proposing the idea that when a language-game changes the concepts subsequently change. How does a language-game change? It changes through modifications of the rules that guide it, i.e. through changes in the grammar and human practices that make up the game. Applying the hinge triangle we see how the grammar or propositions and the use or practices that make up the bottom two corners of the triangle relate to each other and ultimately to the concepts within or under which they function. A change in any of the three corners of the triangle discursively affects the other two.

The next passage I will explore is similar to those discussed earlier, i.e. it concerns Wittgenstein’s continuing response to what he considers Moore’s mistaken use of the expression “I know.” Wittgenstein begins by asking the question “Suppose I replaced Moore’s “I know” by “I am of the unshakeable conviction” (Wittgenstein 1969, 86)? In this case he is beginning to set the foundation for his concept of hinges as he seeks to express a certainty he does not
think is expressed in Moore’s proposition, but which Moore believes he has
expressed. The passage of most interest in this regard is as follows:

Can’t an assertoric sentence, which was capable of
functioning as an hypothesis, also be used as a foundation
for research and action? i.e. can’t it simply be isolated
from doubt, though not according to any explicit rule? It
simply gets assumed as a truism, never called into
question, perhaps not even ever formulated. (Wittgenstein 1969, 87)

In this passage Wittgenstein is elaborating his ideas about hinges as he builds on the
notion that hinges are not objects of enquiry but are rules of enquiry (Moyal-
Sharrock 2007, 90). His question about an assertoric sentence [i.e. a sentence that
states that something is the case] is leading to the idea that there are underlying
foundational beliefs that influence our actions and that are not subject to doubt. This
occurs not because they are used according to a rule but rather they are taken as
unquestionably true and not ever ratiocinated. In the next passage he clarifies his
concept of hinges even further. “In may be for example that all enquiry on our part is
set so to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they are ever formulated. They
lie apart from the route traveled by enquiry” (Wittgenstein 1969, 88). The
propositions he speaks of have a fundamental role in the cognitive activity that is
our process of inquiry. That process is necessarily based on foundational beliefs,
which are unchallenged and unchanging (at least during time of the enquiry).

We conclude this examination of On Certainty with this passage: “It is as if “I
know” did not tolerate a metaphysical emphasis” (Wittgenstein 1969, 482). To get at
the meaning of this sentence we begin with the passage immediately prior. There
Wittgenstein makes the point that what might appear to be certain at a particular
distance might be less so at another distance. He says, “... It is as if I were to see a painting and recognize what it represents from a long way off at once and without the slightest doubt. But now I step nearer: and then I see a lot of patches of different colors... which do not provide any certainty at all” (Wittgenstein 1969, 481). In other words the relative view we take of an object or propositions or whatever we are claiming to “know” is dependent on our vantage point.

That vantage point is informed by a metaphysical construct or system that brings clarity and structure to our human experience. I would suggest that Wittgenstein believes that this metaphysical structure is best understood by means of analysis of the use of language. In this case the expression “I know,” turns out not to be useful in constructing a coherent metaphysical system. This is because it is ambiguous and cannot be counted on to verify knowledge as certain. In other words, something that could be wrong cannot be a foundation for the system that determines what is right and wrong. Wittgenstein also proposes that the expression “I know,” which appears to characterize a very certain state of understanding when first encountered, actually becomes less certain and more vague as it is examined from different vantage points.

The concept of the metaphysical emphasis he speaks about originates in the Philosophical Investigation. “What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (Wittgenstein 1958, 116). In this case the expression “I know” has an everyday use, which is the cause of much epistemological confusion because of its use in everyday language to mean
something of which we are certain. It is not a state of mind but an ascertainable fact. It does not therefore ‘tolerate’ or permit abstraction into a coherent metaphysical system because as “I know” is examined more closely it becomes ambiguous and far from certain. In fact, Wittgenstein might argue that the expression is merely grammatical.

This chapter has examined selected passages from *On Certainty* with a view toward deepening our understanding of Wittgenstein’s positions. I have also suggested a construct for examining the relationship between hinge concepts, practices and propositions. This hinge triangle construct is a methodology that is also useful in examining the moral space between objectivism and relativism. As we examine this relationship between objectivism and relativism we keep in mind that ethical normativity (rule based and contingent) is a construct that rejects essentialism (universal and non-contingent). In the next chapter I will trace Wittgenstein’s ethical journey from the *Tractatus* to *On Certainty* as I dig deeper into his thoughts on values and moral principles.
CHAPTER 4

WITTGENSTEIN'S ETHICAL JOURNEY

In this next chapter I will trace the transition of Wittgenstein's thoughts on ethics from the *Tractatus* to *On Certainty*. In the course of this examination I will present what I believe is an important theme in this transition, which is the notion of *mystery*. In spite of his seemingly positivist pronouncements in the *Tractatus* I will show that in fact he always had doubts about that position and early on in his philosophical career had already begun moving toward a philosophy that highlighted the role of mystery in our lives. This part of the thesis advocates for an understanding of the centrality of mystery as the principle response to the belief in Western thought, championed by Kant among others, in the primacy of rational thought as the guide to human moral actions.

Wittgenstein's Early Ethics

Wittgenstein begins his line of thinking about mystery in the *Tractatus* when he postulates that some things cannot be said, i.e. expressed in language. “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical” (Wittgenstein 2009, 6.522). Further on he famously says: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein 2009, 7.0). The part of the argument in the *Tractatus* that is of interest in this study is the development of the critical role of ‘silence.’ This role is also manifested in Wittgenstein’s later works, for example in *Zettel*, where he says, “... sometimes the voice of philosophical thought is so soft that the noise of the spoken word is enough
to drown it and prevent it from being heard, if one is questioned and has to speak” (Wittgenstein 2007, 453). Inexorably tied to this idea of silence as a part of his moral view, is the distinction between what can be said and what can only be shown.

James Edwards in his book *Ethics Without Philosophy* proposes that “all of Wittgenstein's books are gestures; they are showing, not sayings” (Edwards 1985, 156). Accordingly he makes the case that in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein is trying to show that “instances of theoretical reasoning are secondary to reasoning of a practical sort” (Wittgenstein 2007, 157). Wittgenstein is trying to show his sensitivity to the role of silence through the practice or activity of reading his book, not by reasoning or thinking about it.

His strong belief in things that are unsayable and can only be 'heard' in silence is also evident in his introduction of hinges in *On Certainty*. He makes the case that it is hinges that are manifested in the everyday moral and ethical practices we undertake as we go about living our lives. Those hinges cannot be spoken about directly (only as propositional doppelgangers) and therefore are only ever shown in our actions.

Edwards makes the point in *Ethics without Philosophy* that understanding Wittgenstein's ethical thinking requires that we come to grips with his concept of self-understanding and contrast it with the prevailing tradition in Western philosophy. That prevailing tradition, according to Edwards is, “This picture, the self-understanding of Western philosophy, we may call rationality-as-representation” (Edwards 1985, 19). Although rationality-as-representation is
arguably a principle thrust of the *Tractatus*; Wittgenstein will later reject the idea. However, the critical concept of mystery will remain a central part of his thinking (Edwards 1985, 12).

Edwards goes on to say that the thing that has long defined what it means to be human (in Western Civilization) is the capacity to think, i.e. among other activities, to reason. Thinking and reasoning allow humans to accurately represent what is real and objective outside the self (Edwards 1985, 20). Knowledge is therefore defined as knowledge of universal definitions, as re-presentations of the eternal Forms of which we here and now see only the shadows (Ibid.).

Furthering this line of argument Edwards proposes, “Thought, therefore, is identified with rational intellect; to think is to try to represent in some medium, the real” (Ibid). If we continue to follow this line of thinking we come to understand that the focus of the Western philosophic tradition is on creating an absolutely accurate account or representation of objective reality. Following this tradition, the way that a person might go about achieving the ultimate picture of the real is by losing or disregarding the subjective point of view. This perspective is evident in Edmund Husserl’s *Phenomenology* where he talks about ‘bracketing out’ those subjective things that distract us from a pure sense of the phenomena we are investigating (Husserl 1982, 60-62, sec 30-32).

Thomas Nagel in *Mortal Questions* describes this perspective as follows, “The pursuit of objectivity involves a transcendence of the self . . . objective transcendence aims at a representation of what is external to each specific point of
view: what is of value in *itself*, rather than *for* anyone” (Nagel 1979, 209). This perspective compels the self to transcend itself, to try to get outside itself in order to find this objective reality. This is a reality that, according to this point of view, will be the same for all rational humans. In effect this portrays a belief in the existence of non-contingent universals; those universal moral principles that are presumed to be true regardless of the context in which they are to be understood and applied. This belief in turn has driven Western civilization to search for non-contingent universals to satisfy this external and objectivist point of view. As Wittgenstein makes clear in the *Tractatus*, language is the medium of representation and as such defines the limits of our world. It defines those limits by assuming a belief in reality as representation and in a subsequent belief that language is the medium of that representation.

Therefore, to the extent that language accurately depicts the world, it defines the extent of my knowledge of the world and consequently articulates the limits of my world. Wittgenstein makes this point clearly in the *Tractatus* when he says, “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” (Wittgenstein 2009, 5.6). Further on he clarifies this thought even more while addressing the role of the *self* in defining the limits of language and consequently the limits of my world.” The world is my world; this shows itself in the fact that the limits of *language* (of the only language I understand) mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein 2009, 5.62).

This is not solipsism in the traditional sense of believing that nothing in the world exists except, as I perceive it, including myself. Rather, Wittgenstein is
postulating a self that is like the eye that cannot see itself in its own field of view (Edwards 1985, 37). In the Tractatus he says, “There is no single thing that thinks or entertains ideas” (Wittgenstein, 2009, 5.631). He goes on to propose that if he wrote a book called “The World as I Found It” he could only show “… in an important sense there is no subject; for it alone could not be mentioned in that book” (Ibid.).

The point of Wittgenstein’s argument here is to close the gap between the extremes of realism and solipsism. He does this by showing that, like many other dichotomies, this distinction is neither as severe nor as distinct as it may appear. In the Tractatus he says, “Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism” (Wittgenstein 2009, 5.64).

As I proposed at the beginning of this thesis, in the example of the relationship between objectivism and relativism, this strict distinction between extreme positions is only useful in initially understanding the relative characteristics of those positions. What we strive for when we apply the characteristics of any dichotomous position to an event in the world is a mean between the extremes. For example in trying to understand what it means to be responsible with money, a person must chart a course between miserliness and extravagance in the ways that they spend their money. The mean, following Aristotle, is discoverable through the application of practical knowledge (phronesis) gained from experience and manifested in our everyday practices.

It is also in this same sense that Wittgenstein says that solipsism coincides with realism. He believes that the self is not an entity like it is in Descartes’ world but
rather “... as Wittgenstein says, it shrinks to an ‘extensionless point’, -a mere boundary to experience—and the reality (independent and alterable states of affairs) remains” (Edwards 1985, 38). In other words when I say the world is my world I am not denying that there is an objective world that exists beyond me. Instead I am saying that that world is only ‘real’ to me because the self perceives it, like the human eye that ‘sees’ the landscape of the world but is never in the field of view. Importantly that self is not part of me (in the sense of the Cartesian self) but is an extensionless point that is neither an entity (of a subject) nor an empirical (objective) thing in the world.

Edwards describe the self that Wittgenstein envisions in the Tractatus, as “This willing subject” which he goes on to say is “the limit of my world, not part of it, as the eye is the limit of the visual field” (Edwards 1985, 42). He (Edwards) makes the point that Wittgenstein believes that the will is best understood as an attitude and as such is not part of the world and therefore does not possess the attributes of the world. In the Tractatus Wittgenstein says, “It is impossible to speak about the will in so far as it is the subject of ethical attributes” (Wittgenstein 2009, 6.423).

Further on he states that “If the good or bad exercise of the will does not alter the world, it can only alter the limits of the world, not the facts... In short the effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world... The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man” (Wittgenstein 2009, 6.43). In other words he is saying that the facts of the world, the objective reality, cannot be changed by the self but the attitude toward those facts is within the power of the
willing self to change. So it is that our attitude, the way in which we view the events of the world, is determined by our self as the willing subject, as the eye outside the field of view. So it is also with events in the world, which can change in ways we might not want, in spite of our willing those events to be otherwise, it is in our power to change the way we perceive those events. Said differently, the objective world has no value except that which we assign to it through our willing self. While we cannot change many of the events in the world we can always change our interpretations and reactions to those events. We keep this notion in mind as we continue to explore the moral space between the extremes of relativism and objectivism.

The discussion of Wittgenstein’s thought in the Tractatus shows that the willing self adapts an attitude toward the world that is within its control, i.e. whether to live in a happy or an unhappy world. According to Edwards the point of Wittgenstein’s deliberations in the Tractatus is to “make it clear how important thought (language) is when it comes to the really important things in life” (Edwards 1985, 49). He goes on to say that the “sense of life can come clear” but this ‘sense’ cannot be spoken about because it belongs to “the realm of das Mystiche: They show themselves” (Ibid.).

However, Edwards also points out what he sees as a point of tension between different accounts of the self. On the one hand there is the “intellectualist” version of the self, which sees the self as the passive spectator of events in the world, trying to understand the events of the world from a purely “objective” standpoint. On the
other hand is the “willing” version of the self, which sees the self as more than a spectator, as actually determining the type of world it will live in - happy or unhappy (Edwards 1985, 50). Edwards proposes, “Ethics is a matter of will, not of thought – even if the willing involved nothing more than a mysterious movement within the willing (attitudinal) self” (Ibid.). So we see in the early Wittgenstein beliefs that are fundamentally in tension with each other – rational verses mystical. This tension serves to sharpen his thinking on ethics and morality. His morality is neither the strictly rationalist account of Kant’s categorical imperative, nor is it the “anything goes” of naïve relativism. Instead Wittgenstein invites us to view the moral issues in our world in terms of the self as the defining limiter of that world.

In the first part of this chapter I have presented versions of Wittgenstein’s thoughts on ethics primarily focused on the *Tractatus*. In particular I explored James Edward’s contention that the point of the *Tractatus* is to “show where the sense of life is to be found” (Edwards 1985, 204). The answer Edwards proposes is to be found in the “metaphysical self” that is outside the world and outside the subject but defines the limits of both. The *self* then limits the world but the *will* makes the world mine. The *will* makes it a happy or an unhappy place; it is an *attitude* toward the world (Ibid.). The sense of life as we see it is outside thought, outside rational representation. Edwards interprets the *Tractatus* as *showing* the self being *shown* that sense.

Edwards proposes that “What is shown to the self then is a kind of practical knowledge: knowledge of how to see the world aright, of how to assume the correct
attitude to it” (Edwards 1985, 205). It is the willing self, as I pointed out earlier that gives value to the world, a world neutral in its presentation to the human self. However, Edwards contends that Wittgenstein, in this early period is still in the grip of traditional metaphysics. This is evident in his desire to see the world sub specie aeternitatis (as it is eternally) as a presentation of representational rationality, as a non-contingent universal (Edwards 1958, 206). The implication here is that after one sees the world ‘as it is eternally’ then the self could assume the correct attitude toward it, presumably, the self could then live in a happy world fully understanding objective reality, as it really exists. Were this possible it would be a compelling vision. In Wittgenstein’s later work he will regard the desire to look for things that are sub specie aeternitatis (as they eternally are, i.e. non-contingently) as an indicator of a misunderstanding about the processes whereby we come to live in and understand the world.

Edwards refers to this misunderstanding when he characterizes Wittgenstein’s early thinking as “rationality-as-representation” (Edwards 1958, 208). In the Tractatus this representation indicates the boundaries inherent in thought because rationality-as-representation requires that we first recognize the world sub specie aeternitatis. In other words rationality-as-representation requires that we come to understand the limits on our ability to recognize the limits on “one’s power of representation” (Edwards 1958, 209). Edwards goes on to characterize Wittgenstein’s later work as indicating that he (Wittgenstein) had begun to doubt the efficacy of literal representation itself. Thus Wittgenstein is challenging a central
tenet of Western philosophy, which is the focus on constructing the most literal representation of the real.

Edwards thinks that Wittgenstein has transitioned from thinking about an image as an accurate representation of something to understanding an image as something one sees *through* like an opaque cloud, in order to understand it (in practice). In other words to “see” an image in its *use* is to see through it. This means that the thing (the image) “… floats free from identification with the way it is seen” (Edwards 1958, 213).

In this sense Edwards proposes that Wittgenstein is moving from a philosophy whose role is representation to a philosophy whose role, like that of the poets, is to free us from literalness. Freeing one from literalness means changing the focus of philosophy from being aligned with a scientific model where the primary activity is the construction of theories concerned with the search for general or universal principles. Edwards argues that this scientific philosophy is evident in the pervasive metaphysical concept of rationality as representation (Edwards 1958, 19-21). The new focus, on his view, should not be on an alternative theory or theories but rather the focus should be on resisting the urge to develop a theory at all.

In the *Tractatus* the dominant theme was rationality as representation, i.e. that the way in which a person sought to represent the world was through propositions. Those propositions, which were mediating devices and as such were logical, epistemic, and focused on objects. Those objects, of course were also the focus of rationality as representation. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, on the other hand,
Wittgenstein presents language as a mediating activity, but without an object oriented end state. The structures of language in this work (*Philosophical Investigations*) are not intended to mirror the world. Rather, language is seen as part of a larger form of life. Participating in a form of life, through the use of language and the practices inherent in that form of life, is necessary to understand any form of life (Drengson 1985, 114-115). The early writings in the *Tractatus* make it clear that although Wittgenstein was aligned with the Philosophic tradition (evident in his emphasis on representation) he broke with that tradition with his ideas about silence. His concept of silence incorporated his distinction between *saying* and *showing*. For it is in silence that one ‘sees’ what can only be shown, for example: our actions as a manifestation (showing) of our moral beliefs. In this regard the *Tractatus* is foreshadowing his work in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

**Beyond Representation**

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, the role of pictures as representing reality (through language) is portrayed as an abstraction. In his earlier work, the *Tractatus*, the portrayal of representation was one in which pictures were the mediation between the world, and the individual. Whereas in Wittgenstein’s later works pictures are portrayed as being ‘seen through’ in order to get to the more meaningful discourse of language, which is embedded in our form of life (Ibid).

The purpose of philosophy more broadly then is not to develop better pictures of the world but rather to discard those pictures by calling into question their usefulness as representation. This calling into question occurs when we focus not
on the pictures but on the activities that we undertake in living in our forms of life.

As an example, in the Philosophical Investigations Wittgenstein says, “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (Wittgenstein 1958, 109). The bewitchment occurs when we accept the literalness of the grammatical pictures that are a part of language (Edwards 1985, 151). Furthermore, literalness in any form tends to describe the extremes of a position. In the following part of this chapter I will discuss the positions of relativism and objectivism (realism) as they apply to moral judgments.

In his book Ethics without Philosophy Edwards proposes that realism and relativism only make sense against the background of rationality-as-representation. Furthermore, he contends that Wittgenstein’s ethical view is what he (Edwards) proposes as ‘sound human understanding’ (Edwards 1985, 154-155). The sound human understanding begins with an individual deciding not to attempt to know his life but rather to live it (Ibid.).

In other words, the sound human understanding is not based on an epistemic knowing, but rather it is based on opposition to the idea of knowing in the form of rationality-as-representation. Instead of a knowing, it is an understanding of what can only be shown (Ibid.). This understanding could be interpreted as a form of relativism since it would entail seeing beyond the images of the real to the uniqueness of individual realities. However, this doesn’t mean that we can go from a relativistic view of the truth, i.e. “nothing is true” to an ethical relativism that would hold that “everything is permitted” (Edwards 1985, 249).
It is important to keep in mind that moral judgments, in my view, should be informed by the Aristotelian notion of the mean. In other words when we reflect on moral and ethical choices we are careful to discriminate the mean from the extremes of a particular polarity, e.g. bravery from cowardice. The virtue that I am illuminating here, like all virtues, is subject to interpretation in the sense that what one person thinks is brave another may think is merely doing “his duty.” In the end the difference between bravery and recklessness is often very difficult to discern. So too would be the distinction between patience in the face of the enemy as one deliberates on a response to an attack and cowardice where one is frozen by fear and does nothing to respond.

When we understand the culture and the context in which people are making moral choices we come to see that not everything is permitted. The normative constraints of cultures only allow, within that culture, certain acceptable moral behaviors. This is not a belief in a strong relativism that encourages an anything goes mentality but rather just the opposite. If one holds a realist point of view then one is confined by the idea that that there are certain immutable truths that exists “out there” in anyone’s world and will be the same for all worlds. This point of view, taken to an extreme, breeds a conviction in the particular culture that is guided by this realist belief that they have the one true answer to whatever the question is, because their culture has the one true vision of reality.

Therefore, a person could be deluded into thinking that they could get that other culture to ‘see’ the same empirical evidence they ‘see’. Once that occurred then
the other would clearly believe in the ‘truth’ of that evidence and consequently have the same world-view. While this way of thinking is pervasive in Western culture, it has not historically proven to be effective or even possible when dealing with other cultures. This point of view is also not where Wittgenstein is going; instead he is proposing a way of seeing other forms of life. While there may be similarities between various cultures that subscribe to different forms of life, it is likely that in spite of those similarities there are differences in moral behavior.

The issue here, according to Edwards is that arriving at a sound human understanding is a process of deliberation. This process will eventually lead to what he calls an “ethics without philosophy,” which is an attitude toward the world in which we live (Edwards 1985, 250). That attitude is one open to mystery, open to the idea that some things cannot be understood by rational, epistemic deliberation. This attitude is not philosophical in the sense that it is an epistemic process, constrained by rules and procedures.

To be clear, this attitude is manifested in our moral actions, it is manifested in what we do, not in what we think or say. In On Certainty Wittgenstein says, “Giving grounds, however justifying the evidence, come to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting …” (Wittgenstein 1969, 204). In other words our lives are above all about doing (acting) not understanding (thinking) or seeing (rationality-as-representation).
Wittgenstein’s approach in his later works was to show the great diversity of forms of life and language-games and not in trying to find a formula with which to distill the essence of a form of life or a language-game. He was interested in seeing through the image to the mystery that lies beneath, to the hinges that manifested themselves in our doing, in our practices in a local moral order.

In the second part of this chapter I begin by presenting more evidence of Wittgenstein’s ethical journey and then explore in detail the distinctions between relativism and objectivism. I will make the case throughout for a contextually informed approach. Previously I discussed Wittgenstein’s early writings about ethics in the *Tractatus*, now I want to focus on a particular section in that work and examine what it means to our exploration of his ethics.

In section 6.4 of the *Tractatus* he says, “All propositions are of equal value” (Wittgenstein 2009, 6.4). I take this to mean, as Rush Rhees says, “... all *logical* propositions are of equal value. No one logical principle and no special set of logical principles is the fundamental one and source of all the rest” (Rhees 1965, 17). If this is true for logical propositions then the question remains, is it true for ethical propositions? Wittgenstein goes on to propose, “The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value” (Wittgenstein 2009, 6.41). In other words things only have value when they are viewed from another ‘outside’ perspective. Wittgenstein completes this thought by saying, “If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so”
Rhees proposes, “Instead of a ‘value that has value’ he might have said ‘that has value in itself’ or ‘absolute value’ (Rhees 1965, 17).

Said differently, the way things are might have been otherwise; therefore there is nothing special about something being as it is. What makes something special then is the value that we assign or attribute to it, a value that is aesthetic. Rhees uses as an example to explain this passage in the *Tractatus* the notion that “… because of what judgments of good and evil do mean that it is pointless to look for their meaning in an event or facts that might be found by science” (Ibid.). If it is pointless to look for the meaning of events in science then where is it appropriate or useful to look for meaning? Wittgenstein implies that values or meaning cannot lie in the world but instead “… lie outside the world” (Wittgenstein 2009, 6.41).

When Wittgenstein says, “It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed” he is proposing to expunge value from the framework of the world as it is. His vision in the *Tractatus* is that nothing has any more value than anything else because in fact nothing has any intrinsic value at all. The world has no value; there are just plain facts. Even if there were such a thing in the world as value, it would in and of itself be just another fact and therefore have no value.

Wittgenstein goes on to draw the conclusion that “… there can be no ethical propositions” (Wittgenstein 2009, 6.42) and then he says, “It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics are transcendental (Ethics and aesthetics are one)” (Wittgenstein 2009, 421). Aesthetics are also individual and to some extent relative and are not well informed by formulas or calculations. If ethics and aesthetics were
one, as Wittgenstein proposes, then ethics would not be, as Kant believed, informed by rational and epistemic reasoning. Additionally in *The Notebooks, 1914-1916* Wittgenstein says, “The work of art is the object seen sub specie aeternitatis; and the good life is the world seen sub specie aeternitatis. This is the connection between art and ethics.” He goes on to say, “The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view sub specie aeternitatis from outside” (Wittgenstein 1961, 84e).

Rush Rhees does not interpret the passage that states that there can be no ethical propositions as a literal denunciation against speaking about good and evil. Rather, he explains that understanding the passage requires that one understand the distinction between absolute value and logical necessity. First he says that they are both outside the world of facts, that neither can be expressed. However he does propose that the necessity of logical principles can be shown whereas absolute value cannot (Rhees 1965, 17). The example he gives is a true – false notation, which he says is a logical symbol not an explanation. However, he further comments on how the true –false notation relates to ethical judgments, “… for where there is a judgment of absolute value, the question – Is it true or false? means nothing. If I could express an ethical judgment, you might deny it and of course it would mean nothing to say we were both right” (Rhees 1965, 18).

It is instructive at this point to explore Wittgenstein’s *A Lecture on Ethics* in order to clarify his thoughts on absolute and relative judgments of value. In that lecture he tells the following story to make his point about relative judgment.
“Supposing I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said “Well, you play pretty badly and suppose I answered “I know I’m playing pretty badly but I don’t want to play any better,” all the other man could say would be “Ah, then that’s all right” (Wittgenstein 1965, 4). Wittgenstein is making a relative judgment of value, not describing (with language) what he has seen. Furthermore, he goes on to make his point about absolute judgment of value, “But suppose I told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said “You’re behaving like a beast” and I were to say “I know I behave badly, but I don’t want to behave any better,” Could he then say, “Ah, then that’s all right?” Certainly not; he would say, “Well, you ought to want to behave better” (Ibid.). Rhees interprets Wittgenstein when he says “certainly not” (in response to the reply to the question about behaving badly) as making the point that such a reply makes no sense. It makes no sense in terms of what “… is intelligible in this game of ethical judgments” (Rhees 1965, 20).

The contextualization of these examples of statements of judgments is also a theme in Wittgenstein’s thoughts from The Notebooks, 1914-1916 about the view sub specie aeternitatis (from the perspective of the eternal, an objective point of view). He (Wittgenstein) proposes that looking at things in this way gives one a view of the object with the “whole world as background” (Wittgenstein 1961, 84e). Rhees characterize this perspective when he says, “To understand any judgment of value we have to know something of the culture, perhaps the religion, within which it is made, as well as the particular circumstances that called it forth…” (Rhees 1965, 21).
This aforementioned passage in particular, supports my contention throughout this study that context is essential to understanding the range of possibilities for any choice we make, especially for any moral choice. For without context no nuanced value can be assimilated with any series of facts. In terms of understanding judgments of value and universals we should consider whether or not the dialog presented above about the nonsensical reply “I don’t want to behave any better” contains an example of one such universal. It would seem that any such universal (which would make sense in all situations) would only make sense because it is contextualized and therefore contingent. Said another way, is my reaction, which is “of course you should want to behave better” a non-contingent universal? That is the question left unanswered in this passage. If for instance the reply cannot be characterized as such does that support the case for the existence of non-contingent universals? Secondly, is this non-contingent universal a proposition or something else, say a practice?

In a passage from Rhee's article Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics, he (Rhee) relayed a conversation he had with Wittgenstein in 1942 regarding what he called “genuine ethical or moral problems.” According to Rhee they discussed the imaginary case of a man who was deciding between giving up cancer research and staying with his wife or continuing his research and leaving his wife. At the end of the discussion they have mulled over myriad possibilities regarding the choice of staying with her or leaving his wife (Rhee 1965, 23). Wittgenstein pronounces that the man may say, “Well thank God I left her ... or
maybe “Thank God I stuck to her” or he may not be able to say “Thank God” at all, but just the opposite” (Ibid.). He concludes by saying, “This is the solution of an ethical problem. Or rather it is so with regard to the man who does not have an ethic” (Ibid.).

What Wittgenstein means by this is that in realizing the range of possibilities of any ethical choice, the hinges that are evident in a person's choices, also limit those same choices. If, as Rhees declares, the man has “The Christian ethics, then he may say it is absolutely clear: he has got to stick to her come what may” (Ibid.). In this case the man’s moral hinge is expressed in doppelganger propositions that illuminate the tenets of Christianity. Those tenets would not even allow for the option of leaving his wife; a practice he could not conceive of, much less carry through.

Therefore, in this case (a man with the Christian ethic) the situation is not an ethical problem because for him there is no option other than staying with his wife, which is a fundamental practice in an uxorious way of life. There is no option because of the non-epistemic, non-experiential hinge belief that is manifested in the practices in our daily live. In this case the moral hinge is manifested in the act of the man staying with his wife. So for this man there is no moral dilemma, the only person with a moral dilemma is one who has no moral hinge equivalent to this man’s Christian belief in the sanctity of marriage.

Rhees goes on to then pose the question of “whether the treatment of such a question in Christian ethics is right or not” (Ibid.)? The answer to this question is
that it is not possible to decide if one ethic is right and another wrong, or that one is true and another false. Who, for example, would decide what criteria would be universally used to judge different ethical systems? The answer to this question is at the heart of my discussion about the difference between a morality based on objectivism and one based on relativism. The desire for an ethic that was objective began with Plato and continues to this day (Ibid.). Those who believe that there are non-contingent universal moral principles, Kant for instance would be troubled by a simplistic notion of relativity. That is because even a weak relativism (even in a nuanced and thoughtful form) might be seen to undermine a categorical imperative in morality by allowing for multiple and equally credible perspectives.

The point that Wittgenstein (and Rhees) are making is that just because we admit that there are varied and different moralities or systems of ethics doesn’t mean that each ethical system is right from its own perspective (Rhees 1965, 24). The question of rightness or wrongness makes no sense in that it cannot be compared to an empirical model to determine its accuracy in the way that a theory of physics could be validated by astronomical observations.

According to Rhees if I decide that the Christian ethic is the right ethic I am making a value judgment, which amounts to my adopting Christian ethics. From that point of adoption forward I would then view all ethical dilemmas against the background of Christian ethical tenets. In some cases, such as the previous example about the man doing cancer research, we saw that these moral hinges would preclude a person from having an ethical dilemma altogether.
Rhees goes on to propose, “There is no one system in which you can study in its purity and its essence what ethics is” (Ibid.). However, it would seem to be the case that looking at different cultures one would find points of commonality across cultures in terms of their ethical belief systems. Those points of commonality would in turn be manifested in the moral practices of those different cultures. However, at the same time those commonalities don’t necessarily lead to a set of non-contingent universal moral principles. For example in one culture showing respect for the dead means immediate burial, in another it means burning the corpse on a funeral pyre days later and in yet another culture it could mean eating the corpse to conserve the essence of that tribe.

The early Christians, for example, refused in many cases to bury the body of a suicide in a cemetery choosing instead to bury them at a crossroads to indicate that the person who committed suicide was confused and had lost their way. It was also common in early Christian society for the local authorities to confiscate the property belonging to a person who committed suicide. This is an example of a culture that treated the dead (by suicide) contemptuously because they failed to live out the life God gave them. The underlying imperative in this case, respect for the dead, depended on how a person died and was manifested in different ways.

Those who died defending their country or their religion, for example, were treated as heroes, which was obviously quite different from the treatment afforded to suicides. The question of whether this is a contingent or perhaps even a non-contingent universal moral principle remains to be answered. Regardless of the
form of different ethical systems, even the one that stemmed from Hermann Goring’s pronouncement “Recht ist das, was uns gefällt” (roughly translated: “Right is what we like”) they all served the purpose of setting the horizon of possibilities and impossibilities by framing an attitude toward the world (Rhees 1965, 25).

Rhee concludes his essay with a discussion of the factors for deliberation when considering other ethical systems, i.e. those systems other than our own. He cautions against trying to interpret them in the context of what those other moral systems mean to me. He says, “We are inclined to think that expressions as they are used in those ethical discussions have some significance which they suggest to us—instead of looking at what is done with them there” (Rhees 1965, 26). In other words, the important thing is to understand what those other ethical systems stand for and mean to the people who live in them, not what they mean in the context of our own prejudices. Rhees also cautions against thinking that what seems to us to justify an action in another moral order is really in fact what justifies that action to the individual actants in its local context (Ibid.).

This passage again shows the power of context in limiting and enabling moral choices. In this case those choices involve the attitude with which we view ethical systems other than our own. It also shows the power of contexts in helping us understand that the reasons people have for local moral actions are what they are only in the peculiar context of a discreet ethical system. Those reasons are not what we might believe that they must be, i.e. that they comport with our own rationality.
and hence our own morality. This is the case in spite of how well we think we ‘bracketed out’ our own beliefs when thinking about those reasons.

Lastly we should keep in mind that trying to homogenize or synthesize various ethical systems is not likely to succeed; the varied moral orders are there in the world and attempting to impose one culture’s morality on another might not endure. In fact the opposite may occur as in the case of missionaries who have “gone native” instead of converting the natives to Christianity. Rhees holds that Wittgenstein believed in a non-judgmental way, “in different ways of doing it,” not different ways of saying the same thing or reaching the “heart of the matter by seeing what they all had in common.” Rather that “the variety is important—not in order to fix your gaze on the unadulterated form, but to keep you from looking for it” (Rhees 1965, 25).

This chapter began with a presentation of Wittgenstein’s sense of mystery and how it has evolved from his early to his later works. I will complete this chapter by referring to the notion of absolute value, which Wittgenstein expresses in A Lecture on Ethics as the experience of absolute value when he says, “... and I wonder at the existence of the world” (Wittgenstein 1965, 8). This experience is an example of the ethical and the absolute. To “wonder at the existence of the world is to experience it as a limited whole” what Wittgenstein calls “the mystical.”

He says in the Tractatus, It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists” (Wittgenstein 2009, 6.44). Further on “To view the world sub specie aeternitatis is to view it as a whole—a limited whole. Feeling the world as a
limited whole—it is this that is mystical (Wittgenstein 2009, 6.45). Joachim Schulte, in his book *Wittgenstein says*, “Wittgenstein says we have to come to terms with the fact that the miraculous, the religious and indeed everything that appears really valuable to us, eludes meaningful expression in the sensible language that is the only one suited for science” (Schulte 1992, 75). It is not only the language of science that is ill suited to meaningful expression; it is any attempt to put the ethical into words. This is because we are “running up against the limits of language.”

In order to live the good life, the ethical life, one must have a sense for the mystical and a self that is in the world but not part of the world. This sense, however, cannot be put into words either as a question or as an answer. So for example, if we cannot put the answer into words, how could we possibly even ask the question? Wittgenstein put it this way, “When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words. The riddle does not exist. If a question can be framed at all, it is also possible to answer it” (Wittgenstein 2009, 6.5). We cannot answer the question for example –why does the world exist? Because it is not really a question at all but an illusion generated by language (Melchart 1999, 625). All we can say is how the world is. However, we are reminded that there are things that cannot be put into words, “There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical” (Wittgenstein 2009, 6.522).
CHAPTER 5

RELATIVISM AND OBJECTIVISM

This chapter continues to probe the distinction between relativism and objectivism (realism), examining each of these two schools of thought in more depth. Throughout, I will continue to illuminate the role of context in shaping moral choices and in understanding different moral values. I begin by evaluating David Wong’s moral philosophy, principally from his book, Natural Moralities.

Relativism and Objectivism

Wong’s philosophy interests us because it is fundamentally a defense of relativism. However, Wong’s relativism is not a naïve relativism wherein any culture’s moral values are as good as any others, rather it is a philosophy that he calls “pluralistic relativism.” He explains his version of relativism as follows: “The theory is relativistic because it holds that there is no single true morality. It is pluralistic because it recognizes limits on what can count as a true morality” (Wong 2006, xv). Wong rejects the view that there is one true morality (a universalistic morality in the Kantian model). He says that he doesn’t think that every existing morality is or can be a true morality. His definition of a true morality and his explanation of pluralistic relativism begin with the introduction of his foundational concept of “moral ambivalence.”

Moral ambivalence is “The phenomenon of coming to understand and appreciate the other side’s viewpoint to the extent that our sense of the unique rightness of our own judgment gets destabilized” (Wong 2006, 5). According to
Wong this phenomenon is so prevalent and so serious that it undermines one’s confidence in her own moral system as truly objective and universal. On his view when we come into contact with other cultures and their moral systems we recognize that these other systems seem equally justified in their response to value conflicts as does our own. His interpretation is that the moral disagreements, i.e. the conflict of values, which give rise to ambivalence, typically involve a plurality of values such that disagreeing parties accept the same moral values but assign different priorities to them. This plurality of values also includes irreducible values such that these values are neither deducible from other moral values nor reducible to them.

Wong draws his concept of Moral Value Pluralism from this idea, explaining it as “The doctrine that there exists a plurality of basic moral values, where such values are not derived from or reducible to other moral values” (Wong 2006, 6). He elucidates his use of the term value as including moral duties in the sense that I have defined duties in this thesis, i.e. what we owe to others (to the community). Wong goes on to comment that although it seems obvious that there exists a plurality of moral values “…the history of modern Western moral philosophy is dominated by theoretical commitments to the supremacy of one or another value” (Ibid.).

His form of moral pluralism allows for the accommodation of conflicting values without the seeming imperative to synthesize those different values into a set of universal values or even more so into one fundamental universal value. Wong also proposes that in addition to a plurality of irreducible values there is also a plurality
of different but adequate and justified responses to the inevitable conflicts between values. He presents as an example of irreducible values, two values that are at the center of this thesis, i.e. the tension between the rights of an individual and duty to one’s community. In making his case Wong says his own work on relativism “… exemplified a contrast between two types of moralities, one having at its center the duties arising from the value of community … and the other having at its center the rights persons have purely as individuals” (Wong 2006, 10).

It is this fundamental tension that exemplifies the idea that there can be two different kinds of adequate moralities, i.e. moralities that enable adequate responses to value conflicts. The relativist position is one that holds that the two moralities presented here, one rights based and one duty based can both be considered adequate. In fact they can exist in some form together and at the same time. Wong uses as an example of this idea the Western moral tradition, which he says values both duty (relationships between individuals) and rights (autonomy of individuals). However he also says, “When values of relationships and autonomy conflict in the West, there is a comparatively greater tendency to give priority to autonomy” (Ibid.). This does not mean that the two values do not or cannot coexist; rather it is simply an acknowledgment that Western culture tends to privilege autonomy over community when the two values conflict. In Eastern cultures it might well be the opposite.

Wong is proposing that his form of pluralistic relativism allows for adequate moralities, rights based and duty based, to exist in the same culture. Furthermore,
he contends that a culture or local moral order will characteristically favor one or the other morality. The example he uses of a duty-based culture is Chinese Confusion morality and the example he uses of a rights-based culture is Western European and American morality (Ibid.). Neither tradition (East or West) is strictly one or the other; but rather they exist as a sliding scale of priorities reflecting the morality of a local community at a given time. I will make the case in this thesis that since supererogatory acts (those considered above and beyond one’s duty) are grounded in moral hinges, they are realized in duty-based practices. This is valid even in a moral order that privileges individual autonomy, i.e. one that is rights-based and seeks to allow each person to live free from restrictions (duties) emanating from the community in which they live.

Earlier in this chapter I presented a brief description of Wong’s concept of moral ambivalence. This is the idea, in principle, that a person could so deeply understand and empathize with the values of another culture that their own moral values would come to be shaken or at least questioned. Wong’s view of pluralistic relativism is based on the validity of his concept of moral ambivalence. It seems to me, however, that there are differences in the levels of understanding on which he has founded this concept.

In other words, it is certainly possible for a person to understand only so much about another’s values (not having a deep and complete understanding). That person, with incomplete understanding, would then potentially base their judgments about the behavior of the other person or the practices of the other
culture on what they don’t understand rather than on a deeper level of understanding that Wong seems to presume. In fact that deeper level of understanding may not even be possible because of very different and conflicted worldviews. Samuel Fleischacker in his book *Integrity and Moral Relativism* also supports this view, which is the one that I am also proposing. He contends that we make such judgments, devoid of context, when we hold the objectivist view that there are finite sets of values, which act as the guide to a proper human existence (Fleischacker 1992, 71).

Wong interprets Fleischacker’s view as following Wittgenstein’s notion that “… knowledge depends on a background of shared assumptions and standards of evidence” (Wong 2006, 12). He goes on to propose that “world pictures are embedded within cultures” (Ibid.). Furthermore, that “Our world picture involves not only a distinct set of beliefs about the world but an ordering of interests that determine how we go about trying to have reliable beliefs” (Ibid.). On Wong’s view it would be possible to have a shared set of values but have them ordered in a priority that varied from culture to culture. That different ordering would subsequently influence the knowledge a person had of the world and on which he made decisions about the validity of moral values and positions held by another culture.

Wong also introduces the notion that access to knowledge differentiates one culture from another. The Western culture, he says, has given “… precedence to our interest in ‘egalitarian knowledge’ (wanting and believing that people have roughly the same access to the truth) and in prediction and control of this-worldly
objects . . . ” (Ibid.). He contrasts this Western view with views held by other cultures (Eastern Confucianism for example) that give “… precedence to an interest in eternal life and in both wanting and believing that certain people have special access to knowledge” (Ibid.). Although Wong draws this distinction between Western and Confucian traditions, I would suggest that even within Western culture alone the distinction is not so clear between the wisdom of crowds and the wisdom of experts.

As an example, in contemporary American culture there exists a clear sense of egalitarian knowledge evident in the strong interest in university education. At the same time there is an equally strong sense, exemplified in the continued strength of organized religion, in the belief (tacit or obvious) that certain people (religious leaders, preachers, priests, etc.) have ‘special’ access to knowledge. This special access to knowledge about God’s work or Jesus’s intent would then be imparted by those with that special knowledge to the rest of the congregation, hence the practice of preaching sermons. The fact that these two seemingly opposing worldviews exist together would seem to support Wong’s case for the possibility of a pluralistic relativism. However, the underlying assumption behind his concept of moral ambivalence, a deep understanding and acceptance of the other’s moral motivations and beliefs, seems to me more questionable.

We have already seen that Wong believes that understanding of the other implies that we understand (and accept) that they may have significantly different moral values (or a different priority of moral values) than we do. While I believe it is possible to understand the differences in another culture, I don’t think that
understanding automatically implies that a person can or will accept another's morality as valid. Nor will they automatically accept it as competing with their own morality as an equally legitimate guide to life. The distinction Wong makes between competing moralities in this case is tenuous unless it is aggregated to a higher level.

As an example, Wong interprets the debate over abortion as being about the tension between the duty to protect human life and the right of individual autonomy (Wong 2006, 20). While this distinction appears credible it fails to characterize the intensity of the positions held on the different sides of the debate. The distinction in these positions is centered on the timing of the conception and beginning of human life and is informed by different interpretations of common empirical data.

Furthermore, to believe that those stringent adherents to their positions are likely to come under the sway of moral ambivalence and be persuaded about the validity of the other’s position (and see the other’s position as potentially competing with their own) is to give too much credence to the potential for accommodation.

Moral ambivalence is used by Wong as the rationale for pluralistic relativism and as such does provide at least a basis on which to frame his assault on universalism. It is possible, however, to support a position of pluralistic relativism without supporting a strong view of moral ambivalence. In other words a person can, in my view, understand and empathize with another’s morality without seeing it as necessarily competing with her own or as an alternative to which they might be converted. For example, a person could understand the eminent priority that one
culture gives to the rights of an individual without believing that in their culture a person’s duty to the community should be secondary to the rights of the individual.

**Rights and Duties**

While there are many possibilities for prioritizing moral values, a fundamental distinction is the one between the rights of individuals and the duty to community. Samuel Scheffler, in *Human Morality*, has proposed two ideas that capture this distinction. The first is the Ideal of Humanity that characterizes the priority of an individual’s *right* to live their own life with little to no interference or demands from the broader community. The second idea is the Ideal of Purity, which characterizes the priority of an individual’s *duty* to act from a perspective that treats the rights of all people (including their own) in a community as equally important (Scheffler 1992, 102).

Wong interprets Scheffler as arguing in his book that “The Ideal of Humanity can accommodate to some extent the Ideal of Purity, but not the other way around” (Wong 2006, 26). Furthermore, Scheffler also makes the case that when human actions are seen from the point of view of the Ideal of Humanity (the prioritization of individual rights) that subsequently the Ideal of Purity (the prioritization of community duty) can then be seen as a supererogatory ideal (Scheffler 1992, 122).

This view of a supererogatory ideal informs what are called supererogatory acts, i.e. those actions done by an individual that are considered above and beyond duty. This comports with Scheffler’s notion of the Ideal of Humanity. That ideal allows for the possibility that an individual could act from a sense of duty to
community but that they generally act within the ‘space’ of moral choices they have
carved out for themselves and in which they live their lives. It is when a person acts
out of a sense of duty to community over and above acting in accordance with the
rights they feel are owed to them by the community that we enter the realm of
supererogatory acts. Actions that are supererogatory are considered as such by the
local moral order in which they are performed and occur when those acts transcend
the duties normally attributed to a particular individual. The attribution of those
duties is based in large part on a person’s ‘position’ in a culture and exists alongside
the rights that an individual expects, again given their position in that culture.

When trying to determine the balance between the moral values associated
with rights and duties, which we have been discussing, there are two primary views
on determining the dominant methodology that might be used to guide that balance.
One way to try to determine a preferred methodology among all others is by
deriving that priority methodology from general principles that are applicable
across all possible moral choices. Kant’s categorical imperative is one such example.
Wong agrees that this is clearly one of the choices but does not agree that it is or
should be the preferred methodology. He characterizes the influence and
applicability of this view by saying, “This emphasis on deriving conclusions about
particular cases from general principles represents a dominant trend in modern
moral philosophy” (Wong 2006, 27).

In the case of the categorical imperative, Kant does not propose specific actions
that would be done or moral choices that would be made in a given situation. Rather
he only proposes that any such actions or choices are in accordance with the a priori maxim of the categorical imperative (Kant 2012, 4:401-402). This is a “top down” objectivist or universalist view of moral principles. This view contains the tacit assumption that there are universal moral principles whose a priori nature applies to all rational beings in all moral situations. This view does not allow for the important differences in a given situation or in the unique culture in which a person is navigating the complexities of conflicting moral values as they are dealing with a range of possible moral choices.

The other methodology and opposing view is one that takes into account the particular circumstances involved in a specific moral choice. A particularist (as opposed to a universalist) would not subscribe to the notion that moral judgments in individual cases are primarily drawn from general principles. (Wong 2006, 28) This particularist point of view was presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis where I articulated Aristotle’s concept of phronesis. David Wong attributes to particularists a harking back to “The Aristotelian notion of a phronesis or practical wisdom that depends significantly on knowledge of particulars acquired through experience.” He goes on to propose, “Good moral judgment, they (particularists) argue, is more akin to good perception than it is to deduction from the right principles” (Ibid.).

While Wong’s Natural Moralities is focused on his attempts to deal with moral ambivalence, his broader discussion about dealing with conflicting moral values is of great relevance to this study. He accurately portrays the ways in which people go about making moral decisions in the context of the tension between the rights of
individuals and the duty of those same individuals to the community in which they live. The idea of a supererogatory act is one in which we see this tension exemplified. What is in tension generally and more so in the case of an individual living in the Western tradition is that the individual performing a supererogatory act (from a sense of duty) does so in the context of a culture that prioritizes individual rights.

The primary right of an individual in any culture is the right to life and the performance of certain, supererogatory acts is likely to put the individual performing the act at risk of the loss of their life, for example in trying to save another. That risk could come from piloting a spaceship into orbit to engage an incoming asteroid that could destroy the planet, or jumping into a swollen river to save a dog, especially if it was the family pet. In this case the identification of the dog as the family pet as opposed to a stray or wild dog about which one had no affinity, is central to the impulse to try to save the dog.

In other words the person-preserving, i.e. moral aspect of rescuing the dog, is connected to the role the dog plays in creating and sustaining the individual’s sense of self, of being a person. The characterization of a supererogatory act as such is dependent on two things. The first is the position in that culture of the person performing the act and the second is that culture’s view of the significance or uniqueness of the act in the context of the priority given to rights or duties in that local moral order. In a culture that prioritizes rights over duty there might be a
different context for determining what constitutes a supererogatory act than in a culture that prioritizes duty over individual rights.

Wong’s concept of pluralistic relativism is focused on the ultimate resolution of conflicting values, which are shared among different actors. He does not, however, propose that *any* resolution of this conflict of values is appropriate or adequate. Instead, he believes that there are constraints on any adequate morality. These constraints are informed by human psychology and behavior. They are best understood in the context of interpreting the function of a morality as enabling social cooperation (in the broadest sense), which is beneficial to both the individual and the community. Wong proposes, “Morality is not *determined* by these deep human propensities (i.e. physical needs, social status, etc.), but if it is to serve as an effective guide to action, it must be limited by these propensities” (Wong 2006, 44).

So these constraints must limit human propensities toward harmful behavior to both the individual and to the community. At the same time the constraints must allow people to attain things of value, i.e. things that provide for a meaningful individual life while encouraging ‘other’ directed actions that benefit the community. These constraints are not universal moral principles, but rather they are normative limits on a person’s action. Those who desire to live in a particular moral order will voluntarily adhere to these local norms.

Wong, however, would also argue that any constraints must necessarily require accommodations of persons whose moral beliefs may be different from the majority (Wong 2006, 69). His point here seems to be contingent upon the societal
scale that one is considering. In a populous pluralistic country this accommodation is more likely because of the greater potential for cultural diversity. On the other hand, it is less likely to be the case in a smaller local culture that is defined by its unique and generally less diverse cultural singularity.

The constraints that we are illuminating in this section are normative, meaning that they function as rules of behavior if a person is to be assimilated into and become a member of a particular community. Constraints are not like universal principles, which are applied in accordance with an outside objective maxim that is grounded in moral assumptions that are not unique to a particular culture. Instead, because these constraints are normative they account for the uniqueness of various cultures and the priorities those cultures set, for instance between rights and duties. Wong goes on to address the relationship between these constraints on adequate moralities and moral reasons; he proposes, “a genuine moral reason is such that acting on appropriate circumstances contributes to the function of morality” (Ibid.).

Different cultures and communities have different ways of dealing with value conflicts, and they have specific interpretations of the appropriate circumstances concerning moral choices. Therefore, they will develop different moral reasons to support their specific ways of resolving value conflicts.

However, according to Wong, there are universal criteria for what constitutes an adequate morality. This does not mean that there is, in effect, a universal morality. Rather, it means that the criteria for what Wong calls an adequate morality is constituted by universally applicable generic constraints on any morality. He
proposes, “The plurality of adequate moralities constitutes different ways of satisfying the functions of morality . . . Because they satisfy universal criteria for moralities . . .” (Wong 2006, 72). As such each adequate morality could place different priorities on the moral values that contribute to that culture’s interpretation of a good life. Wong goes on to conclude, “As a result, what is true within different moralities about what ought to be done or what is right may vary because the meanings that establish the truth conditions may vary” (Ibid.).

In addition to the universal constraints on any adequate morality, a particular moral system would also include locally contingent criteria. These contingent criteria are related to the contingent moral principles I discussed in an earlier chapter. An adequate morality is defined by both universal and contingent criteria. Wong defines locally contingent criteria, “From the standpoint of a community-centered tradition, such will be tied to whatever most promotes and sustains certain kinds of community” (Wong 2006, 71). He goes on to clarify, “. . . what is moral will display a distinctive emphasis on communal values, even if these values enter into an uneasy and somewhat indeterminate relation to values having to do with individual autonomy and rights” (Ibid.).

These locally contingent criteria are based on the creation of moral reasons and the foundational norms of a community. It is here that we can see the differences between moral systems. All moral systems, according to Wong, in order to be adequate, must be in accordance with the constraints on morality presented in this chapter. However, moral systems will differ in the ways they construct (locally)
norms within these constraints. These differences are, “... expressions of the contingent value priorities that differentiate one morality from another” (Wong 2006, 80). On his view Wong defends his proposed differentiation of universal and local criteria when he explains, “... universally valid criteria yield merely a skeleton of a morality, insufficiently rich in content to be action guiding” (Wong 2006, 81). It is the local criteria that establish the priorities, which in turn establish the truth conditions for moral judgments and choices in that community.

Since these truth conditions are established by local criteria, the relativist would hold that their potentiality is in the form of a plurality of true moralities and not limited to the search for just one true morality. This plurality of true moralities is informed by the attitudes that people from different cultures have toward what defines them as a person in that culture as well as toward their relationships to others. There is evidence that points to attitudes in Asian societies, for instance, where people tend to think of themselves as *interdependent* beings whose identities are inextricably tied to their position and relationships in their society (Wong 2011, 10-13). This same evidence also reveals that in Western societies (the United States, in particular) people tend to think of themselves more autonomously, focusing on their internal characteristics *independent* of their position and relationships in their society (Ibid.).

Pluralistic relativism offers a thoughtful and nuanced way of viewing moral systems with an appropriate focus on the power of contexts, in this case - the local culture to which one belongs. A criticism of this view raised by Alexus McLeod in the
Journal of Chinese Philosophy is that Wong has not shown what it is that obligates or fixes a person to belong to this moral community and have this morality, rather than that one (McLeod 2011, 495). The answer to this criticism is found in an understanding of the role of Wittgenstein’s moral hinges as the grounds of our behaviors and practices in a local community. Before I answer McLeod’s criticism, I will explore a view of cultural relativism as articulated by Richard Shweder in Thinking Through Cultures that offers another perspective in addition to that of Wong’s.
CHAPTER 6
CULTURE AND MORAL CHOICE

This chapter explores recent developments in fields of cultural psychology that are relevant to my examination of the relationship between context and moral choice.

Thinking through Cultures

This chapter examines the work of anthropologist Richard Shweder. In his book, *Thinking Through Cultures*, he focuses on the fundamental theme of the tension between relativism and objectivism. He is also concerned with finding a methodology to understand different cultures in a meaningful way. In the previous chapter we saw how David Wong tried to come to grips with the challenge of understanding others by developing his concept of moral ambivalence. Shweder, for his part, proposes to develop the concept of cultural psychology, which he describes as, “The idea of a cultural psychology is the idea that individuals and traditions, psyches and cultures, make each other up” (Shweder 1991, 2). He goes on to say that this idea implies, “… that the process of consciousness (self-maintenance processes, learning processes, reasoning processes, emotional feeling processes) may not be uniform across the cultural regions of the world” (Ibid.).

In other words, he is articulating a position that addresses the issue of cultural differences and the implications for multiple world-views or even multiple objective worlds. While he says that “There is no homogeneous ‘back cloth’ to our world, he is careful to point out that “the conceptions held by others are available to us”
(Shweder 1991, 5). Furthermore, he proposes that when we come to understand another's "conception of things we come to recognize possibilities latent within our own rationality" (Ibid.). Shweder however, does not go as far as Wong in proposing that we can understand others so deeply that it causes us to consequently doubt the validity of, or become ambivalent about, our own moral position and values.

He does instead recognize that we could see different possibilities in our own rationality. He defines rationality as 'psychic unity' and the issue he points to is the tension I previously outlined between an individual’s duty to community and an individual’s right to autonomy. Shweder explains the problem of rationality as "the tension between the claims of tradition for our allegiance verses the claims of our ego to autonomy from the limitations of our customary practice and belief" (Shweder 1991, 7). The claims of tradition encompass our duty to community, family, friends, etc. and the claims of autonomy (on the part of our ego) are from those same traditions and practices that we enact in order to live as members of that community.

Shweder subsequently makes an interesting observation when he proposes the idea that “existence is the negation of pure being” (Ibid.). He means by this that Western intellectual thought since Plato has been focused on finding the universal form or true (pure) being by stripping away the ‘noise’ from the superficialities of our lives (Ibid.). Evidence of this belief in Western thought can be seen in Edmund Husserl’s attempt to find the essence of the human experience by Phenomenological reduction. As I pointed out earlier, in order to discover this essence he proposed to
‘bracket’ (out) or suspend our predispositions and prejudices (Moran 2005, 7-8). This is, I would suggest, a universalist position wherein one tries to search for deeper universal human values by ironically discarding the context that gives meaning to those very values. The meaning of these values is evident in a person’s everyday actions in the moral order in which those actions are practiced.

Wittgenstein uses an apt metaphor in the Philosophical Investigations to illuminate the difficulty of this position when he explains the meaning of the word ‘derive.’ He says, “… the meaning of the word ‘to derive’ stood out clearly … in a quite special case of deriving … in a quite special garb, which has to be stripped if we want to see the essence of deriving” (Wittgenstein 1953, sec 164). He explains and comments on this method of finding the essence of something, “So we stripped those particular coverings off; but then deriving itself disappeared. – In order to find the real artichoke, we divested it of its leaves” (Ibid.).

Shweder on the other hand is sympathetic with Hans Gadamer’s thoughts in this area when he suggests, “… our prejudices make it possible for us to see; that traditions not only obscure but illuminate; that our differences make us real…” (Shweder 1991, 8). We can only ever see the world, to include ourselves, through the lens of our prejudices. Those prejudices are evident in the cultural practices we engage in as we live our lives while trying to make sense of our world and the behavior of the others that live in it. Shweder points out that in order to understand other cultures we must “take a stand.” We must ground ourselves in one culture in order to understand another. We can only ever ground ourselves in the culture in
which we live, no matter how much we presume to understand another's culture. He goes on to say that when thinking through cultures “There is no place, no neutral place, for us to stand” (Shweder 1991, 23).

The idea here is that regardless of the thinking or reasoning a person does, the cognitive process of bringing an idea to consciousness is similar. Shweder describes the process as follows, “The postulation of our own internal mental constructs as external forces lending intelligibility to the data of the senses seems to be a central and indispensable feature . . ." (Shweder 1991, 60). He goes on to describe this feature as necessary for “. . . not only imaginary, fanciful, hallucinatory and delusional thinking but of scientific thought as well” (Ibid.).

In other words, our prejudices, i.e. our internal constructs or filters, shape how we come to understand all sense data. It does not matter if that sense data is considered by a particular culture as fact or fantasy. This ‘post positivist’ scientific interpretation calls into question what a supposed empirical fact may actually mean. This is not to say that we should simply disregard scientific facts but rather that we should understand that throughout history what were regarded as scientific facts have continually been revised as new paradigms take hold (Kuhn 1962, 4-8).

Although Shrewder articulates a relativist position in this book, it is one that accounts for the empirical contributions of science in his subject-dependent (as distinct from subjective) model. However he also asserts that “what is of value and importance is a matter of consensus; social ‘facts’ are created not discovered” (Shrewder 1991, 121). While at first the distinction between social and scientific
facts may appear stark there are actually many similarities. Fundamental among those similarities is that ‘facts’ are ultimately taken to be such only through acceptance by the local culture in which they are manifested in practice.

For example, the fact that the earth is round was genuinely disputed for many years; to some it was a ‘fact’ that the earth was indeed flat. What we take to be scientific facts based on considered empirical data is, I would suggest, always subject to interpretation in a local cultural context. The emotional disagreement over the facts of global warming in contemporary America is but one example of scientific facts being interpreted according to very different a priori cultural filters.

Throughout this thesis I have been concerned with illuminating the power of contexts in understanding the constraints on moral principles, values, and ultimately on the moral choices we make. Fundamental to this study is examining the difference between an individual’s rights and their communal duties as those ideas have come to be known. In order to more fully understand that relationship we now explore the variances across cultures of the concept of personhood. Shweder’s anthropological data are particularly illustrative.

According to Shweder there are significant differences between the Western (predominately United States) conception of the individual and the Eastern (predominately Indian and South East Asia) conception of the individual. The primary difference is that in the West a person’s sense of self is differentiated from the role they play in their culture. Whereas in the East there is no clear
differentiation between a person’s individual sense of self (as interpreted by them or others) and the position or status they occupy in their local culture.

An example of the latter is the Gahuku-Gama people of New Guinea detailed in the work of anthropologist K.E. Read. In the culture of the Gahuku-Gama they do not believe that people are equal (in a moral sense) in the same way that a culture in the West might. Rather, “. . . their value does not reside in themselves as individuals or persons; it is dependent on the position they occupy within a system of interpersonal and inter-group relationships” (Read 1955, 250). Importantly, the ethical implications of this according to Read are that there is no developed abstract standard by which they judge moral action. Instead “the specific context, the particular occasion, determines the moral character of a particular action” (Read 1955, 260).

Contrast this view with the one Read attributes to the West where a person’s moral responsibilities to himself and others are seen to “. . . transcend the given social context and are independent of the social ties that link him to his fellows” (Read 1955, 280). This example also illuminates the moral implications for human behavior and provides insight into whether that behavior is guided by a sense of ‘self’ that is understood by an individual as context dependent or context independent.

Shweder also presents evidence of data collected on the differences between the way the Oriyas Indians (from Orissa, India) and Americans (from the Chicago area) describe persons in their respective cultures. To the Oriyas, personal accounts
are relational and specific; they describe other people in the context of their behavior. For example, they might describe a person by pointing out how they react in situations, “when a quarrel arises, cannot resist the temptation of saying a word; will talk right in the face of even a British Governor” (Shweder 1991, 128). On the other hand the American respondents in this study described people abstractly, adding their own value-laden interpretation. For instance, the Americans might describe someone without a behavioral context saying, “He’s friendly, arrogant and intelligent” (Ibid.).

Shweder concludes from this data that the different Indian and American concepts regarding the relationship of an individual to his society should be considered in light of what he calls the “sociocentric organic verses egocentric reductionist view of person-in-society” (Shweder 1991, 129). In other words, the Indian concept of a sociocentric organic view prioritizes an individual’s relationship with others and his duty to the community over that individual’s rights. The American concept, on the other hand, an egocentric reductionist view prioritizes an individual’s rights and autonomy above his duty to his community. These concepts of an individual’s place, i.e. their position in their culture and their concept of self are manifested in how they describe other people in their culture.

According to Shweder the data clearly shows that the concept of a person varies from culture to culture and is a product of the collective imagination of the society in which they live (Shweder 1991, 153). The concept of a person is not something that is given to or imposed on a culture; rather it is a creation of that
culture and is derived from human interactions in the community not from a group of autonomous individuals. An example of this communal interaction is evident in the concept of a right is something claimed by an individual as owed to them by others. However, in order to exercise a right it must be given up by the larger community in which they live. An individual right, such as the Western notion of privacy, is something that others are willing to grant to an individual member of that culture. Keeping this in mind, I would contend that the American egocentric reductionist view of a person, in spite of its focus on individual rights and autonomy is as dependent on the community in which an individual lives, as is the Indian sociocentric view.

This analysis also seems to show that the fundamental structure of any culture relies on the holistic interaction of all the people living in that culture. Furthermore, it shows that people in different cultures develop and sustain their world-views through the practices in which they engage as they go about living in their world. According to Shweder, "People around the world do not all think alike" and that what one thinks is related to how one thinks about things, i.e. in context or in the abstract (Shweder 1991, 155). How one thinks turns out to be a product of the local moral order in which one lives and the moral hinges they adopt, which in everyday action and practices make evident that culture’s world-view, i.e. sociocentric or egocentric.

Shweder’s analysis also points out the distinction between those cultures that emphasis the rights of the individual and those that emphasis the duties an
individual owes to their community. The Oriyas Indian society in his study is a duty-based society where an individual’s priority is to conform to the accepted norms of moral action. The people in that society understand their position, first and foremost, as a member of their community (Shweder 1991, 168). On the other hand the American respondents in his study reflected a rights-based culture which prioritized the individual’s choice to conform or not, to all the moral norms of the culture. In fact, in the American culture, as reflected in the attitudes of the study participants, moral norms are not considered restrictive as long as one’s behavior does not infringe upon the rights of another person. In effect, “almost anything goes” (Shweder 1991, 169).

Interestingly Shweder completes this sentence by clarifying that “almost anything goes” does not include incest, which is the only universal prohibition on human behavior that he points out in his work. It (incest) remains after all of the analyses of his research into myriad human behaviors, to include the killing of other people across all cultures, the only seemingly universally condemned behavior (Ibid).

Shweder takes these differences in world-views between Indians and Americans and expands on the implications for understanding the development of moral norms in a culture. He points out the shortcomings of psychological research in the West, which he says is “indifferent to context . . . takes language as epiphenomenal” and is characterized by a continuous “search for universals” (Shweder 1991, 228). Based on his study and research he suggests that there is
much to learn from studying everyday linguistic discourse because it emphasis the importance of relationships and living as we do in community with others. Studying everyday discourse also, and importantly, shifts the focus away from one that is solely on privileging the position of the individual. Focusing on our own communicative discourse also brings context and meaning to the fore by giving equal importance to what is “local and special as to what is general and universal” (Ibid.).

On this view Shweder is anticipating the emergence of Positioning Theory, a social psychological construct that embraces the analysis of everyday linguistic discourse. Positioning Theory illuminates the rights (accrued to an individual) and duties (to the community) that a person's position accords them while living in their local moral order. Positioning Theory is based on what is specific and local; it accounts for context as being fundamental to understanding the moral choices we make. Those choices are evident in the practices of human behavior within a particular culture. Positioning Theory provides the framework by which we can examine everyday linguistic discourse thereby illuminating the positions we take and the ways in which those positions enable and constrain our moral practices.

The importance of context in shaping moral choices is the central theme of this study. Context comes from understanding what is particular, i.e. local and specific in a given situation. While the more general view, i.e. what is universal and abstract, has a role in framing moral choices, it is not as useful in helping to understand the limitations inherent in the presentation of those choices. A central tenet of
universalism is the belief that people are essentially all the same and possess similar global personality traits. If this were true then it would certainly add weight to the argument for a set of universal moral principles, which are context independent, i.e. non-contingent universals and applicable across all human cultures.

Shweder’s research however does not support that claim. Instead his research shows that “Individual differences in conduct are narrowly context dependent and do not widely generalize across contexts” (Shweder 1991, 270). In other words generalizations about universal moral attitudes and behaviors do not apply across cultures. In fact just the opposite is evident from his research, i.e. that local context is the predominate discriminator of human conduct.

The essence of what it means to be a person is in fact inextricably tied to the local moral order in which one lives. Furthermore, the norms of behavior a person choses to live by in order to be a member in good standing in their local community, vary across cultures. The norms of the local moral order in which one lives are not derived from individual behaviors but are instead the determinants of individual human behavior. This relationship between individuals and their community is indeed symbiotic. Understanding the nuances in that relationship begins with an understanding of the context(s) in which the practices inhering in that relationship are manifested.

In the next chapter I will present Positioning Theory in order to further illuminate the constraints of context on the moral choices we make.
CHAPTER 7

POSITIONING THEORY – RIGHTS AND DUTIES

This chapter presents an innovative development in the field of social psychology that is relevant to understanding the power of context in shaping moral choices. It examines linguistic discourse as a way of illuminating relevant context.

Positioning Theory

Positioning Theory is the study of the way rights and duties are ascribed, attributed and justified to and by individuals in local groups. It includes the discursive development of the shared assumptions that influence those duties and that consequently shape the development of individual selves and the action patterns they undertake. The shaping of the rights and duties taken up by individuals results from the development, intentionally or otherwise, of positions created or changed through the interaction of those individuals with others in a local group. The ascription of rights and duties is the outcome of these interpersonal communications and is the common cognitive activity through which shared assumptions are manifested.

Positioning Theory has been described as “The study of local moral orders as ever shifting patterns of mutual and contestable rights and obligations of speaking and acting” (Harre’ and van Langenhove 1999, 1). More specifically, a position is “... a complex cluster of generic personal attributes ... which impinges on the possibilities of interpersonal, intergroup and even intrapersonal action through some assignment of rights, duties and obligations to an individual...” (Ibid.). Said differently, my position is based on a relation to others in a particular situation in
which I am assigned certain rights and duties, or have certain rights and duties conferred on me because of my position in an organization, or my personal character, history and so on. Such a position can be defined in a systemic sense, one that could be conferred by a formal organization chart; but here position comes close to the more stable and less ephemeral concept of a role. It is more likely, however, that a position is relational in the sense that the actual influence of an ascribed or demanded position is exerted through personal, discursive relations within and without a formal organization.

This notion of relations, which are in fact relative, is central to understanding Positioning Theory. For example a runner who runs the fastest times and wins all her races at the state level is positioned as a star performer at that (local) level. However, her performance may be the grounds for assigning (or refusing) the rights and duties only as an unpaid coach at her local high school. On the other hand if she was winning races at a national or Olympic level her run times would be such that those times would be the grounds for assigning (or refusing) the rights and duties of a well paid coach at a nationally ranked and reputable University.

In order to understand Positioning Theory, we need to appreciate that: (1) prior assessments of personal skill, moral character and other attributes a priori may be involved in positioning (2) there is a relative aspect to the positioning of the participants in relation to other actors, local context and the issues at hand. Positions should therefore be understood as “ephemeral, disputable and changeable” (Harre’ and Moghaddam 2003, 140)
Positioning Theory is based on the notion that “social phenomena are to be considered to be generated in and through conversation and conversation-like activities” (Harre’ and van Langenhove 1999, 3). Those conversations are between people, positioning themselves and being positioned by others and are therefore *moral* in character and of interest in this study. The right and the duty to speak and to listen are locally and often temporally fixed. The social reality that we experience living in the world is not given, but rather is co-created by the contributors to the discourse.

Positioning Theory is a way of examining this discourse, which is not a private soliloquy with oneself but instead is based on interaction with other persons in some relevant context. The application or use of Positioning Theory helps us understand the development of shared and collectively held assumptions. These assumptions in turn influence the rights and duties ascribed to and claimed by involved individuals as part of their discursive presentation of themselves as persons of worth.

A person is usually positioned or positions him or herself by reference to a combination of personal attributes that influence the possibilities for interpersonal actions making plausible the rights and duties attributed to the person occupying that position. Pre-positioning is the phase in which an individual’s relevant attributes come to be salient to an evolving situation. For example, knowing Greek, a person may be positioned by his or her monoglot companions to have the duty to interpret in an Athenian café. In this sense positions are also relational because for someone to be pre-positioned for instance as an expert and hence with certain rights and duties,
there must be someone else positioned as a novice (Tan and Moghaddam 1999, 183-185).

**Positioning Terrorists**

This relationship, between expert and novice, exemplifies the distinction between characteristic extremes. It also has application in our upcoming examination of the terrorists’ use of the Internet as a means of discursive interaction in order to, among other things, recruit new young people to the cause. In the case of terrorism in order for someone to be positioned as a terrorist there must be others that position him or her as such. Those who position others as terrorists generally see themselves as occupying a position as fair and enlightened individuals of high moral character. Ironically these are the very same attributes the terrorists claim for themselves.

Similarly there must also be those who are positioned as oppressors in order for freedom fighters to be so named by themselves. The narrative of a freedom fighter makes use of the discursive and normative conventions or story lines in which they are seen to be fighting to free their followers from an oppressive ruler or government. This story line then becomes the context within which they live or aspire to live and which in turn shapes the moral choices they have available.

Positioning Theory also allows us to take into account the effect that a collective identity has on the development of individual identities and consequently on the affect that the collective identity or community has on individual morality. With this in mind, I will explore the effect that established, i.e. expert terrorists have on the creation and development of new, i.e. novice terrorists. We can gain this insight
because positioning involves the development of group selves as well as the development of individual selves (Taylor, Bougie and Caouette 2003, 197).

The effect of the continuous interaction between the individual and the relevant community is indeed symbiotic. This idea that it is the group one belongs to or seeks to join that influences the development of the individual self is foundational to the creation of a terrorist as it is to any closed community of single minded actors – such as fighter pilots, Gran Prix drivers, or champion tennis stars.

In order to more completely understand the relationships that contribute to and are affected by positions, Harré and van Langenhove proposed the positioning triangle as a heuristic framework. The positioning triangle, consisting of a story-line, social acts and a position also illuminates the continuous interaction between these three and the effect they have on each other (Harré and van Langenhove 1999, 18).

![Positioning Triangle Diagram]

The central dimensions of human development - linguistic, cultural, and intellectual, etc., requires interaction with others. This interaction occurs through language and other symbolic systems. It is the catalyst for developing and sustaining positions. Social reality is not developed through the identification of static structures or preexisting notions about human behavior, but through the give and take of conversational dialog in the course of which the flux of positions ebbs and flows.
Positions are necessarily tied to a story-line which shapes and gives meaning to social acts performed by the persons so positioned. They are very much influenced by local norms of acceptable actions and in that sense they are relative. Making the case for a universal position(s) is problematic when taking into account the wide range of possible interpretations of speech acts; for example, one generation’s idiot may well be another’s savant.

It seems that a universal position, like a universal moral principle is problematic. This is because the concept of universality in human practices, as we have seen throughout this thesis, does not account for the many nuances in different moral orders. Those nuances of behavior, while they may be at odds with practices in other cultures, are all considered acceptable modes of behavior within their local situation.

Understanding the relative and relational nature of positions enriches our investigation of terrorism because it shows (one of) the processes through which people are drawn into terrorist networks. The answer to the question of why someone becomes a terrorist comes not from examining him or her as individuals but rather from studying the social and cultural context that enables the human networks they populate to thrive. Positioning Theory reminds us that at root the convictions that sustain a network are moral. Having set out the foundations of Positioning Theory I will apply it in the case of the phenomena of terrorism to illuminate the power of context in forming and influencing moral choices.
Terrorism is a cultural practice with its own determining rules and reasons, as a meaningful and rational (in the eyes of the terrorist at least) activity. No one is born a terrorist; people become terrorists just as they become Buddhist monks or generally members of any kind of closed institutions. Evidently, terrorist is also not an absolute or universal label. Even the use of the word terrorist is correlative with the use of the word freedom fighter or at least something like it. The oft-heard quip still rings true “One person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter” (Moghaddam and Marsella 2004, 15). What we see here is that what initially might seem to be a clear-cut distinction— between that of a terrorist and that of a freedom fighter—turns out to be dependent on where you stand with respect to the worthiness of the cause. The distinction between the two extremes depends on a moral perspective.

In the case of terrorists, they position themselves as more than simple criminals, indeed they position themselves as part of a movement that aspires to a greater good than does the corrupt government or culture against which they are fighting. In other words, at the same time that they position the members of the target society as devoid of rights to the usual give and take of human society, they arrogate to themselves both the right to destroy the enemy and, more importantly, the duty to do so.

This complex pattern of positioning presumptions is tied in with a familiar story-line demonizing the targets and at the same time offering interpretations of the forms of life in target societies as corrupt and evil. It is instructive to note the reciprocity of the rhetoric adopted by terrorists and targets alike in describing each
other in the pre-positioning moves that support the assignment or denial of rights and duties in that locale.

In spite of the rhetoric, members of groups such as al Qaeda are generally averse to labeling themselves as terrorists. While they take up the psychological stance, the experience, the story line, and the moral order of the terrorist while interacting with other terrorists, they may not see themselves as such. The word, terrorist, has always had derogatory implications; but the people we label as such want instead to be seen as martyrs in a just cause. They want to be part of an organization that demands sacrifice and a renunciation of egotism and self-interest (Sageman 2004, 15-20). Said differently, they prioritize duty to others in the group above the rights they might claim as individuals.

Applying Positioning Theory

In the flow of contemporary world events the positioning of Western Europe and the United States by terrorists generally begins with the pre-positioning of the West as the enemy. More significantly they are positioned as infidels, demonizing them to create an object of common hatred. This becomes for the terrorist a hinge, the discursive doppelganger of the practices for which the potential terrorist recruit is positioned. It has hinge status because it is for the terrorist (a member of al Qaeda for instance) a certainty that is immune to doubt and grounds all their other beliefs.

When applying Positioning Theory we need to account for both first order positioning and intentional and unintentional second order positioning. Second
order positioning occurs when the initial position is questioned or not taken as a
given. For example, when a terrorist is positioned as a freedom fighter certain rights
and duties accrue. Today, however, in the West we position many of those
previously called freedom fighters, the Mujahedeen for example, as terrorists.
Conversely many Mujahedeen position themselves not as terrorists, but as martyrs
with the right to paradise when they die.

Examining everyday linguistic discourse is a fundamental tenet of Positioning
Theory and is the methodology for illuminating the context in which we come to
understand the interpersonal dynamics that influence our moral choices. The
following case study shows the relevance of Positioning Theory to our discussion of
terrorism and the power of context. Specifically, we examine the Internet exchange
between “Redemption is Close” and “Merciless Terrorist.” This exchange provides
an example of the application of Positioning Theory to better understand the use of
the Internet by terrorists to facilitate recruitment of new terrorists. It is of course a
moral choice to join a terrorist group.

This is the initial message to the al Qaeda website from “Redemption is Close”
that begins the discourse.

Brothers, how do I go to Iraq for Jihad? Are there any army camps there
and is there someone who commands there? (Weimann 2004, 8)

The positioning begins with the name or ‘handle’ the would-be terrorist gave
himself; “Redemption is Close” portrays a sense of immediacy in his request and the
implication that redemption (in the context of the Islamic narrative) will likely mean
death. The salutation “Brothers” shows him reaching out as a peer and fellow Jihadist. He is serious about his request when he uses the pronoun “I” implying that his true self, not one of his casual personas wants to go to Iraq for Jihad and martyrdom. What follows - the “going to Iraq for Jihad” - text is meant to reinforce his position as a serious recruit i.e. as taking on the rights and duties of a martyr. He again reinforces his position by asking if there are any army camps in Iraq and who commands.

This response comes four days later from “Merciless Terrorist:”

Dear Brother, the road is wide open for you--there are many groups, go look for someone you trust, join him, he will be the protector of the Iraq regions and with the help of Allah you will become one of the Mujahidin. (Ibid.)

The delay of four days could be an attempt by “Merciless Terrorist” to reinforce his position as the one with the power and the right to make this recruit a terrorist. His salutation “Dear Brother” reinforces this position with the formality of the greeting and when compared to the informality of the salutation from “Redemption is Close” positions him as being superior in an avuncular way and taking on the duties of a teacher. Next is the encouragement that “the road is wide open for you” and then the advice that there are many groups but to find someone you trust, then join. The implication is that “Merciless Terrorist” could be just such a person.

The positioning at this point aligns with the concept proposed by Fathali Moghaddam of the floors on the staircase a potential recruit ascends, as he or she becomes a terrorist. It is on the first floor that the potential terrorist seeks an outlet
for and plays out the story of frustration and confusion he feels about his identity and the identity of the group to which he belongs (Moghaddam 2006, 41). The previous Internet exchange is the equivalent of the first floor in Moghaddam’s concept. In his book *From the Terrorist’s Point of View*, Moghaddam offers this image of the process of becoming a terrorist.

Envisage a narrowing staircase leading to the terrorist act at the top of a multistory building. We all begin life on the ground floor of the building. At this stage the future terrorist is no different from you or I. The staircase leads to higher and higher floors… the important feature of the situation is not only the number of floors… but how people perceive… the doors open to them. As individuals climb the winding and darkening staircase, they see fewer and fewer choices, until the only possible outcome is the destruction of others, or oneself, or both. (Moghaddam 2006, 43)

On each successive floor a person’s interaction with society at large decreases as their interactions are now confined to a smaller and smaller group of individuals who hold more and more similar points of view. To belong to a terrorist organization (or any closed group for that matter) requires that they take up and display the opinions of their companions, who are always in the majority. The development of the terrorist self deepens as the new belief system becomes integrated into their existing belief system and outside influences become less and less pertinent or relevant.

The higher she, or much more frequently he, goes up the stairs; the progressively fewer choices are available to the would-be terrorist. Ultimately going back down the stairs becomes unthinkable; it is not even an available moral choice so consequently there is no moral dilemma for the would-be terrorist. Opting out of
the group becomes less and less of a psychological possibility as the personal relations between the members of the terrorist network intensifies. This is especially true in the case of al Qaeda. The modern global jihad was initially built on a foundation of tightly knit groups of friends rather than a loose confederation of aspirant individuals (Sageman 2004, 99-104).

In this example, “Merciless Terrorist” now positions the potential recruit as being part of something bigger than him, “the protector of the Iraqi regions” with the duties that constitute that position. He also invokes a sense of inevitability beyond human control “with the help of Allah,” and of past history “you will become one of the Mujahidin.” This narrative consequently becomes part of the ongoing terrorist discourse and is also used to construct the story-line for the organization’s future.

Finally, at the end of this exchange on the al Qaeda website, “Merciless Terrorist” instructs, “Redemption is Close” to download software that allows just the two of them to communicate privately. This in turn enables the introduction of the new recruit to still higher stories up the staircase, and the right to begin to ascend them. In this case the Internet allowed initial contact to be made but now a more personal dialog must begin in order to deepen the relationship and bring the new recruit to the battlefield. We can see from this example how the context in which others (and we ourselves) understand our ‘position’ limits the scope of possibilities of the moral choices we make or can even conceive of making.
It is important to recognize the symbiotic nature of positions and how the limitations of a position are constantly shifting and changing in response to the context, i.e. the prejudices that individuals bring to any experience. This case study using positioning theory has shown the power of contexts of action in shaping and limiting moral choices. We saw how as the terrorist recruit climbed higher up the staircase of terrorism his or her moral choices became more and more limited. Ultimately the recruit felt he was faced with only one choice, which was to continue as a terrorist, all other options were inconceivable. He had in affect now adopted the hinge beliefs of al Qaeda.
CHAPTER 8
HINGES AND RATIONALITY

This chapter further develops the theme of this study in exploring the power of context in limiting moral choices. I will examine Wittgenstein’s idea of hinges and connect that idea to a culture’s concept of rationality and ultimately to a culture’s characterization of what constitutes a supererogatory act. To that end I propose to present rationality as contextualized limits on human behavior. As I discussed earlier in this study Wittgenstein’s view of hinges is that they are beliefs that are held as certain and beyond doubt if we are to live in a particular way. Wittgenstein first described hinges in this passage: “. . . the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn” (Wittgenstein 1969, 341).

Not only are hinges constitutive of our worldview, but they are also regulative of our behavior in local orders. These local orders could be characterized as moral, natural, political, religious, etc. and our interest in this study is in in local moral orders. How we come to these hinge beliefs and how they influence our conceptions of rationality and our understanding of what is considered rational by various groups is the focus of this chapter. As we investigate this concept further we will see how moral hinges are manifested in moral practices.

Rationality, as the concept is applied to a person’s exhibited behavior in a discrete local order is a uniquely individual construct. It is one that is defined by and through discursive relations, like the relationships among terrorists that I
highlighted in the previous chapter. Importantly, there is no such thing as a universal rationality. This is because the concept of what it means to be rational cannot be articulated abstractly, that is, it cannot be understood outside the concrete context of historical events and the complexities of local social life.

There is no objective or non-contingent rationality that is always shared as a given worldview by diverse cultures. Rationality is therefore based on contextualizing beliefs within actual historical situations, to include of course social practices. What is considered as rational within the worldview of a particular group is subject to varied influences such as culture, education, economic status, etc. Furthermore, I would suggest that behavior labeled by one person as irrational indicates more about the positioning of that particular person than it does about the validity of a decision, a belief or an activity.

In order to appropriately contextualize our beliefs and lead us to a more complete understanding of rationality we focus on the practical structures of both discourses and actions. It is within these practical structures that creation and regulation of meaning occur. Rationality is very much a practical notion in that it reflects the meaning assigned to empirical actions or practices in relation to a working framework. Meaning or sense making comes about by considering the privileged position of the use to which those actions are directed within a particular context.

Since there is no universal, abstract rationality, there is consequently no place for theoretical and abstract truth independent of some context or practice. In other
words there is no form of rationality that is a non-contingent universal. Wittgenstein postulated in the *Philosophical Investigations*, that the truth of a proposition is never independent of its use by humans in language games (Wittgenstein 1958, 226). In its practice guise then, rationality reflects meaning, i.e. truth created through actions on the part of subjects, who act as free and autonomous agents. Rationality also has an epistemic character in that it shapes the means (cognition) through which those agents come to understand their world through discursive interaction with each other in some normative context.

This epistemic character is also reflected in this proposition: we should expand the narrative of rationality from a focus on “a rational person thinks *this*” to “a rational person thinks *like this*.” By changing the narrative we open up space to explore and understand the process whereby we come to our notions of rationality. We do this instead of trying to interpret a particular person’s rationality in a particular context against some code of good practice, which is a necessarily limiting approach.

Discursive interaction is the cognitive process that yields both the production of knowledge for oneself and the acquisition of knowledge from others. Knowledge, which comes from interaction, is ultimately manifested in the shared worldview of the participants in a common discourse. The knowledge that a terrorist recruit comes to in this acculturation process reflects the worldview of the terror network he desires to join.
Rationality is discursively developed and manifested in cooperative behavior considered acceptable by people who freely chose to participate in these mutually agreeable forms of behavior. At the heart of connecting rationality to acceptable behavior is an understanding of what compels others in a group to behave as they do. Said differently, when one person understands the reasons that motivate another person they have taken the first step toward accepting that behavior (the other’s) as rational and consequently respecting the other’s rationality.

While not as radical a position as that taken by David Wong with his concept of moral ambivalence, my idea of respecting another’s rationality does imply a nuanced level of understanding of the other. It does not imply however that a person would subsequently challenge his or her own worldview to the point of ambivalence. This process of reaching an understanding with others also compels individuals to be held accountable not only for narratives they use in discourse but also for justifying the validity of their own positions.

Not understanding, or even attempting to understand, the reason behind another’s apparently unusual behavior leads to labeling the other’s behavior as irrational. What this means is that the behavior in question does not ‘make sense,’ i.e. is not rational in the context of different worldviews. In much the same way, suicide bombers are labeled as irrational because we in the West cannot understand their motivation to destroy themselves. In fact, their behavior is very rational to them in the context of their worldview.
It is important to acknowledge that while we may disagree or disapprove of another's behavior those actions can be rational to the person acting in that manner within his local normative order. I would further contend that a person could not act irrationally in their own mind, baring of course a delusional state brought about by illness, drugs, etc. This is because rationality is manifested in discursively developed and mutually acceptable behavior. For example, one could imagine that all these people cannot act irrationally because they are sharing the same hinges. The rationality of a person's actions is therefore ultimately dependent on their viewpoint and on the acceptability of those actions to like-minded individuals who share the same discursively created values.

Consequently, to knowingly act irrationally is not possible since that would be to act in a way that a person acknowledges that their actions are unacceptable in the moral or natural order in which they live or hope to live. Even someone who commits murder has justified or rationalized that act, if but for the instant in which he pulled the trigger. For that instant he was, in his own mind at least, acting rationally. Inevitably, an individual can only ever act in a manner they believe is rational (in their world), even if others see those actions as irrational, i.e. at odds with the self-interest of the subject.

Ultimately, rationality is a form of sense making and as humans we are compelled to try to make sense of the world. What we cannot make sense of by reasoning we must simply believe, and that belief becomes for us a hinge. It is not a choice for us to believe since to not believe would be to delete meaning from the
world. This notion is similar to one that Wittgenstein illuminated in his discussion of rule-following in the *Philosophical Investigations*. There he posed the question, “How do I obey a rule?” which he answered by saying that the question was really about justification for following a rule. “If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do” (Wittgenstein 1958, 217).

He goes on to say “When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule *blindly*” (Wittgenstein 1958, 219). As I suggested earlier, hinges can be both constitutive and regulative. It is the regulative function that we see foreshadowed in this discussion about rules from the *Philosophical Investigations*. Like rules, hinges are followed blindly and they are reflected in everyday practices that are simply “what we do.” This rule-following is the manifestation of our drive toward sense-making and it is these normative constraints that provide the foundation on which we build a coherent world view.

I am suggesting here that hinges, characterized as tacit beliefs not subject to doubt, are in fact the foundation of rationality. Consequently, the roots of any rationality are found in these non-epistemic beliefs, and not in the calculations of reason. Hinges, whose creation is non-experiential and non-epistemic, contribute to the form of rationality constituted by those same hinges. Any discrete form of rationality, like all forms of rationality transcends the limits of reason as we ‘look to find a reason to believe.’ It (rationality) is also context dependent and therefore
contingent. In order for one group’s behavior to be labeled irrational there must be another group that considers its own behavior to be rational.

Another point of consideration related to identifying the characteristics of rationality is to understand that once we recognizes a hinge for what it is, it is no longer a hinge. This is because having been recognized as a hinge; including recognition of the effect it has on one’s life in a particular local order, it now becomes epistemic in both nature and origin. We have made it (the hinge) the result of a cognitive process. It has, in fact, become at this point knowledge and knowledge is by its very nature something about which we can be wrong.

Therefore when a hinge is recognized as such it is no longer certain and beyond doubt, it is now merely an epistemic practice, or merely an empirical proposition. So far I have established a foundation of understanding about rationality and introduced the role of hinges in the creation of rationality. Next I will explore in more detail the types of hinges and their relationship to rationality as manifested in everyday practices.

First we will examine the origin of hinges. Hinges originate in the observation of and participation in practices and actions in a moral or natural order in which we make use of standards of correctness. For example, “It is wrong to believe the earth is flat,” “It is wrong to be cruel to animals.” Hinges can come from repeatedly experiencing these events or from a single occurrence of such impact as to make repetition redundant. An example of the former is the proclivity of some people to walk around black cats rather than cross in front of their paths because of a belief in
“black cat evilness.” An example of the latter, single occurrence would be the first televised portrayal of men walking on the moon, which, because of a reasoned belief in the infallibility of video technology, enabled all but the hard-core (irrational?) skeptics to believe with certainty that man had walked on the moon. In whatever way hinges come about they are subsequently reinforced through continued repetition of actions to which they contribute meaning, leading to expectations of behavior that displays or manifests these beliefs.

In our exploration of the origin and/or creation of hinges the following question comes to mind: “to what extent is a teacher necessary in the creation of hinges?” The answer to this question is also relevant to the example in the previous chapter about the recruitment of terrorists. For the answer we look to the psychologist Lev Vygotsky who believed that the fundamental process of human development is always collective. It is a process of psychological symbiosis that is fundamentally a kind of apprenticeship. He postulated that all of a child’s development occurs first at the social level and then at the individual level: “An interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one. Every function in the child’s development appears twice: first on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people, and then inside the child” (Vygotsky 1978, 57).

The creation of hinges is effectively a social and discursive process that is affected by a teacher; it is the teacher who brings the student from the Zone of Proximal Development (the level at which a student stops progress on their own) to
the Zone of Actual Development (the higher level a student can reach with the aid of a teacher). (Vygotsky 1978, 86) The behavior exhibited by individuals in these stages is foundationally influenced by hinges and the creation of those hinges is enabled or accelerated by a teacher who imparts to the student the belief systems that define rationality in that local order. The child internalizes the hinge after she has seen the practices displayed between others in her group. This is the collective process of the creation of hinges, enabled by a teacher or one whose actions in that capacity are interpreted by the child as one positioned as a superior or a more capable peer (Ibid.).

There are two categories or types of hinges of interest to us in this thesis. The first type is a metaphysical hinge, one which concerns material things that constitute natural orders, i.e. those that make up an external system, for example, “cats don’t grow on trees.” The second type of hinge is a moral hinge, one which concerns behaviors that constitute moral orders, i.e. those that make up an internal system, for example, “doing your duty.” Importantly, one never proves a hinge’s existence, or demonstrates its validity. Instead, hinges are fixing a certain form of life, which is simply displayed in everyday practices. It is through the observation of and participation in those practices that hinges are consequently identified.

In examining the first type of hinge we can, for example, discover that one never doubts that cats don’t grow on trees, because you could not doubt that and live in the world, as we know it. Therefore, accepting a belief in trees that grow cats instead of branches is irrational in the context of a certain natural order. In the case
of the second type of hinge one never raises the question whether doing one’s duty is a way of behaving that is unchallengeable if we are to live in that particular moral order. Therefore, being dutiful is a moral hinge, since one never raises the question of whether or not I am dutiful if I am acting in that way. Acting that way is what it is to be dutiful.

The driving force behind the rationality of these aforementioned hinges lies in the utility and social efficacy of the practices in which we manifest or realize these hinge beliefs. Consequently, the practice of trimming tree branches is informed by the certainty that they are covered in bark and not fur and that when one cuts into a branch it will not be followed by the screech of a wounded cat. In much the same way the practice of doing one’s duty requires that we accept that by acting dutifully a person is acting in accordance with a practice deemed rational in the moral order in which they live.

In some local orders the doppelganger hinge proposition, “I am dutiful,” could be understood to mean that I have a duty, for example, to give money to the poor. On the other hand, this duty might be opposed to the rationality of other moral orders that believe being poor is a personal choice and therefore the poor, as freely choosing autonomous agents, have selected their lot and deserve no recompense from others.

Hinges, however, should not always be taken as implying only a particular action by someone. For example, one culture may view the moral hinge, expressed propositionally as “doing one’s duty” as acceptable as a spiritual and/or metaphoric
practice, such as praying for the poor on Sunday. That same culture might view that hinge expressed through dutiful actions as an unacceptable empirical or literal practice, such as giving alms to the poor. Both of these hinges are manifested in practices at different levels, and are not necessarily in consonance with or in conflict with each other. They simply reflect the different levels of hinges. In this example, at one level the practice of prayer expresses a hinge, yet at another level the practice of putting money in a jar is the expression of that hinge. These practices have in common that they both display the regulative function that hinges play in our lives. It is important to remember, however, that hinges, their expressive practices and their expressive doppelganger propositions are all in fact, distinct.

The roots of any form of rationality are not found in abstract and objective reasoning but rather in contextualized and discursively created hinges. These hinges are manifested in our day-to-day practices and actions when 'the spade is turned' and we have no recourse to reasoning but must simply believe; i.e. when we reach the bedrock that is the limit of reason.
CHAPTER 9
MORAL HINGES AND SUPEREROGATORY ACTS

In this chapter I continue to explore the concept of moral hinges and will ultimately make the case that moral hinges provide the grounding for supererogatory acts. I begin by introducing the concept of basic certainty and specifically basic moral certainty. This concept (basic moral certainty) as articulated by Nigel Pleasants postulates a pre-epistemic and pre-experiential certainty. The examples of certainty that he presents are the wrongness of killing and the badness of death (Pleasants 2009, 669). According to Pleasants, basic moral certainty plays the same foundational role in our moral practices and choices as empirical certainty does in our epistemic practices (Ibid.).

The concept of hinges, which I have been exploring throughout this study, comes from On Certainty. In that work Wittgenstein famously takes issue with a proposal by the philosopher G.E. Moore that he knows that his two hands exist by displaying them to his students (Moore 1959, 144). Wittgenstein argues, “Moore does not know what he asserts he knows” (Wittgenstein 1969, 151). His (Wittgenstein’s) argument is based on the premise that Moore does not know how his hands came to exist. Furthermore, he cannot give any evidence for that purported knowledge-claim. This is because on Wittgenstein’s view that the fact of the existence of my hands is not something about which I could be wrong (assuming I am not physically or psychologically impaired).
Wittgenstein believes there is something about the way a person goes about acting in the world with their hands that presupposes a certainty more fundamental than epistemic knowledge (i.e. knowledge that is gained by reasoning from evidence). It is also the case that this certainty is “immune to questioning, doubting and testing”; it is also beyond “verification . . . (by) appeal to evidence, grounds or reasons” (Pleasants 2009, 670). As I pointed out in previous examples, we are never aware of these certainties, these hinges, until they are expressed in an empirical proposition. In other words, hinges (certainties) are made evident by pointing out their existence (through language in the form of a proposition) with respect to the practices in which they are manifested.

Our day-to-day epistemic practices are based on non-epistemic certainty about particular states in the world. For example, before I sit down I am certain that the chair I am going to sit on will hold my weight and not collapse and send me tumbling to the ground. If I doubt this, it is because the chair has some obvious characteristic (such as a broken leg) that causes me to question whether it will hold my weight. However, every time I prepare to sit on a new chair I do not turn it upside down to check the structural integrity of that particular chair.

The empirical certainty about a chair’s capacity to support comes from a hinge belief that (unless there is an obvious physical defect) a chair will hold my weight. Of course if I weighed 300 lbs. I might have different criteria for choosing the chairs I sit on (based on the repetitive experiences of sitting) than if I only weighted 150
lbs. However, the role of basic empirical certainty, which is evident in our practice of sitting on chairs, remains unchanged.

Nigel Pleasants points out that most of Wittgenstein’s discussions about hinges in *On Certainty* focuses on basic certainty in the context of empirical certainty. He proposes to expand Wittgenstein’s ideas to include his (Pleasant’s) notion of “basic moral certainty.” By this he means, “… this kind of certainty occupies a similar foundational position in our moral practices and judgments to that of basic empirical certainty in our epistemic practices and judgments” (Pleasants 2009, 671). The example he gives of a basic moral certainty is the ‘wrongness of killing,’ which he suggests is connected to another basic moral certainty, which is the ‘badness of death.’

Pleasants contends, “We cannot sensibly affirm or prove that death is bad and killing wrong because there is no evidence, reasons, or grounds to justify any claim that they are so” (Pleasants 2009, 677). He goes on to say, “We have no evidence, reasons, or grounds for regarding death as bad and killing as wrong, just as we have no evidence, reasons, or grounds for acting in ways that presuppose that we believe our hands will not fall off in use …” (Ibid.).

The implications of this idea about the non-epistemic or non-experiential nature of basic certainty are evident when Wittgenstein illuminates the connection to his concept of a language-game. The concept of the language-game is a central idea in Wittgenstein’s thoughts because it captures the idea of the *use* of language in our acting in the world. In other words the way we go about living in the world is
understood in the context of the language-game in which we are participating. In On Certainty Wittgenstein says “You must bear in mind that the language-game . . . is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there –like our life” (Wittgenstein 1969, 559)

In an earlier passage he had said, when discussing the truth or falsity of a proposition, “… the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game” (Wittgenstein 1969, 204) Again we see Wittgenstein making the connection between our acting in the world and the hinges or certainties that are the non-epistemic, non-rational grounds for those actions. Our empirical actions are understood as being influenced by non-epistemic and non-experiential, i.e. a priori, factors in the context of a language-game.

Pleasants gives as examples of his basic moral certainties the ‘wrongness of killing’ and the ‘badness of death.’ He also makes clear the distinction between those ideas as ethical propositions and as expressions of basic moral certainty. He says that “Statements taking the form: Death is bad because . . . or Killing is wrong because . . . may look like ethical propositions, but . . . rather are expressions of basic moral certainty” (Pleasants 2009, 675). He goes on to explain that in the same sense that we have no evidence to explain our belief that our hands will not fall off if we use them, we have no evidence supposing death is bad and killing wrong (Pleasants 2009, 677).
This discussion summarizes Pleasant’s test of basic certainties and in this specific case, basic moral certainties, i.e. that they are, like hinges immune from doubt if we are to act and live in the world. This is the case when we apply this test to sitting down on a chair or using our hands to accomplish a task, (basic empirical certainties) or acting in a way that shows a belief that killing is wrong (basic moral certainty). In the case of moral certainties however, Pleasants proposes that there is a distinction between believing that killing is wrong and the storyline created to justify killing another human. That storyline could apply to killing as the outcome of acts of self-defense, acts of war, or even acts inhering in religious rituals.

The same applies to the badness of death, which would seem to be an obvious and widely held belief but is subject to frequent exceptions when contextualized in different scenarios. For example, the badness of death is not so obvious in the case where death is the final relief from a long and painful illness or when conversely one believes that physical death is the first step toward an idyllic afterlife.

Ultimately Pleasants makes the case that these basic moral certainties (wrongness of killing, badness of death) are necessary beliefs in that they serve as the hinges or foundation for the investigation of ethical practices. “... basic moral certainty on the badness of death and wrongness of killing functions as the ‘hinge’ on which inquiry into the rightness or permissibility of particular acts, practices, institutions involving death and killing ... turns” (Pleasants 2009, 679).

Even though these basic moral certainties (at an individual level) may seem at times to be at odds with empirical practices (at a group level), they are none-the-
less still foundational to framing our ethical choices. Think of the actions by the guards in the Nazi death camps, which was rationalized behavior at a group level while individual Germans could (and did) believe that killing (in general) was wrong. According to Pleasants the ethical issue in this example of mass killing of one group of people by another could only be completely investigated in the context of understanding the moral judgments involved.

In order to understand these moral judgments an investigation must first account for an individual’s foundational belief in the wrongness of killing. It must then contrast that belief with the rationalized narrative that defends the group’s actions, which obviously did not reflect a belief in the wrongness of killing (Pleasants 2009, 679). This is an example of behavior that is at odds with what appears to be a non-contingent universal moral principle, the wrongness of killing. Instead, the wrongness of killing turns out to be a contingent universal moral principle. Killing it seems is not always wrong.

From this discussion we see that even moral principles that appear to be non-contingent universals, such as the wrongness of killing and the badness of death, are in practice contingent and subject to contextualization. Contextualization a priori, sets the bounds of possible moral choices. With this in mind we next turn to an examination of the relationship between moral hinges and supererogatory acts. It is my contention that all moral acts are grounded in moral hinges. Supererogatory acts, as the ultimate manifestation of a voluntary moral practice, are a particularly instructive case for us to examine. I begin by defining supererogatory acts.
Supererogatory acts are those that are good to do but not (strictly) required by any legal code or religious authority. They are praiseworthy if done, but not obligatory in the sense that one is condemned or punished for not doing them. In some circumstance however, one may be despised for failing to carry out a supererogatory act, for example cowardice in not helping in a rescue attempt even when not required to do so. In J.O. Urmson’s article Saints and Heroes, he defines these acts as those that are good to do but not bad not to do (Urmson 1958, 198-199).

Supererogatory acts have the following characteristics. First, they are voluntary; the person performing the act has the discretion to go beyond duty, i.e. beyond what is required by their position in the local society, their roles in local institutions and so on. They cannot be under any external constraints in their actions such as obedience to the written law, or to the internal demands of reason, i.e. Kantian moral law. Second, the merit of the act is independent of the praise assigned to the person who performed the act. Praise is an assessment of the quality of the way a person dealt with the situation she faced. Merit on the other hand is an assessment of the quality of the act itself. The third characterization of supererogatory acts is that the value of the act comes from the fact that it lies beyond the limits of duty as these are currently conceived for the relevant context. Since this act is not required, its omission does not call for a personal exemption or an excuse.
These supererogatory acts are beyond any impersonal or egalitarian notion of duty; instead they call for privileging individual relationships between persons. These relations create an imperative that is in opposition to the myriad reasons (including non-moral reasons such as causing physical harm or financial loss to the actant) not to act, and therein lies the special moral value of supererogatory acts. They are acts that are done from ideals of self-imposed morality not from principles of law or in accordance with justice.

It is my contention that supererogatory acts are grounded in moral hinges. Hinges, as I have presented them throughout this study are characterized as synthetic and a priori. Furthermore, their origins in a culture are neither conceptual nor experiential. Instead they are tacit beliefs that are usually not formulated explicitly. Additionally, they are a fortiori not tested empirically but are manifested in everyday practices. Those practices are acts performed in a manner that is in accordance with some particular local moral order. Furthermore, hinge propositions are the discursive doppelgangers of hinge practices and are the wherewithal for empirical defenses of those practices should they come into question.

Hinge practices are not just grounded in local customs; they are the grounds of actions that define a local moral order. They are not derived from reasoning about the moral or prudential character of a potential activity. Instead they are simply the things (practices) we do if we are to live easily in a particular form of life without attracting criticism for what we do. It is the actions by which we perform morally worthy, unworthy or indifferent acts inhering in these hinge practices that come
first, even before the *concepts* in characterizing our behavior in a given venue or activity. In other words, we act before we think about or conceptualize what we are doing as we go about living in the world.

Wittgenstein supports this assertion and the implication that it leads to an inversion of conventional wisdom in Western culture (Wittgenstein 1975, 402). With Wittgenstein we now imagine that the *act* is before the *logos* and it is in the act itself that we find the ground of moral practices, not in the words or proposition that describes it or even enjoin it. This is the fundamental difference between a moral hinge (in practice) and its doppelganger, the hinge proposition (in words). Throughout this study hinges are taken to be unattended matters of fact that function like a priori principles in covertly shaping human practices. Some of these practices are indeed moral, in particular the claiming of rights and the acceptance of duties on the part of the actants. A moral hinge is one that is realized in a hinge practice characterized as moral. How that hinge is manifested in action or practice determines whether or not it is moral.

Supererogatory actions are grounded in moral hinges and as such are in tension with the deliberate and thoughtful reasons one might have to do other than act in that way. Those reasons are not necessarily moral. A case in point would be when someone did not perform an act simply because it might cost them money. Supererogatory acts can for the most part be considered as ways of fulfilling duties. Their dutiful character depends on the position of an individual in their local community. Imagine if the firefighters in a small town happened upon a house fire
when their crew was off duty, they would still be expected, because of their position in the local community as firefighters, to rush into the burning house to try to save the occupants. They would not pause to reflect on whether their duty extended beyond normal working hours, but instead they would act because acting in that way is a hinge practice for them if they are to live in that community as firefighters. On the other hand if a group of local tax accountants happened by the burning house they would be celebrated as heroes if they exhibited supererogatory behavior, and ran into the burning building to save a young child.

There might at first appear to be behaviors that seem universally (non-contingent) good to do and not bad not to do, i.e. those that are considered ‘above and beyond’ the behavior expected of most people. However, we see from this brief example that the local contextualization of an act leads to different interpretations of what constitutes supererogatory behavior. Those different interpretations do not fall under any clearly defined criteria. They are not context independent nor are they manifestations of non-contingent universal rules of behavior, i.e. what is always good to do under all circumstances and what is not bad not to do under all circumstances. In fact as suggested earlier, a person could even be despised in the local community for not helping out with a supererogatory act such as rescuing a child from a burning house even if it meant doing so at great personal risk to the rescuer. This discussion highlights the myriad possibilities of interpretation of a given act and should give us pause about the viability of uncovering universals in general and universal moral principles in particular.
I would contend that there are no strictly universal moral hinges. There are instead local customs that influence the moral hinges assimilated into the way of life of that local moral order. Since supererogatory acts are grounded in moral hinges those acts are subject to interpretation (and characterization) by local criteria. Within a local moral order there are universal moral hinges only in the sense that they comport universally with local customs. In that sense there can be universal moral hinges but they are only relevant within the particular local moral order in which they are practiced.

Hinges function like a priori principles in shaping human practices. Since some of those practices are moral, they would involve the claiming of rights and duties associated with the person(s) performing those acts. In the example of the firefighters we saw a case where in the act of rushing into the burning house they displayed their tacit acceptance of their duty in the community as firefighters. Their duty did not however include sacrificing their own lives, although that may be an unintended but foreseeable possibility as a result of their actions. Their duty was to try to save the occupants and put out the fire. The characterization of their action as supererogatory is clearly context and viewpoint dependent and based on the positioning (in the community) of the persons who performed the act. The act itself, saving the occupants of the house and putting out the fire can be evaluated independent of context and viewpoint, based on empirical data, i.e. did the occupants survive, and did the firefighters put out the fire.
There is another aspect of supererogatory acts that merits our attention and that is the characterization as heroic. I would suggest that all supererogatory acts are heroic but not all heroic acts are supererogatory. A heroic act is one that can either be considered as a supererogatory act from a freely accepted duty or as an act from an ordained, i.e. not freely accepted duty. In order to be heroic an act originates in an individual; it is an expression of an individual's autonomous choice. Some heroic acts, considered as supererogatory acts, are not strictly necessary and as such the absence of such acts from the biography of a person is not a cause for criticism or censure. It may even be inappropriate to call any act done as the fulfillment of an ordained duty as heroic.

A heroic act, to be considered as such, changes as the horizon, i.e. the ascription and assumption of one's duty changes. For example, we can imagine a case where ‘doing one's duty’ could conceivably bring benefits to an actor, whereas performing a heroic act outside the range of ordained duties not infrequently could and in many cases does destroy the hero. Think of Captain Oates going out into a fierce blizzard (and certain death) from the relative shelter of the group's tent during Robert Scott's ill-fated expedition to the South Pole in 1912.

The final part of this paper explores the relation between universal and local hinges in order to further illuminate the relationship between supererogatory acts and their grounding in moral hinges. I borrow the definitions from Daniele Moyal-Sharrock's concept of universal and local hinges. She defines local hinges as constituting “… the underlying framework of knowledge of some human beings at a
given time. They are culture-variant and many of them seem to be the product of empirical observation . . . ” (Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 136). On her view hinges are never justified by facts and therefore cannot be falsified by any fact (Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 143). I would suggest, however, that they could be justifiable or falsifiable if expressed as explicit, doppelganger propositions.

As opposed to local hinges, universal hinges are those hinges that we must believe in if we are to make sense of the world in which we live. For example, the hinge belief that there is an external world that exists beyond me as an individual is one such universal hinge (Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 149). If we did not believe in that hinge we would not be able to think of ourselves as anything other than a brain in a vat. Similarly, if we did not believe that some actions are praiseworthy for whatever local reason and others are not, there would be no moral life. As Gilbert Ryle once quipped, one cannot imagine someone forgetting the difference between right and wrong (Ryle 1971, 381).

The distinction between universal and local hinges is important because it clarifies the different types of moral hinges and provides contexts for their characterization as the grounds of supererogatory acts. Human behavior is not wholly determined by a priori ideas or categories although they certainly shape it; rather it arises from actions taken by individuals that are grounded in non-rational, i.e. not from reasoning, hinges. Those acts occur before we think or reason about our behavior.
A universal hinge would be, for example, one that expresses the belief that there are autonomous and sentient beings living on the planet earth. This universal hinge influences our behavior towards other persons because it leads to our taking them as autonomous, meaning that they have and exercise free choice as sentient beings. We do not ask for proofs of a hinge were it to be formulated explicitly. The universal hinge defines a worldview more than it influences the immediate behavior of individual human beings. On the other hand the local hinge that attributes to dogs a status as special animals that should be treated like humans has an immediate influence on cultural behavior. This dog hinge is firmly grounded in Western culture whereas in many Eastern cultures dogs are seen as both an unclean nuisance and as a source of food, not as human-like companions.

The hinge belief in Western culture about dogs could indeed be the grounds for the supererogatory act of saving a dog that fell through the thin ice of a frozen pond and was unable to swim to shore. This act is doubly grounded in a moral hinge because it is person-preserving since acting in this way defines that individual’s (the one performing the supererogatory act) sense of personhood and it reflects the widespread anthropomorphism with which we treat our dogs. Both the strong (human) and the weak (anthropomorphic) sense of personhood is understood in the context of the universal hinge that there are other sentient beings external to and independent of the individual. At the same time it accounts for our taking dogs to be sentient beings. Hinges then are not true or false in the context in which they are
grounded. They are simply grounded in the local community of moral beings whose actions they influence.

In order to appreciate the power of contexts of action in shaping and limiting moral choice I presented hinges as the foundational grounding of moral actions. This in-depth examination of hinges served to deepen our understanding of the role of context in moral life. At the same time I explained how the concept of duty comes to play a central role in moral choice. The origins of a person’s sense of duty can be traced to the historical and cultural situation in which they live. Moral hinges, which are exemplified in day-to-day practices and supererogatory actions, manifest the a priori context that shapes those moral choices.
CONCLUSION

This thesis focused on issues in moral philosophy. In the course of my examination of the power of contexts of action in limiting and shaping moral choices, I drew on foundational texts in philosophy from Aristotle to Kant to Wittgenstein. Also included in my research were excursions in moral thinking in the fields of cultural anthropology and social psychology. My study was designed to be an interdisciplinary approach to examining the role of context, in its most inclusive sense, in determining the range of a person’s moral choices.

The focus of my work was in the realm of moral philosophy, which as discussed in this thesis considered three areas of study. The first area was metaethics where I presented the relationship between relativism and objectivism. I defined relativism as the actions or behaviors that are considered acceptable or unacceptable when considered in the contexts of action of a particular local moral order. Relativism is also aligned with the concept I introduced of a contingent universal principle. In this case the acceptability of actions as morally permissible is contingent upon the context in which they are conceived and in which they are done.

I defined objectivism as the behavior or actions that might be considered to be always right or always wrong in any situation and in any culture or society. Objectivism is aligned with the concept of non-contingent universal principles. In this case those actions that are acceptable or morally permissible are universal, applicable across all cultures and in all timeframes. They are not contingent upon
local norms or context. These fundamental distinctions between relativism and objectivism and ultimately the synergistic relationship between the two are central in this study. Furthermore, this relationship is the framework that provides the overall context in which my study was done and falls within the field of moral philosophy in the subject area of metaethics.

In addition to metaethics there is another field of ethical investigation that is part of what we consider moral philosophy and that is normative ethics. Normative ethics is concerned with rules that serve as a litmus test for discerning appropriate or permissible behavior. It is in the field of normative ethics that I have examined the distinction between a rights-based theory of ethics and a duty-based theory of ethics. A rights-based ethic is one in which people believe that there are rights owed to them as individuals that take precedence over any obligation or duty to others. A duty-based ethic, on the other hand, is one in which people believe that there are duties that they owe to the collective that will take precedence over individual rights.

In this thesis I have argued for a view that highlights and incorporates the power of contexts of action in order to illuminate the possibilities for limiting and shaping moral choices. Contexts of all kinds, historical, cultural, political, religious, etc., are what shape the moral choices available to us as we live our lives. The context in which I presented my discussion of moral principles and values was framed by considering the local moral order to which a person belongs. These contexts are therefore best understood by examining the community in which one
lives. My examination of contexts and their influence on moral choice was informed by an interdisciplinary approach that drew from the fields of Philosophy, Social Psychology and Cultural Anthropology.

Throughout this thesis I also investigated the role of human reason in framing moral choices. In the end I advocated for the decidedly Aristotelian view that we understand living a moral life as realizing the mean between the extremes of the values and informed by practical, not theoretical reason. This mean was not the geometric center between two opposing values, but rather it was a position sympathetic with the concept of the Aristotelian mean. It was a balance point between the universal and the particular and reflected the context in which those positions related to day-to-day practices in a culture.

The central focus around which my argument was built is the characterization of moral acts as being grounded in moral hinges. In this study I examined how moral acts come to be grounded in moral hinges, specifically how supererogatory acts as examples of moral acts are grounded in moral hinges. I also looked at the possibility of the existence of a moral principle(s) as a non-contingent universal, i.e. not dependent on context for meaning. However, I concluded that moral principles were universal only in a limited or local context. That universality extended to those that chose to live in a particular group.

I also argued throughout this thesis for a more appropriate characterization of the power of contexts; a characterization that included the idea of contingent moral principles, i.e. principles whose moral value was understood as context dependent.
vice context independent. Supererogatory acts were presented as examples of contingent moral actions, whose characterization as supererogatory was dependent on their interpretation in a local context. This characterization was informed by practical knowledge, i.e. by interpreting a moral decision in the context of prior experiential practices and actions.

Aristotle’s notion of the *mean* between the extremes of moral values is a particularly strong endorsement of the contingent nature of moral choice. I also presented the philosophy of Immanuel Kant in order to highlight the categorical imperative as an example of a non-contingent universal. The fundamental limitation of the categorical imperative is its basis in the assumption about the enduring power of man’s reason. Along with this assumption about reason’s potential and pervasive influence on human behavior is a tacit belief in the existence of a universal rationality. I argued against a singular universal rationality using both empirical data and historical examples. Instead I presented a concept of rationality that was informed by the context of accepted practices in the local moral order in which a particular individual lived. From Kant’s philosophy, however, I did borrow his concept of a synthetic a priori proposition and portrayed the doppelganger formulations of Wittgenstein’s hinges as an example of such a proposition.

Continuing with the theme of understanding moral choices, I presented Wittgenstein’s ethical journey from the *Tractatus* to *On Certainty*. His journey culminated with his concept of hinges as non-experiential, non-epistemic beliefs manifested in the moral practices and actions that exemplify moral choices. I argued
that hinges were the grounds of moral acts and those grounds developed symbiotically from the decisions made by a person to live and accept the practices inherent in a given society or culture. Hinges inform our actions and do so outside the influence of deliberate reasoning. They are simply manifested in the way we act and the practices we undertake in order to live and flourish in a particular group. Importantly, those practices and acts deemed by one culture to be rational behavior can at the same time be viewed by another culture as irrational behavior.

In the beginning of this thesis I proposed to examine the seeming dichotomies that shape moral choices. That theme continues throughout as I argued in all cases for a *mean* between the positions. As I dug deeper into the tension between these disparate positions I explored the concept of Cultural Relativism from anthropology and the concept of Positioning Theory from social psychology. I presented case studies to illuminate the power of contexts, exemplified in these concepts, in establishing the range of possible moral choices.

Finally, I presented supererogatory acts; those acts that are above and beyond duty as a framework for examining the general concept of duty in moral decisions. Duty, as something an individual feels she owes to the greater community is central to interpreting what constitutes a supererogatory act in a local moral order. On the other hand, rights, what an individual thinks is owed to them by the community, must be balanced against duty in order for the morality of any culture to be considered adequate by its participants.
In the end I would argue that Wittgenstein's hinges as synthetic a priori beliefs (by definition non-epistemic and non-experiential) are manifested in moral practices based on duty. This is because individuals wanting to live in a particular local order in a particular way adopt those hinges as a way of life. A local moral order in the form of a community could not sustain itself if it was strictly rights based. This is because, in order for members of the community to have certain rights, there must be others that tacitly or otherwise allow those rights to supersede a previously agreed upon duty.

Without a sense of ‘doing one’s duty’ there could not be a coherent and viable moral order. It is duty that comes first and it is duty on which any adequate moral philosophy must be based. Understanding the foundation on which our sense of duty is based and how the power of contexts of action shape and limit the moral choices available to us was indeed the focus of this thesis.
REFERENCE LIST


