2005

Problem of reductionism in morality

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THE PROBLEM OF REDUCTIONISM IN MORALITY

by

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B.A. Wheaton College, IL, 1998

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

May 2005

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Morality looms large in our lives. We all note its gravity and can explain some conception, however vague, of its tenets. Morality represents those aspects of our lives we consider most meaningful. For all this importance, however, morality has no heteronomous force over us. Unlike physical forces, such as gravity, to which we must acquiesce, in accord with our wills or against them, morality cannot make us act in any certain way. Unlike arguments of science, backed by mathematical formulas and experimental proofs, morality can only persuade us to adhere to its claims to the extent we are willing to listen and be persuaded.

This tenuous mix of gravity and seeming powerlessness has encouraged many thinkers to argue for some conception of a secure foundation for morality. Two of these thinkers, offering two very different approaches, are Immanuel Kant and Martha Nussbaum. Kant seeks to ground morality in the objective and unchanging a priori foundation of reason. Nussbaum redirects the moral moment to the concrete and tangible lived particulars of our actual lives. Each, however, focuses on too narrow a foundation, thus failing to provide moral guidance that accurately reflects both the gravity and richness we associate with the moral life. Kant and Nussbaum commit the errors of rational reductionism and empirical reductionism, respectively.

In contrast to the moral methods of Kant and Nussbaum, centered coherence provides a foundation for morality that does not suffer from the same critique of reductionism. Instead, it describes the necessary and sufficient conditions for moral guidance and reflects the gravity and the meaning we recognize in morality.
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1. Introduction: The Force of Morality

Bernard Williams opens his book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* with a question posed by Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*: How should one live? It is not a light question.

Socrates thought it of the utmost importance, and his dialogues continually probe for clues to the answers. Each of his encounters narrows the range of possible suggestions. The answers proposed by philosophers since Socrates reflect the weight Socrates associated with the question. These answers are heavy, often struggling, and too often freighted with the metaphysical and epistemological baggage of philosophical argument. As the title of his book suggests, Williams concludes that philosophy cannot fully address Socrates’ question in a way that meets the standards it has set for itself.

Yet, philosophy has never been able to cease addressing and debating the question. Each major philosophical school has paid and pays tribute to morality, even if only to argue against the possibility of any such system. Following Plato, Aristotle wrote the comprehensive and scientific *Ethics*. Aquinas’s theological metaphysics, Hume’s skepticism, Kant’s critical method, and Nietzsche’s indictment of religious pessimism, to name a few, all provide examinations of morality. In the twentieth century, positivism sought to excise intangibles from what we consider meaningful. Even the poststructuralists, after deconstructing every foundation for hegemonic thinking, attempt to argue for moral positions, although, ironically, their deconstruction attempts can be attributed to preconceived moral notions. More recently, moral philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum have sought a different approach. Agreeing with Williams that philosophy cannot fully answer Socrates’ question, she rejects the traditional methods of
philosophical discourse as insufficient for addressing moral concerns in favor of the rich
and descriptive medium of fiction.

It is an interesting question why the intellectual and cultural history of the west
places great importance on morality. Why if, as Williams and many other philosophers
conclude, explanations and defenses of morality are not fully compatible with
philosophical argument, does it still receive so much attention by philosophers and even
more attention by society?

At the institutional level, moral language is evident in every context. It is nearly
impossible to listen to a politician speak without hearing words such as “values” and
“integrity.” Businesses convene ethics committees and task forces. Non-profits in every
town strive to fill in the gaps to create a “better” society, however their mission
statements define this, and philanthropic foundations gladly keep them funded. These
foundations have no technical or legal obligation to give out massive quantities of their
money, yet they choose to toil over thousands of grant applications to fund an incredibly
wide range of non-profit activity instead of accumulating wealth for personal use.

At the individual level, people seek moral guidance from syndicated columnists
such as Randy Cohen of the New York Times Magazine or Abigail Van Buren (now
succeeded by her daughter). People seek moral advice from religious and non-religious
sources, such as churches and self-help retreats. Books tell people how to handle every
aspect of their lives, such as how to responsibly spend and invest their money (with a
myriad of authors offering an equal number of definitions of “responsible”), how to
respect their partners, and how to instill values in their children. Everywhere we look,
there is some form of discussion about morality. Evidently, as Williams also claims, the insufficiency of philosophy to fully address morality is not the final word on the subject.

We must ask why morality has such a hold on people, both scholars and non-scholars. If philosophy cannot offer a sufficient account for morality, why is it so beholden to it? Perhaps more importantly, what is the place of morality in human life that it represents the primary area of overlapping interest between the academic and non-academic worlds? It would be nothing short of hyperbole to say that the general public has any interest in the majority of topics discussed among philosophers. Factual anecdotes about quantum mechanics or a general discussion of skepticism and security of knowledge might provide interesting dinner party conversation, but to probe either at a deeper level, such as a presentation of material from original sources on the subject, would quickly erode interest.

A discussion of morality, however, whether in the form of political theories, economic disparities, or justifications for individual actions receives a very different response. People engage in discussions about priorities for the government's allocation of money. Unlike other philosophical topics, detailed arguments for whether the income tax should be flat or graduated, or whether economic growth should occur from the top down via tax breaks or from the bottom up via direct social funding, maintain public interest. A subject such as the death penalty rarely keeps a conversation neutral and uncharged, and the details of arguments underlying various positions in this debate serve to increase, not decrease, the intensity of interest and, perhaps, tension. Even among people holding identical beliefs on the subject, a discussion of agreement about the death penalty, including detailed arguments for either side, will raise hackles.
The emphasis we place on morality is reflected in the weight we attach to decisions we would consider moral. We all recognize the difference between situations and decisions we think contain moral content and those we think do not, and while most people may struggle if asked to articulate the difference, this difficulty is one of articulation and does not reflect their inability to note that a difference exists. I want to be careful not to enforce a dichotomy that separates moral from non-moral, holding instead that the distinction reflects endpoints on a continuum that, as Socrates’ question suggests, recognizes the applicability of value judgments across the whole of our lives. For here, however, the language of dichotomy is useful for demonstrating a recognition of moral content in our lives. Thus, while the trained scholar may have a greater awareness of presuppositions containing moral content that underlie decisions that may not be obviously fraught with moral content, it is the case that people distinguish between decisions they consider moral and those they think are not, and they are able to recognize morality in their lives. Again, whether the validity of this distinction holds up to philosophic scrutiny is a different subject.

A key aspect of the difference between decisions considered to have moral content and those that do not is the nature of the reasons we give for the decisions. If we bought a new car and someone asked why we chose a certain car color over another, we would shrug our shoulders and respond that we simply like it. Perhaps it has been a favorite color since childhood, or maybe it is the color most displayed in all the showrooms and magazines. The answer, however, would not draw on principle or deep-seated argument.
If asked why we purchased a certain model over another, however, a wider range of answers is possible. Cars can be status symbols, and the choice of one over another reflects awareness of this. However, cars are, primarily, functional possessions; we use them, and we often use them quite hard. The choice of car model, then, also reflects the vehicle’s ability to meet our predetermined needs. Weekend summertime visits to the lake house require a vehicle with sufficient capacity to carry the whole family, the kids’ friends, everybody’s possessions, and food for the weekend. Perhaps the vehicle also needs to pull a boat trailer. In contrast, a daily commute to work and occasional trips to the grocery store fit a very different car.

In these examples, we see the introduction of moral content. It would be difficult to argue that the person purchasing a car for status reasons does so for moral reasons, though moral issues may be involved. In contrast, the person who can afford a status car but chooses something of a different character may be acting from the belief that humility is a virtue, thus deliberately avoiding the ostentatious status car. If we were to ask these two people why they chose the cars they did, we would find that the nature of the answers is very different. While it may be the case that the first person’s occupation requires a certain façade in order to deal effectively with prestigious clients or donors, in truth, very few people can make such a justification for purchasing a status car. Given the generally high reliability of new cars today, it is a safe assumption that status cars are purchased for status reasons. If we asked the second person why he or she purchased a particular car that is not a status car, we might receive an enlightening reason, such as that it was a Consumer Digest recommendation. If, however, and perhaps more importantly, we asked this person why he or she did not purchase the status car, we will most likely
receive a principled reason. In other words, unlike the person who purchased the status
car for status reasons, this second person could, if pressed, offer a defendable, principled
reason for the choice to purchase a particular car and not the status car.

The point of these examples is to show that a characteristic difference between
decisions considered to have moral content and those that do not lies in the gravity we
perceive in the decision. We attribute a certain significance to those decisions considered
to have moral content, and one way to identify this perceived significance is to note the
reasons we give for making particular decisions. We do not consider our moral decisions
to be based on arbitrary reasons. We do not think our motives as insignificant or
negotiable. Rather, when making a decision we would generally categorize as moral, we
think of our decision as having arisen from some reasoning, or, if the decision has been
made with minimal reasoning, we could, if pressed, offer some justification for our
decision.

While we may cite spontaneity or whim, even arbitrary personal preference, as the
reason for choosing to act in certain ways and not others, such as whether to buy the
midnight blue or arctic teal car, we do not think of these light motives as prompts for the
choices we would customarily describe as having moral content. However, it is
important to note here that these “lighter” decisions are also laden with moral content.
That we do not or cannot defend them reflects our inability to recognize the presence of
morality in these decisions rather than their lack of moral content. Decisions of whim,
then, are not amoral; they simply reside in a realm of decisions we do not customarily
think of as moral. We do not attribute gravity or significance to them in the same way we
do to decisions we understand to contain moral content. In the situation above, then, each
of the decisions is laden with moral content. However, only the reasons given by the person who did not purchase the status car reflect the gravity we associate with our moral decisions.

Again, this discussion gives rise to the already-mentioned dichotomy. Apparently, we sometimes act outside the realm of moral content, and at times our actions are laden with moral content. An important side effect of this distinction between decisions we consider to have moral content and those we think do not is that it creates an artificial boundary in our lives. The fact that most people can distinguish between the two decision types, being able to justify and defend certain decisions while remaining indifferent about others, gives rise to the notion that our moral life is compartmented and separated from normal, daily living. Now I am making a moral decision; now I am not. We, of course, do not always think this with each action, but, if pressed, most people would make the distinction.

Modern moral philosophy has encouraged such thinking. Keeping with the modern era's attempts at epistemological certainty, its two most influential moral thinkers, Kant and Mill, provide comprehensive systems for determining whether actions are moral. Kant's categorical imperative allows one to place an action into a formula like a variable, and then calculate whether it is moral or immoral. In doing so, he encourages the thinking that separates our lives into moral (moral vs. immoral) and non-moral. Although Mill's system and versions of utilitarianism that have followed allow for greater spontaneity when acting, they nonetheless deepen the lines of thought distinguishing moral from non-moral action. In either case, they further cement the appearance of compartmentalization by making the moment of determination a timeless
abstraction from daily life. To determine whether an action is moral or immoral requires
a pause, the completion of a formula, and then a return to normal living.

Socrates’ question, however, does not imply any such distinction. He simply
asks, How should one live? In doing so, he suggests a different approach, one less
compartmentalized, where life itself and the moral realm are synonymous. His question
encourages us to consider life as a whole, where living well is not an option for certain
times and certain places, but is a mode of living in which we can participate daily. In this
sense, individual acts can be moral or immoral, but their moral significance is not limited
to their inclusion in the moral non-moral divide. Rather, acts take their moral
significance from their place in the organic whole of a life. Socrates’ question prompts
us to apply the same weight we attach to moral decisions and place it on our daily living.

Regardless of how we understand the place of morality in our lives, whether
limited to certain realms or manifest comprehensively across our lives, we continue to
attach greater significance to those actions and decisions we consider to contain moral
content. Why do we take moral decisions so seriously? What is it about them that
prompts us to set them apart from other decisions, to give them a special place of weighty
consideration in our lives?

One aspect of moral decisions that sets them apart from others is that moral
decisions are decisions we can defend. In situations we might consider to be without
moral content, our reasons for making the particular decision we did do not have great
import to us. We could easily shrug off criticism for the decision because it was one we
do not think of as having arisen from deeply held convictions. Again, this does not
relegate the decision to whim; rather it notes a distinction between decisions deliberately
and conscientiously made from reasons we can, and would, defend from those where a request for justification would seem odd. If pressed, we could offer reasons for the decision, and we could back those reasons with others. Ultimately, we could defend the decision down to some underlying, fundamental principle we hold in our lives.

This understanding of morality as defendable arises in part from the western intellectual tradition's emphasis on rational agency. Presupposed in Socrates' question, How should one live? is the understanding that we have the ability to act in different ways and to conscientiously choose between reasons for acting in different ways. Presumably, this choice is also a rational one, and, by posing the question, Socrates' suggests that the answer to the question is capable of being better decided, understood, and explained through rational examination.

As rational beings, we are not slaves in our daily life to passion, desire, and need. Rather, we can will in a way that includes principles and reasons. We can also choose to act in accord with, or contrary to, our reasoning. Moral decisions, then, which, as defendable, are decisions based on principle although we may not normally articulate the underlying principle or principles, coincide with a fundamental aspect of who we are as humans. We are rational, and we possess the agency to rationally decide how to act. Arguably, this aspect of moral decisions distinguishes them from other decisions we make that, although they are conscious decisions of ours and not coerced or mere response to stimuli, do not arise from deeper underlying reasons. We base rational decisions on defendable, though perhaps slight or superficial, reasons, and, as decisions we can and do defend with rational argument, moral decisions manifest a fundamental aspect of our humanity.
Kant offers us a connection, by use of the will, between rationality and morality. In *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he develops this connection by first establishing the good will as the only thing that could be called good without qualification, contrasting it with all other traits and qualities that are, ultimately, corruptible. Gifts of character, such as intelligence, courage, and perseverance, and gifts of fortune, such as riches, power, and health, may have many good applications and manifestations, yet none of these can be called good in itself. Rather, each can cause harm if directed by a will that is not thoroughly good. Unlike these gifts of character and fortune, the good will is not good "because of what it effects or accomplishes or because of its competence to achieve some intended end; it is good only because of its willing (i.e., it is good in itself). . . . Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither diminish or augment this worth."²

The perfectly good will, however, is rare at best. Our desires and inclinations prompt us in directions other than those of a good will, and morality is therefore a burden for us. Kant addresses this burdensomeness by naming reason's "highest practical vocation" and "proper function" as producing a will "good in itself and not one good merely as a means."³ Thus, the connection between morality and rationality resides in the association of reason and the will, and the will and morality. The good will is the proper moral agent; moral actions are those subject to the good will; and it is by reason that our actions accord with those of the perfectly good will.

Further, we defend morality because it also engages those aspects of us traditionally considered non-rational. We sense its presence in the prodding and tugging of our emotions, in decisions we make motivated by love, joy, injustice, or hurt. We, as
humans, are stirred deeply in the presence of beauty, in all its forms and mediums and in its particular cultural manifestation, even though we may not each appreciate all of these varied modes. We hold standards for judging the qualitative depth of this beauty because we want to defend its importance to us. These standards use rational language to explain their judgments, but they are ultimately motivated and upheld by the deeper, intangible feelings we have in the presence of beauty. Likewise, we may appeal to the language of traditional rationality to defend a decision motivated by emotion; however, the decisions themselves arise from aspects of us other than this appeal to rationality. That is, many of our most profound and potent experiences do not fit neatly into the realm of reason and rationality. Yet, few of us would deny the important place of these experiences in defining what it means to be human.

In addition to morality’s relation to our rationality and our emotions, we also place weight on moral decisions because we tend to understand them to reflect aspects of our lives more grave than the seeming minutiae that arise during our individual daily living. One reason for this is that morality often includes overlap between our actions and the lives of other people, necessarily placing the emphasis somewhere other than on us. This expands the focus of our accountability, and thus the gravity of morality. It is important to note here that this accountability is not merely an adherence to social convention or decorum. We disapprove when people act recklessly in a way that threatens harm to others not just because it is socially improper; rather, we do so because we understand harming others to be immoral. Thus, when our moral life overlaps with the lives of other people, we tangibly recognize that morality represents something greater than us. We overtly acknowledge morality’s parameters by willingly limiting our
actions to conformity with those parameters, tacitly admitting that we are acknowledging a greater entity.\textsuperscript{4}

In contrast to the moral gravity experienced in the presence of others, we tend to apply a different standard when judging the morality of the action that appears to affect our own lives only. When alone, it becomes easy to cut corners or to rationalize our behavior. For example, we may allow a blurring of the line between actions that are self-serving for principled reasons and those that are self-serving out of merely selfish desire. Our tendency to allow ourselves to become morally sloppy when alone in a way that we do not when our actions involve other people or are enacted in the presence of other people demonstrates our recognition that morality entails a force of accountability. It also demonstrates that a theory of morality must explain and expand this accountability to apply when we are alone.

Both Aristotle and Kant recognize the need for morality in the context of solo action. Aristotle describes the virtues as the standards for the proper moral life, and, though most of the virtues have a social application, some of the virtues he discusses have application in the absence of other people.\textsuperscript{5} Temperance, for example, is a virtue that applies primarily to actions involving oneself only.\textsuperscript{6} Kant’s three descriptions of the moral law set the moral law in a social context. Yet he is also careful to provide a method for determining the morality of actions to oneself. In \textit{Foundations}, he explains the categorical imperative’s application to actions that involve ourselves only, and he prescribes proper action by explaining that we have a duty to ourselves.\textsuperscript{7}

However, while we may agree with either or both of these two systems, they require some degree of fortitude for their enactment. Unless we exert conscientious self-
discipline, our sense of accountability in regard to the action is diminished. Both Aristotle and Kant give us guides for moral action when we are alone, but these guides are ones we grasp with our minds, leaving them susceptible to our minds' rationalizing of other behaviors. That is, because morality presents no heteronymous force in our lives, it gives us the possibility to act in a way other than what we understand to be the moral action, a possibility that becomes especially accessible when we are alone. The problem with each of these systems, then, is that neither appeals to aspects of our lives broader than our cognitive faculties, and, when we are alone and apart from the gravity of morality realized in the presence of others, morality is subject to our mind's ability to overrule our natural desires.

This reveals the quirk of morality. Morality represents an aspect of our lives that we consider greater than our own personal whims, yet it cannot force us to act a certain way. We associate it with our deepest understanding of our rationality. We emphasize our moral principles, defend the decisions we make from these principles, and take great strides to abide by these principles and decisions. We recognize the relation between morality and our most deeply felt emotions and experiences. We understand morality to represent an aspect of our lives greater than us and willingly subject ourselves to morality as we are able. Yet, for all this weight we give to morality and its place in our lives, we can choose, as evidenced particularly when we are alone, to ignore morality's call and act in a way other than what we understand to be the moral option.

Further, for all the weight and priority morality has in our lives, it is not only unable to force us to act in a certain way, but it can only suggest why this certain way is the right one. We cannot point to a topic or argument, as we might in science, and say,
here, this proves it. We may approximate this verification, but even a solid argument remains dependent on a person’s autonomous acceptance of it. Morality is not backed with the same argumentative force that a scientific claim may have. Scientific knowledge can be proven, secured, verified through fact. More importantly, these means for proof and argument are effective in convincing a skeptic. If someone doubts a scientific claim, evidence can be given to show these doubts to be unfounded. To deny the evidence and argument supporting a scientific claim is to deny one’s rationality.

Morality, however, cannot rest on so secure a foundation. Tests and experiments do not provide it with greater validity, and thus force over us, only with greater argumentative force to convince us to adhere to its claims. A social survey might reveal that an overwhelming majority of people hold the same moral position about a particular issue, or that a majority derive greater happiness from certain activities and not others, but even this evidence does not equal the force of scientific verification. The tendency for many of us to slouch morally when alone is evidence of the difference in force between moral and scientific claims. This does not mean that morality’s force is less potent than that of science; indeed, many people have moral convictions that are as strong as the scientifically verifiable aspects of their lives. Rather, the difference is that people, even those who hold very strong positions on particular moral issues, have the option of choosing to act or not to act in compliance with those convictions, whereas those same people cannot for one second deny the claim gravity has on their lives. In both morality and science, people may deny their rationality and act outside of their understanding of the supporting arguments, but only the latter can expose this irrationality by demanding compliance.
Bernard Williams deems this difference of force a problem for morality, and we can distinguish two modes of this problem. The first, which is beyond the scope of this paper, notes that some people may choose to live apart from the orienting framework of a moral system. For Williams, the possibility of such a skepticism (to be distinguished from one representing a negative morality in opposition to a perceived morality), presents a real threat to proponents of the moral debate. At any time, the moral skeptic can simply opt out. It is important to note that opting out of morality is merely an assertion; no one can live outside of morality, where one’s actions have no moral significance. The second mode, which presents a stronger threat of destabilization, notes that moral arguments may have no force over those who consider themselves within the realm of morality. Here, there are two ways in which this lack of force can be a problem for morality. First, it could be the case that the internalized moralities of people who are not skeptics are fundamentally incompatible. Religious fundamentalism provides many examples, demonstrating that the force one party’s argument has on another is similar to the force of a moral argument on the moral skeptic. Second, at any time, those of us who live within the parameters of a morality can choose to act otherwise than our own convictions, or those with similar convictions, dictate. Thus, although arguments for a moral position, whether directed toward the skeptic or toward those, including ourselves, who adhere to some conception of a defined morality, can carry significant force, this force is suggestive and unlike arguments of science, which can rationally convince or can be empirically demonstrated.

Williams discusses these threats as contributing to the search for moral Archimedean points. As described earlier, moral decisions are ones we defend, and, at
some point, this defense must rest on some foundational principle. If we state a position on a particular moral issue, we also must be able to give a reason for why we hold that position. This reason, however, is also subject to the question Why? and so on. At some point, this must end. Thus, we come to an Archimedean point underlying a moral position or a set of individual moral positions. For example, if we claim that capital punishment is immoral, we will most likely trace this position to an underlying principle describing the dignity of the individual life. The discussion of a related position, that capital punishment for the mentally retarded is immoral, rests instead on the principle that it is unfair to hold all people to the same standard when some are incapable, due to insurmountable circumstances, to meet the expectations of that standard. While this principle has overlap with that of respect for human dignity, it is not the same. In philosophy, we narrow these Archimedean points even further, and Kant grounds human dignity, for example, in the ability for self-legislation that arises from reason.

The reliance on Archimedean points in morality is especially poignant because of morality’s inability to enforce itself. The history of philosophy’s reliance on Archimedean points to support claims about the natural world seldom transferred outside the classroom or the salon. We avoid touching fire whether we live in a cave, are monistic or dualistic entities, have any faith in the reliability of our senses, or understand our last experience with fire as necessarily related to our same unified self. To proponents of morality, however, Archimedean points have to protect morality from the vulnerability it otherwise faces. Further, as the past 500 years of human history has been characterized partly by continued encounters with different worldviews, people’s understandings of morality appear ever more vulnerable and threatened.
This thesis will examine the use of Archimedean points by proponents of two different moral theories. Both Immanuel Kant and Martha Nussbaum seek to ground their approaches in indubitable foundations. Kant claims we are ultimately rational beings, and he grounds morality in reason. Arguments directed toward reason can carry force, because we are all rational and therefore should accord with rational arguments. Martha Nussbaum, in contrast, seeks to avoid the abstraction of Kant's metaphysical claims, and she grounds morality in the tangible details of lived experience. Arguments offered in appeal to our tangible experience in the world, such as appeals to our emotions, can also carry force because we are all subject to these same empirical conditions.

The problem of reductionism in each of these approaches is revealed initially in their incompatibility with one another. Each, in seeking an indubitable foundation for morality, reduces morality to the limitations of that foundation. In grounding our morality in reason, Kant denies the tangibles which Nussbaum champions. In grounding our morality in the tangible contingencies of lived experience, Nussbaum prevents a reliance on the universality and categoricalness provided by reason. Yet, both of these foundations are ones we would associate with being human and ones we would consider important for morality.

What is needed, then, is an approach to morality that can incorporate each of these components. This incorporation does not come without a price. Its inability to be a priori and shielded from contingency would displease Kant, and its appeal to a foundation that resembles a broader, more general system will displease Nussbaum.

This thesis, then, will consist of the following. After a brief discussion of reductionism and its relation to morality, it will present an overview of Kant's moral
system and a critique of this system as rational reductionism. It will then summarize
Nussbaum's position and critique it as empirical reductionism. The last section will
sketch what an alternative position might look like, how we can ground it, and how we
can access it.

2. Reductionism Explained

Successive attempts to secure the certainty of knowledge characterize the history
of modern philosophy. Following the skepticism of the Renaissance, particularly
Montaigne's indictment of knowledge derived from the senses, philosophers have sought
to guarantee the validity of our knowledge about ourselves, our knowledge itself, and the
relation of our knowledge of the world around us to the actuality of what this world may
be.\footnote{Coupled with these attempts are countering explanations that deny the certainty of
these various attempts to secure knowledge.}

Each of these various positions, whether fitting the rationalist or empiricist
strategy in the history of philosophy, shares a common aspect. In arguing its position,
each relies on a foundational, seemingly-irrefutable starting point. In other words, both
the rationalist and empiricist camps are essentially reductionist, attempting to secure
knowledge about the world, specifically the principles of mathematics and physics, by
reducing the statements of these sciences to statements of indubitable first positions.

Descartes' \textit{Meditations on First Philosophy} provides the most notable example of
rationalist reductionism. After intentionally doubting all his senses, thereby disregarding
any knowledge he may have derived from them including the existence of his physical
body, and after attributing all his thoughts to the machinations of an evil genius who
controls all his thoughts, Descartes concludes that he can know with a priori certainty that he exists. If he is so deceived, then he must, at minimum, exist as an unextended entity capable of thinking deceived thought. *Cogito ergo sum.* However, Descartes’ rationalist reductionism creates an unavoidable problem of mind-body dualism that he and the other rationalists never successfully resolve. Leibniz, likewise, thought he could reduce all the statements of a natural science to the statements of logic, thus grounding them within the a priori principle of contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason. He too, did not succeed.

Classical empiricists, such as Locke, make implicit claims that the principles of science reduce to sense-experience sentences; contemporary empiricists, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, for example, make such claims explicitly. Hume provides the most notable example of the reductionism of classical empiricism, denying both the rationalists’ claims to a priori knowledge of self and god, as well as other empiricists’ claims about non-sensory knowledge. He rejects, for example, Locke’s description of our intuitive knowledge of our selves, an assumption crucial to Locke’s empiricism. In contrast, Hume describes an empiricism so severe that it denies even the concept of causality, though the events prompting claims of causality, such as the reactive movements of striking billiard balls, have been demonstrated numerous times. Rather, for Hume, all our knowledge is a posteriori, and he challenges us to try to find some other source for our ideas. Thus, even our most complex ideas, such as God or self, are only aggregate things comprised of other, more simple ideas. Because Hume states that all our ideas come from our impressions and other ideas, it follows that our idea of God as an infinite substance comes only from reflecting on our own ideas, and then augmenting them to
infinity. Writing roughly one hundred years after Descartes, Hume concludes with a skepticism more comprehensive than that of Montaigne.

In each case, rationalism or empiricism, the goal of the reduction is to secure the epistemology underlying claims of science, which is assumed to be dubitable. What is interesting about the concern over the claims of science and knowledge, however, is that, at the end of the discussion, we all continue living as though the claims are indubitable. As Locke notes when rejecting claims that we exist apart from our physical selves, “I think it is beyond question, that man has a clear idea of his own being; he knows certainly he exists, and that he is something.”11 He continues by noting wryly that we can discuss non-existence or the dubiousness of our senses only until we receive an unpleasant sensation. A punch in the nose, for example, quickly reminds us of our existence.

The history of modern philosophy demonstrates that efforts to secure claims about epistemology lead toward reductionism. The effort to establish an indubitable Archimedean point inevitably defines a concentrated, secure locus. Likewise, moral positions, which also seek to establish secure foundations for their claims, tend toward reductionism. However, they differ significantly in that an appeal such as Locke’s to real life and common sense when defending epistemological certainty does not translate completely to a discussion of moral foundations in light of moral skepticism. As described earlier, morality has no irrefutable claims on our lives—or at least none so pragmatically acceptable—like a punch in the nose does. Although we understand morality’s gravity, as evidenced through our compliance with its claims in public, through our desire to comply with its principled statements when alone, and by our
eagerness to defend its principles, we can always opt out at the end of the discussion if we so choose. We need not comply.

This susceptibility of morality to skepticism, then, makes reductionism a problem for theories of morality. Because moral claims represent and reflect our deeply held beliefs, and because they, unlike a punch in the nose, cannot default to a concrete, tangible demonstration that we all accept at the end of the day when we finish the philosophical argument and return home, reductionism appears even more urgent. The perceived need to secure that which holds a place whose importance is tantamount in our lives, and yet is ultimately not a mandatory or heteronymous force for us, leads to definitive attempts to establish an irrefutable foundation for morality. As Kant states in the *Foundations*, "Morals themselves remain subject to all kinds of corruption so long as the guide and supreme norm for their correct estimation is lacking." If we take morality seriously, which we should, then we need to ground moral theories in a secure foundation. However, the reductionism inherent to a defined Archimedean point narrows conceptions of morality in ways that do not accurately reflect its comprehensive scope in our lives.

In philosophy, the dominant moral theories tend toward such reductionism. This thesis will address two of them. First, it will examine Kant's categorical imperative and show that this approach, while thorough in its explanation and secure in its foundation, is ultimately reductionist and collapses into rationalism in a way that diminishes its ability to accurately address our concrete moral lives. In contrast to Kant, this thesis will also examine the current work of Martha Nussbaum. She rejects the abstraction of what she calls a general theory (such as Kant’s) in favor of a system of moral decision making that
is appropriate to the lived particular details of our moral lives. Nussbaum initially
captures the tangible richness, complexity, and comprehensiveness of our moral lives in a
way that Kant's abstract, timeless theory does not, but in doing so, her theory collapses
into a fierce empiricism that resembles Hume's epistemology.

Before proceeding, we might ask whether reductionism, epistemological or moral,
is a problem, because the discussion thus far assumes so. Reductionist theories, in
seeking to establish a claim indubitably, tend toward a narrowness that does not
accurately reflect the very reality they try to explain, and therefore are insufficient
positions. Descartes' secure claim that he exists, for example, leaves him with the
insurmountable problem of accounting for his physical body. Hume's strict empiricism,
like the positivism it foreshadows, leaves us with a discouragingly atomistic and
mechanistic view of the world. This view does not even allow us to posit complex,
abstract ideas or values which, as Kant notes, are required for any sense of overarching
coherence in our lives. The failure of each of these reductionist positions to accurately
describe our lives is evident in the fact that we all return to daily life when the discussion
is over. We do not live as dualistic entities, nor do we see continually conjoined events
as eternally coincidental and therefore arbitrary. Rather, we understand each observation
or event in our lives as fitting within the broader story of our lives. Our lives, taken as a
whole, are non-reductionist by nature, and the individual moments that comprise our
broader lives are equally non-reductionist. We do not at any one time point to an event or
sensation and name it as the foundation on which the rest of our life depends. Rather,
these significant moments act as landmarks within the broader scope of a life's narrative.
From them, we gain reference and direction, and we may even understand them to define
the reality of daily life or to demarcate the beginnings and endings of individual eras in our lives, but we do not reduce all our other experiences to these singular moments.

There appears to be a trade off, then, between the grounded security we desire in our epistemological or moral positions and the ability of these positions to accurately reflect the full richness and complexity of our lives. If we imagine a continuum where rational security defines one end and empirical security the other, this tradeoff becomes easy to pinpoint. As an epistemological or moral theory approaches the end of the continuum representing rational security, that is, as it tends toward an a priori and universal foundation, its ability to accurately reflect the reality of our tangible lives diminishes. Rational reductionism, with its focus on a priori reason, abstracts from the concrete contingencies that comprise the real fabric of our everyday lives. Likewise, as we move toward empirical certainty grounded in the individual moments of concrete experience, we lose the broader necessity and universality that characterize a foundation based in reason. Ironically, then, empirical reductionism is also an abstraction from the fabric of life. While it emphasizes the role of these tangible details, it struggles to connect them, apart from the introduction of presupposed content, into a meaningful whole representative of our real lives.

This tradeoff between reductionist securities and richness is not so simple or black and white, and it manifests itself differently in epistemology and morality. For now, however, we will let it stand. The important point to note here is that reductionist theories, in seeking to pinpoint the specific and even absolute foundation for our knowledge of the world or morality, fail to accurately represent the reality of our greater lives.
Moral reductionism presents a greater problem than does epistemological reductionism and is the focus of this thesis. Debates over epistemology end when the discussion is over and the arguers return to life outside philosophical discussion. Whether we are dualistic entities or not, we eat when we are hungry. We, the subjects of our unified or accompanying bodies, feel pain when we are struck, and we feel psychological pain when hate accompanies this striking. Whether continually conjoined events are actually so because of causality or coincidence, we function with the confidence that they are causal. Epistemological skepticism never has us doubting whether or not we will fall to the ground if we step off a balcony.

Morality, however, which represents or relates to many of our most deeply held beliefs, cannot simply default to daily life when the discussion is over. There are no external forces acting on us that morality must account for in the same way that a theory of epistemology must account for the apparent demands of an apparent physics. Rather, when the debate over moral theories ends, we, autonomously, must still decide how to act. Although we cannot live amoral lives apart from moral significance, we can opt into a particular system of morality. Further, if we choose, generally, to live within a particular moral framework, we must with each action decide whether we are acting in accord with what we understand to be morality, and then whether or not we will follow through with morality's demands once we have made the judgment. In morality, there is no recourse to just plain living within the parameters of external forces. We live within the structure of external civil laws, but this presents different demands than an abstract system of morality. This is not to distinguish "moral" acts from those daily actions we
perform without consciously thinking of them as "moral." Rather, it notes that morality, unlike epistemology, still requires conscientious consideration for its enactment.

We, of course, do not strictly undergo this deliberation process with each action. Kant's categorical imperative implies that we do. Mill and successive utilitarians, on the other hand, recognize that the relationship of our actions to our understanding of morality resembles that of our actions to our understanding of epistemological certainty. Similar to the way that we continue living whether or not we know for sure if our experiences accurately represent reality, utilitarianism generally concludes that we act for our own good, and that the aggregate of a society of individuals acting for their own good is a net positive of good. For Mill, morality is not a struggle over each action, and the difference between his approach and that of Kant is evident both in the moral decision process and in the consequences of these decisions. Kant's perhaps unrealistic continual calculation with each action assures that we do not act in a way that compromises the dignity of others or ourselves. Mill concludes *Utilitarianism* with the admission that some people may be trampled by others within the pragmatic parameters of his theory, but he carefully allows for this as long as the aggregate good increases. "All persons are deemed to have a right to equality of treatment, except when some recognized social expediency [i.e., greater aggregate good] requires the reverse."13

Although utilitarianism accurately notes that we do not continually struggle under the burden morality places on each of our decisions, it tends to understate the role and the scope of morality in our lives. We do not consider morality lightly. It is not an afterthought or postscript we attach to actions we would have committed anyway. This retort oversimplifies the utilitarian school, yet it maintains an important distinction.
Specifically, we act purposefully, conscientiously taking note of our actions in light of our understandings of morality.

Socrates' question, How should one live? then, does not represent mere pondering. We attribute to morality the highest place in our lives, submitting both our wills and our physical desires to its claims. We also do not perceive morality to be an abstracted aspect of our lives distinct from the meaning in our lives. While we may consciously understand certain acts to be laden with more moral content than others, we do not consider morality to exist in isolated pockets only.

A theory of morality then, must meet these two requirements. It must accurately encompass the gravity and security we attribute to morality. It must also reflect the richness and complexity of our individual moral decisions as they relate to the comprehensive totality of our lives.

A difficulty has arisen, however, with attempts to meet these requirements. As described earlier, the reductionism inherent to a defined Archimedean point narrows a conception of morality in a way that conflicts with morality's comprehensiveness in our lives. Specifically, the establishment of morality's rational or empirical security seems to contradict the richness and complexity of our lives. Likewise, a moral theory that truly addresses this richness and complexity, focusing on the region of the continuum between the ends of rationalism and empiricism, appears to spread and therefore thin the locus of a moral system such that it weakens the secure foundation it needs to have.

The moral theories of Kant and Nussbaum demonstrate the problems of rational and empirical reductionism in morality. In providing a seemingly irrefutable foundation for morality that is secured in the a priori, necessary realm of reason, Kant cannot allow
the contingent, a posteriori details of our lives to provide moral guidance. Yet none of us would deny the place of love, sympathy, hurt, or anger in our moral lives. Nussbaum correctly seeks to reinvigorate the richness of the ethical life by grounding it in the concreteness of experience, including elevating the status of human emotional intelligence. Yet, in making the lived crux of a moral decision the basis for her theory, she disrupts—functionally deconstructs—the possibility of a greater moral order, and her theory resembles a Hume-like empiricism.

The question of interest here is whether or not this security and richness can be achieved without the reductionism that has thus far accompanied such attempts. And the answer is probably not. The naming of an Archimedean point necessarily narrows a moral theory, whether this point be that of abstract rationalism or the tangible contingencies of a particular moment. Without such a focus, morality is ungrounded, and, as Kant correctly notes, this is unacceptable.

However, the goal of avoiding the reductionism that has accompanied theories such as Kant’s or Nussbaum’s is not to extricate a safe moral theory from the foundation that provides its security. Reductionism, or perhaps concentration, is not itself detrimental to effective moral theory. It is an unavoidable component of any defense of morality. The difficulty that Kant and Nussbaum create for their theories is that they reduce their theories to loci too narrow to accurately address the richness, complexity, and comprehensiveness of morality in our lives. For Kant, this is the security of a priori reason. Nussbaum correctly shifts the locus of morality away from the abstraction Kant gives it, but in describing a moral decision making process dependent on the lived moments of tangible human life, she is left with a mosaic-like collection of individually-
meaningful decisions. She must presuppose the overarching moral principles that provide the comprehensiveness and security to morality.

In contrast, the need is for a re-examination of the nature of the moral life and moral decisions. Morality needs a secure foundation. But this foundation does not need to be a singular, narrow point or series of points, as it is for Kant and Nussbaum. We do not understand our lives as reduced to a singular focus, and morality, which reflects the comprehensive meaning we find in our lives, also should not be reduced to a narrowly defined moment.

In the postscript to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Bernard Williams concludes with the hope that morality will be understood on the bases of truth, truthfulness, and the meaning of an individual life. By truth, he means the facts of science; by truthfulness, the ability to recognize our mistakes and then change our interpretations of these facts; and by the meaning of an individual life, a shifting of the moral discussion from the abstract argumentation of philosophy to the more tangible reality of human life. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate much more than this. Yet, these three bases do provide a sort of foundation for morality, but with a twist. They continue his argument that morality is a different game than traditional philosophy has made it, one less fitting for traditional argumentation and proof.

With this in mind, then, we can begin to chart an alternative to the theories provided by Kant and Nussbaum. If we can define a foundation for morality that is still defendable but avoids the narrow reductionism that has thus far accompanied moral theories, then we can still provide the security required for morality while accurately reflecting the richness and complexity that characterizes the moral life. The hope here,
however optimistic, is that this broader reductionism or concentration will describe a foundation for morality that, although less secure than more narrow reductionisms, will carry greater force.

The remainder of this thesis will be written from this perspective.

3. Kant’s Moral Method

In the history of philosophy, Kant’s standard role is that of reconciler of the claims and failures of his rationalist and empiricist predecessors. Claiming that Hume’s skepticism woke him from his dogmatic slumber, he establishes a secure foundation for knowledge and the natural sciences through the introduction of synthetic a priori judgments in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Such judgments contain both the a priori security required by the rationalists and the content of experience desired by the empiricists.

Although the security of the natural sciences figures prominently in Kant’s critical work, he maintains another focus throughout. In the conclusion to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant writes, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily they are reflected on: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” An equally pressing goal for Kant, then, is to also explain the place of morality in our lives. The *Critique of Pure Reason* lays the foundation for the security of our knowledge, and it also provides a framework for securing morality. As Guyer and Wood state in their introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant’s metaphysical system must effectively explain not only the sciences, but also God, freedom, and immortality, because our morality has an “inescapable stake”
in the success of this metaphysics. In this section, I will explain Kant’s objectives for a system of morality, how the introduction of synthetic a priori judgments provides a non-reductionist security for our knowledge, and then how, by analogy, they appear to provide this same non-reductionist security for morality.

Kant’s objective in defining a system of morality is to insulate morality from any possibility of contingency. If morality is to give guidance, then it must be objectively secure—a priori, necessary, and universal—and Kant emphasizes this point. In the preface to the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he states, “Morals themselves remain subject to all kinds of corruption so long as the guide and supreme norm for their correct estimation is lacking.” Further, a moral law “must imply absolute necessity.” Specifically, “All is lost when empirical and therefore contingent conditions of the application of law are made conditions of the law itself, and a practice calculated to effect a result made probable by past experience is thus allowed to predominate over a self-sufficient theory.” He asks rhetorically, “Is it not of the utmost necessity to construct a pure moral philosophy which is completely freed from everything which may be only empirical and thus belong to anthropology?” and then answers in the affirmative.

In other words, if morality is to fulfill its role as a guide and supreme norm, then it cannot be the case that morality rests on questionable or moveable grounds. Even if we accept the security provided by our senses and our experiences, we cannot, as Hume argues, piece together a complex idea of morality from these empirical snippets, regardless of how complete the picture they give us may appear. A secure system of morality cannot be a patchwork of particular responses to particular moral quandaries. As Kant states, the ground for moral law “must not be sought in the nature of man or in
the circumstances in which he is placed but a priori solely in the concepts of pure reason, and that every precept which rests on principles of mere experience... may be called a practical rule but never a moral law.”21

Clearly, this necessity is available only a priori in reason. However, Kant has no interest in the dogmatism of his rationalist predecessors. Therefore, the metaphysics underlying the moral law he seeks to describe must somehow balance the necessity and security found only a priori in reason with the equally pressing case against dogmatism. To accomplish this, Kant offers the transcendental logic, a peculiar system of a priori knowledge possible only in the presence of sensibility. The full details of this system do not interest us here, but the form of knowledge Kant’s metaphysics gives us—synthetic a priori judgments—provides the framework for his explanation of the moral law.

Therefore, because the form of synthetic a priori judgments figures so prominently in a discussion of Kant’s morality, and later in the critique of his moral system, a brief explanation is in order.

In the introduction to the Critique of Pure Reason, Guyer and Wood describe Kant’s goals as seeking to “not only undermine the arguments of traditional metaphysics but also to put in their place a scientific metaphysics of his own, which establishes what can be known a priori but also limits it to that which is required for ordinary experience and its extension into natural science.” They continue that he, therefore, “had to find a way to limit the pretensions of the dogmatists while defending metaphysics as a science which is both possible (as was denied by the skeptics) and necessary (as was denied by the indifferentists).”22
Kant’s strongest criticism of the rationalists was his accusation of dogmatism, the assumption that reason could proceed in explaining metaphysics without an “antecedent critique of its own capacity.” Kant objects that dogmatic statements make knowledge claims about metaphysical reality they are not entitled to make, and then he provides this needed critique by explaining that all cognition of reason must conform to the objects of experience. This requires the thing in itself, which, depending on how we interpret Kant on this subject, can place anti-dogmatic parameters on reason. His theory of knowledge, then, offers a solution that provides both a priori security and synthetic content. The a priori component provides the required security sought by the rationalists (and Kant), and possible experience provides the critique—the parameters of content—to limit reason. The error of the dogmatic reduction of knowledge to reason occurs because rationalism ignores the validating, and limiting, parameters offered by experience.

Synthetic a priori cognitions, then, offer us what Gordon Brittan Jr. calls the “really possible” world. The thing in itself, accessed in experience, provides the conditions for the grounding of reason. Although reason can think speculatively beyond the bounds of experience without erring, it cannot claim knowledge about any such topics. Thus, Kant explains, we can think of the thing in itself as an object, but we cannot cognize it as such. This distinction is necessary for valid experience. Otherwise, there would exist, as he claims, the absurdity of appearances without an object that appears. It is also required for limiting the claims of reason, grounding its knowledge within the parameters of experience.

With this in mind, Brittan argues in *Kant’s Theory of Science* that Kant’s epistemology is anti-reductionist. He posits an alternative to the standard interpretation
of Kant’s role in the history of philosophy, where Kant reconciles the claims of his rationalist and empiricist predecessors by his introduction of synthetic a priori judgments. Brittan’s claim is that each of these positions is essentially reductionist, attempting to secure knowledge about the world, specifically the principles of mathematics and physics, by reducing the statements of these sciences to statements of indubitable first positions. In each case, rationalism or empiricism, the goal of the reduction is to secure the epistemology underlying claims of science and about the world, which are otherwise subject to foundationless claims, including skepticism.

Brittan’s alternative to this explanation of Kant describes Kant not as the dialectical solution to these two schools, merging their positions in synthetic a priori judgments. Rather, he describes Kant as rejecting the rationalist and empiricist projects altogether. Kant does not build from their foundations, but views their basic attempts to secure their positions as misguided. Brittan states, “What Kant wrote constitutes not so much a reconciliation of ‘rationalism’ and ‘empiricism’ as the rejection of a feature they share in common [their reductionism].” Brittan continues that Kant’s Copernican revolution was not the introduction of synthetic a priori knowledge itself, but his addressing of the same goal—the security of epistemological knowledge about the world—by first accepting the principles of science as secure, and then explaining their metaphysical underpinnings. In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant shifts the epistemological question away from whether knowledge is possible to an explanation of, given the security of science, how it is possible. By delineating a system for knowledge, one that is complete and consistent on its own terms, he can offer the real possibility of a secure science that is nonreductionist. Synthetic a priori knowledge, then, does not
provide a reconciliation of rationalism and empiricism, but offers a novel, nonreductionist epistemology.

Kant's system of morality relies on this same nonreductionist framework. The categorical imperative, the primary expression of the moral law, is a synthetic a priori judgment. Kant very clearly emphasizes the moral law's a priori nature, and thus its required necessity and universality. The law is also synthetic; it has content and cannot be analytically determined from reason alone. As synthetic and a priori, then, the moral law appears to avoid a collapse into either position, and it resembles the robustness that characterizes the real-possibility, synthetic a priori propositions Kant sought for his epistemology.

To describe the law as both synthetic and a priori depends on Kant's metaphysics, specifically the interrelationship of the idea of freedom, autonomy, morality, and the natural world. Here, I will quote Kant in full:

Categorical imperatives are possible because the Idea of freedom makes me a member of an intelligible world. Consequently, if I were a member of that world only, all my actions would always be in accordance with the autonomy of the will. But since I intuit myself at the same time as a member of the world of sense, my actions ought to conform to it, and this categorical ‘ought’ presents a synthetic a priori proposition, since besides my will affected by my sensuous desires there is added the Idea of exactly the same will as pure, practical of itself, and belonging to the intelligible world, which according to reason contains the supreme condition of the sensuously affected will. It is similar to the manner in which concepts of
the understanding, which of themselves mean nothing but lawful form in
general, are added to the intuitions of the sensible world, thus rendering
possible a priori synthetic propositions on which all knowledge of a
system of nature rests.²⁸

The moral law is inextricably connected with autonomy, and this autonomy serves
both to give validity to the moral law and to provide the synthetic content of the law.²⁹
"All maxims are rejected which are not consistent with the will’s giving universal law.
The will is not only subject to the law, but subject in such a way that it must be conceived
also as itself prescribing the law, of which reason can hold itself to be the author; it is on
this ground alone that the will is regarded as subject to the law."³⁰ "Reason, therefore,
relates every maxim of the will as giving universal laws to every other will and also to
every action towards itself; it does not do so for the sake of any other practical motive or
future advantage but rather from the Idea of the dignity of a rational being who obeys no
law except one which he himself also gives."³¹ Only in this way can a moral law be
applicable yet universal and categorical, avoiding the hypothetical status of empirical law
and the coercion of heteronomous forces. Only in this way, by freely willing to act
according to laws we give ourselves in accord with reason, do we act morally.

The interrelation of autonomy and the moral law relies on the presupposed idea of
freedom. Together with God and immortality, freedom is a regulative idea presupposed
by reason. Kant’s proposed regulative ideas serve the purpose of providing a framework
for understanding the spontaneous and particular logic of the categories, but, like the rest
of the transcendental noumenal realm, it cannot be explicitly delineated in a provable
form. Rather, it is an unknowable assumption. Similar to the way we can posit the
existence of objects-in-themselves apart from our knowing them, we suppose, as ideas, the existence of God, freedom, and immortality, although we can never know these.

The categorical imperative, then, fulfills the synthetic a priori character of Kant's anti-reductionism. Presupposed freedom-in-itself is inextricably intertwined with a universal, non-contradictory, self-legislated rational component. As a synthetic a priori statement derived from Kant's greater metaphysics, then, the categorical imperative offers us the best expression of morality in our daily lives. It resembles the nonreductionist robustness of a statement of real possibility, containing both synthetic and a priori components and avoiding a collapse into either rationalism or empiricism.

4. Critique of Kant's Method: Rational Reductionism

The strength of Kant's nonreductionist epistemology lies in his introduction of transcendental logic, which provides a stable foundation for knowledge and science in a way that avoids the reductionisms of both his rationalist and empiricist predecessors. Kant then uses this same system to give his morality the a priori security it requires while grounding it in an anti-dogmatic foundation.

On closer examination, however, we find that the application of transcendental logic to morality is not analogous to its role in epistemology. Kant's discussion of synthetic a priori propositions differs when knowledge of the physical world is compared with the moral law. In his epistemology, Kant emphasizes the importance of the objective thing in itself for restraining reason's metaphysical speculation. Experience guides reason's knowledge claims. This limiting of reason is the motivating force for, and the primary argument in, the Critique of Pure Reason. Yet, in his morality, Kant
appeals to a very different aspect of the thing in itself for the synthetic a priori categorical imperative, a presupposed freedom of the will proposed by reason.

Although both approaches use synthetic a priori propositions, these propositions are of a very different nature. Indeed, this reflects his different intents as well. In his epistemology, he wants to ground reason in experience; in morality, he seeks to purge any traces of contingency.

In this section, I will critique Kant’s moral system, claiming that his selective use of the thing in itself results in a system of rational reductionism that is unable to guide real-life moral decisions. This critique will examine several problems with the categorical imperative, finding it short on both theoretical and practical levels. First, the categorical imperative breaks from the parameters Kant establishes for knowledge in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, resulting in rational reductionism. Because of this breach, the categorical imperative is essentially formalist logic with presupposed moral content, as Hegel describes. Second, the formalist nature of the categorical imperative fails to reflect the complexity of real moral dilemmas. The simple examples Kant offers to fit this formalist framework do not represent the decisions found in moral life, and an examination of real moral decisions reveals the categorical imperative to be lacking in its ability to give guidance. Quandaries giving rise to multiple maxims or complex maxims present very real difficulties for Kant’s system.

The difference between the synthetic a priori nature of Kant’s epistemology and his theory of morality resides in the role of the thing in itself in each, and, when explaining the categorical imperative as synthetic a priori, Kant attributes to the thing in itself a different status than it has in his epistemology. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*,

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Kant seeks to limit the metaphysical speculation of reason and provide security for science, and, in discussing these, he emphasizes knowledge as knowledge of objects. He implies through this emphasis that the thing in itself provides the grounding for physical existence and any knowledge of it. In discussing morality, however, he names freedom of the will—presupposed by reason as a regulative idea—for the synthetic component of the categorical imperative.

Technically, Kant's selective use of freedom fits within the parameters of the synthetic a priori model. It aligns with Brittan's description of his epistemology's Copernican revolution, in which Kant supposes the truth of the complete system and then explains the arrangement of the components underlying the system. If a complete and consistent explanation can be given for the components, then there is little reason to doubt the theory in its completeness. Thus, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant provides a complete and consistent explanation of transcendental logic, including the place of the regulative ideas (God, freedom, immortality), all the while being very careful to keep tabs on reason's speculative knowledge claims. Within this framework, then, Kant gives us the analytically-derived form of the categorical imperative, yet he avoids pure rationalism by building into this form the assent of a free, rational being.

On closer examination, however, we cannot accept this particular use of freedom to build the synthetic a priori categorical imperative. First, to construct the categorical imperative, Kant improperly assumes the liberty of discussing the thing in itself as freedom only. Although he gives a proof in the preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* for why morality must presuppose freedom, he does not state why the thing in itself is nothing but freedom. He does claim that the moral law cannot be heteronomous, and
thus justifies why the thing in itself's contribution must be freedom. But Kant never
grounds this claim. Explaining the motive is not an argument.

Second, Kant's use of freedom is also problematic on its own terms. Underlying
this problem of the lack of an argument is the more general fact that, in discussing the
role of freedom, he attempts to delineate the thing in itself. In discussing epistemology in
the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant is careful to keep the thing in itself as a negative
notion. Although it is thinkable, and although reason can posit freedom, God, and the
immortality of the soul, the thing in itself is unknowable and, therefore, inscrutable in
these terms. When describing the categorical imperative, however, Kant discusses the
thing in itself in positive terms, utilizing it to his benefit. His explanation of the moral
law works because of the uncoercive nature of freedom, yet, in naming freedom, Kant
takes a liberty with the thing in itself to which he is not entitled. Indeed, his positive
definition of the thing in itself as freedom dangerously resembles the dogmatism of
which he so strongly accuses the rationalists, and he commits the very metaphysical
speculation whose arrogance partly motivates the Critique of Pure Reason.

Yet, still, it appears we can defend Kant's use of freedom by referring back to the
model underlying his epistemology. If the components contributing to synthetic a priori
propositions hold together in a way that survives logical scrutiny, then we should grant
Kant the possibility of this use of freedom. With this selective use of freedom, the
categorical imperative works. That is, it fits the logic of the model he gives us for
synthetic a priori propositions.

This benefit of the doubt, however seamless the argument, does not work with the
categorical imperative in the same way it works with epistemological knowledge. The
thing in itself as freedom cannot provide the same grounding as the thing in itself as object can because of the very system for knowledge Kant gives us in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. He argues that we can think of objects giving rise to appearances. That is, we can know the thing in itself as appearance through the categories, allowing us to posit it apart from us and give it objective existence.\(^34\) As knowable through terms that allow for concreteness and tangibility, the thing in itself grounds knowledge of the physical world.

However, while thinking of an uncognized object is possible because we have appearances of objects, we cannot know or think freedom in this same way. Freedom is vague and intangible. It is a property of the self, and cannot be known. As a defined concept, it is a regulative idea posited by reason. An abstract concept, then, freedom cannot offer the same force of tangibility. We do not have an appearance of freedom from which to think of the thing in itself as freedom, and, although Kant developed the categorical imperative as the device to yield the equivalent of appearance, this equivalency falls short because freedom's independent existence does not carry the grounding force required to keep reason from abstraction. Contributing to the synthetic a priori moral law, then, it cannot serve the same function of grounding reason's speculation as an object does when contributing to knowledge. In contrast, freedom itself seems in need of grounding. I will develop this critique further in this section. For now, however, the net result of the apparent synthetic a priori categorical imperative is a reason-based grounding of reason.

Kant's choice to limit the thing in itself by selectively discussing it as freedom appears to be an obvious blunder. Surely, the tediously thorough Kant, whose texts
comprehensively explain his philosophic systems, did not overlook the above difficulties when writing. He must have foreseen this line of critique, re-examined his theory, and then proceeded with his writing, having understood it to pass the test. Indeed, his selective use of freedom has a deliberate purpose that fits well into his broader schematic.

As described in the previous section, Kant desired to remove any traces of contingency from morality. To guide, morality must have nonempirical foundations. One of his statements warrants repeating. “All is lost when empirical and therefore contingent conditions of the application of law are made conditions of the law itself, and a practice calculated to effect a result made probable by past experience is thus allowed to predominate over a self-sufficient theory.”35 Here lies the reason for his selective use of freedom.

Humans distinguish themselves from all other things by their faculty of reason. “For this reason a rational being must regard itself qua intelligence... as belonging to the world of understanding and not to that of the senses.”36 Thus, a rational being cannot subscribe to the laws of nature (heteronomy), but must think of the causality of its will as residing in freedom. Specifically, “If we think of ourselves as free, we transport ourselves into the intelligible world as members of it and know the autonomy of the will together with its consequence, morality; whereas if we think of ourselves as obligated, we consider ourselves as belonging both to the world of sense and at the same time to the intelligible world.”37

Kant discusses the thing in itself in terms of freedom to avoid any empirical influence or any hint of contingency in the moral law. Freedom, by nature, cannot be influenced. As a component in the synthetic a priori categorical imperative, then, it
meets the need for synthetic content in transcendental logic while preserving morality against the influence of empirical conditions.

Kant recognized that this particular, selective, and limited use of freedom could lessen the force of the argument. How can an abstract, non-tangible concept proposed by reason ground the categorical imperative? Therefore, in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, fearing that freedom would have no force, Kant seeks to attribute causality to freedom; however, he struggles to define this causality. At best, he describes how freedom serves as a cause. He begins with an analogy: in the same way that natural necessity influences the actions of irrational beings, freedom underlies the actions of rational beings. Defining it negatively, he states that the will of rational beings requires a presupposed freedom to avoid heteronomy. Reason does not respond to external influence. If this were the case, impulse, not reason, would be the source of the will's judgments. Defining it positively, he explains that the “concept of a causality entails that of laws according to which something (i.e., the effect) must be established through something else which we call cause.” Freedom, then, is not lawless, but a “causality of a particular kind according to immutable laws. Otherwise a free will would be an absurdity.” Freedom, then, serves as a sort of default cause; it fills the place preceding the action of rational beings that would otherwise be taken by heteronymous sources or by randomness.

Kant's argument here makes sense; it is rationally cohesive. Evidently, he believed it to be sufficient for his needs. Yet, as before, defining the thing in itself as freedom, even in this positive way, still does not endow it with a grounding force equivalent to that of an object. The analogy he draws between the causalities of freedom
and natural necessity fails for the obvious reason that his analogy compares abstract and tangible forces. While reason responds to freedom and not heteronymous forces, thereby making freedom the only possible cause for the actions of the will, this does not make it analogous to the causality of natural forces. Rather, Kant substitutes a structural equivalency for analogy, distinguishing two types of actions (rational and irrational) and noting that each is necessarily prompted by some cause, freedom or heteronymous forces, respectively. That these two concepts fit the same general model does not support the needed analogy, and the causal nature of freedom remains very different from the notion of a cause in the real possibility of physics. Even defined positively as a causal force according to immutable laws, freedom remains a regulative idea of reason itself—a presupposed device to understand the will as autonomous. As such, it does not arise as appearance, and we cannot structure it in space and time, anchoring reason in the really possible world. The categorical imperative therefore fails to achieve the same grounding that synthetic a priori propositions have in Kant’s epistemology.

Thus, by describing the thing in itself as freedom when defining the categorical imperative, Kant technically meets the minimum requirements for synthetic a priori propositions. Yet, limiting the thing in itself to freedom effectively renders the thing in itself impotent for its role in limiting the speculative claims of reason. With this strategy, Kant insulates the moral law from its relation to experience, resulting in rational reductionism.

These theoretical problems give rise to difficulties in the practical application of the categorical imperative. Kant’s careful construction of the categorical imperative results in a purely formal rule that fits more in the category of general, rather than
transcendental, logic. This formal aspect of the categorical imperative results in the need for empirical guidance, including preconceived definitions of morality and the choice of maxim.

In the essay "On the Proverb: That May be True in Theory, But Is of No Practical Use," Kant provides some background for a discussion of the relationship between the theory and practice of moral decision making. He defines a theory as "an aggregation of rules, even of practical rules... as long as these rules are thought of as principles possessing a certain generality and, consequently, as being abstracted from a multitude of conditions that nonetheless necessarily influence their application." Further clarification is found in the introduction to the Analytic of Principles, where Kant distinguishes between general and transcendental logic. General logic, as empty rules, needs guidance for its application. This guidance comes from judgment, the "faculty for subsuming under rules... of determining whether something stands under a given rule." To justify why, or to explain how, something is subsumed under a rule, however, requires another rule. The application of this rule requires a rule, and so on into infinite regress.

Kant then proposes the notion of "mother-wit" as the solution to this dilemma, an instinctual ability dictating the proper application of rules. And for those without mother-wit, there are damning examples.

However, these descriptions of application apply to general, not transcendental logic. Synthetic a priori judgment does not need guidance for its application. Kant states, "The peculiar thing about transcendental philosophy is this: that in addition to the rule... which is given in the pure concept of the understanding, it can at the same time indicate a priori the case to which the rules ought to be applied." The reason
transcendental logic does not require guidance for its application is that “it deals with concepts that are to be related to their objects a priori.” As a synthetic a priori proposition, then, the categorical imperative belongs to transcendental, not general, logic, and this application reveals the problem of Kant’s different uses of the thing in itself for his epistemology and morality. While synthetic a priori propositions about the world do not need guidance for their application, Kant’s narrowing of the thing in itself to freedom subjects it to the conditions for the application of a rule. Without an appearance of freedom, there can be no relation of concepts to objects a priori, and this leaves the categorical imperative without a priori guidance for its application. It is, in a sense, empty.

In the second and third sections of the *Foundations*, Kant seeks to avoid the critique of emptiness, explaining that the combination of freedom and reason provides sufficient guidance in the form of the categorical imperative. If we see ourselves as self-legislators according to our endowment of reason, then the only possible rule is the one Kant has given us in the categorical imperative’s first expression. In this, universalization and noncontradiction provide the form of the rule to which a free, rational being would willingly assent. However, as Hegel describes, this content of form is insufficient for its application.

Avoiding the infinite regress of rules, then, and disregarding mother-wit, the categorical imperative still requires guidance. This guidance must be found empirically. Here, we see why Hegel’s critique of formalism and abstraction from context is so devastating to the application of the categorical imperative.
Successful application of the categorical imperative has two parts: choice of maxim (including its formulation) and universalizing of the maxim. Kant describes the quandary as the paradigmatic moral situation underlying the need for moral guidance. In response to a particular quandary, an agent proposes a maxim which, when universalized, describes whether following through on that maxim is a moral or immoral action. If, when universalized, the result yields a contradiction or absurdity, enactment of the maxim would be immoral. If, however, universalization of the maxim does not yield a contradiction or absurdity, then following through on the proposed maxim is permissible. The categorical imperative describes the threshold distinguishing immoral from moral, where moral is defined as that which is permissible or blameless. It cannot describe variations within the moral nor can it make judgments of better. I will address the issue of blamelessness later in this section.

The categorical imperative’s content, the form of rational assent to universalization, is secure as a priori. In giving examples, Kant emphasizes the effectiveness of universalization as the determiner of morality, and he describes quandaries that direct us to a single, correct maxim to demonstrate the use of the categorical imperative. In his examples, it is clear that reason does provide adequate guidance for navigating moral dilemmas. Yet, other situations are not so clear. Consider the following example, which resembles those Kant offers.

Before leaving for an extended vacation, a woman packaged and hid her silver in her house. Upon returning, she forgot where she hid it, and, although she searched everywhere, she could not find it. Believing it to be stolen, she filed a claim with her insurance company. A representative questioned her extensively and performed
background checks, and then awarded her $2,000, the full amount of her claim. Six years
later, however, the woman bought a new house, and, while scrutinizing every inch of her
house while packing for the move, she found the silver hidden in the trash compactor.
Having not used the trash compactor for over ten years, she had literally forgotten that the
appliance was built into the kitchen counter. It had never crossed her mind to check there
for the silver. She immediately called her insurance company to find out where to send
the equivalent sum of money as she received from the claim.

In this situation, when the woman found her silver, she faced a moral quandary.
The insurance company did not know she had her silver, and they had no way to know
this. Thus, free from any heteronymous prompting, the woman had to decide what to do.
Keeping the money would require less effort on her part. However, as a good, but
unwitting, Kantian, she called to return the silver, believing it to be her duty to adhere to
a policy of honesty. It seemed correct to her that every person in this or any conceptually
similar quandary, such as receiving too much change at the cash register or finding a
significant sum of money on the sidewalk, should at least attempt to return the money to
its rightful owner.

Application of the categorical imperative reveals her decision to be moral in
Kant’s terms, and to stop the story here would resemble Kant’s examples. However,
when the woman called her insurance company, it did not want the money. The surprised
representative said that paying for claims is a planned part of the insurance business, and
to go back six years to change the books, correct their taxes, and re-issue their reports for
only $2,000 would be more effort than it is worth. The company told her to just forget it.
This second part of the story creates an interesting situation for a strict Kantian. In any subsequent, similar quandary, the woman’s maxim (or the maxim of any person who has heard this story) must take into account knowledge of the insurance company’s refusal to accept the return of small claims. Although knowledge of this story is a contingent detail, it cannot be ignored. Universalizing the qualified maxim, however, would require all people to attempt actions they know to be futile. This qualification helps illuminate the difficulties that can arise with application of the categorical imperative in situations other than those Kant gives us and upon a deeper examination of the ones he provides.

In providing examples to model the categorical imperative, Kant does not consider the full range of possible quandaries, but carefully crafts quandaries into forms that achieve the results he seeks. In Foundations, he provides several examples, presenting both the quandaries and the maxims in broad, general terms. When the maxims are universalized, the formula successfully resolves the quandaries, neatly demonstrating the effectiveness of the categorical imperative. In “That May be True in Theory,” he offers an example in much more detail, including the contingent circumstances of the situation and the emotional sentiments of the trustee. The quandary is a much more realistic picture of our actual decisions, and the maxims Kant considers again present an adherence to duty, and not to a form of happiness, as the correct choice. Here too, however, even with a more richly painted situation, his examples and approaches to resolving them seem somewhat disingenuous, and we are left with questions about his method’s effectiveness.
As mentioned earlier, implementation of the categorical imperative involves two distinct actions, the choice or formulation of the maxim and its subsequent universalization. Kant focuses on universalization to emphasize the non-empirical status of the moral law. However, the first of these actions concerns us here, and a careful consideration of the details of a quandary reveals where Kant’s approach falls short of providing guidance in our tangible lives. Specifically, we can identify two problems with Kant’s examples of quandaries and formulation of maxims, his reliance on preconceived moral norms and his failure to distinguish between quandaries that are tests and those that are existential crises. Both problems arise from his attempt to secure the moral law a priori and become evident when examining the full depth of a quandary’s details.

Consider, for example, the second quandary Kant discusses in *Foundations*, in which a man who knows he cannot repay any loan “finds himself forced by need to borrow money.” The man then proposes to lie about his intention to repay in order to get the loan. When universalized, this maxim is immoral. The example is general and simple; however, it still reveals the two problems. First, the example, lacking complicating factors, gives rise to and then tests a maxim of simple honesty, asking whether the man should deliberately lie. In this, Kant relies on the preconceived and socially entrenched value of honesty to craft an example and maxim that demonstrates the effectiveness of the universalization strategy, concluding that lying is immoral.

Kant does not discuss the man’s need, the amount of money, or why he cannot repay the money, and a consideration of the situation’s potential details shows that the man may have other options than outright lying, and thus other maxims in addition to the one Kant thought was the obvious one. Does the man seeking money need to buy
medicine for a dying child? Could he appeal to someone's pity, or to his friends, for assistance? Is his inability to repay it due to a physical handicap or illness, or is the length of the repayment period too short for his budget to handle it? If it is the latter, why could the maxim not be to renegotiate the loan in light of the circumstances, persuading the lender to extend the repayment period? Or, if repayment is the problem and if the amount of money to be borrowed is small enough, perhaps he could appeal to family members with a promise to repay it in service rather than money. A full consideration of details, then, is important, for out of them arises the maxim to be universalized, and this maxim may not be the single, simple statement embodying preconceived values that Kant derives from his examples. Although Kant includes a richer set of details in the example he offers in "This May be True in Theory," here too he designs the situation to lead to a single maxim and an outright test of honesty.

The second problem observes that, in addition to the fact that quandaries do not always reveal entrenched values in neat maxims, a full consideration of details shows that the resolution of quandaries does not always have the form of a test. Kant does not distinguish between quandaries that are tests and those that are existential crises. The moral agent in each of quandaries above simply asks himself, "Should I proceed with this evident action?" and the answer, via universalization of the maxim, is a simple yes or no. More often than not, however, quandaries are existential crises, in which the options are not so clean and the strategy not so simple. These crises have two forms. In one, a choice must be made between multiple maxims, and, in the other, the maxim is complex and does not properly fit the universalization strategy. In each case, the categorical imperative is unable to provide guidance. I will discuss existential crises and decision
processes thoroughly in the section on Nussbaum’s method. Here, however, it is important to note that an examination of the details in a quandary, which Kant sought to purge as factors in the moral decision process, are the essence of these crises.

Even a cursory examination of a moral quandary shows that any quandary may have more than one possible maxim as solution. The maxims may be very different, leading to different morally permitted outcomes when they are universalized, yet any guidance for choosing between them is empirical, based on the contingent particulars of the situation and taking place chronologically prior to universalization. Because of this, the decisive focus of the categorical imperative is not the act of universalizing a maxim as Kant emphasizes, but the choosing of it, an activity that takes place in the contingent world in response to particular details. Although, in Kant’s examples, universalizing is taken to dominate the statement of the evident maxim, in reality, the particular details of a quandary make universalizing subsequent to the choice or formulation of maxims. This is exactly what Kant did not want. Yet, in his zeal to purge any trace of contingency from morality, he inaccurately overlooked the categorical imperative’s empirical composition and failed to recognize the very real possibility of multiple maxims.

In addition to the categorical imperative’s inability to choose between maxims, complex maxims, arising from a quandary’s details, provide a greater problem for it. In his examples, Kant only proposes simple maxims as appropriate responses to general quandaries. However, quandaries are complex, and there is no reason to assume that maxims are not likewise complex. For example, faced with a moral quandary, a person may propose a maxim that has two components joined with the conjunction *and*, or with the qualifier *only if*. Thus, to revisit the insurance claim quandary, if the woman involved
encountered a similar quandary later in life, the categorical imperative would allow her to qualify her maxim of honesty—try to return the money only if the amount exceeds $2,000. Otherwise, she would be attempting an action she knows to be futile.51

Complex maxims present a very real problem for the categorical imperative. Arising from the particulars of the quandary, there is no limit to the number of details, clauses, and qualifiers they may contain. With the proper mix of qualifying phrases, maxims could be construed in such a way that otherwise immoral actions become moral. In other words, since the standard for morality in Kant's system is only blamelessness, where we understand the difference between moral (i.e., not immoral) and immoral but cannot distinguish good and better, complex maxims could serve to talk around the problem, effectively lowering the threshold by which a maxim qualifies as blameless. It is easy to extrapolate from the above maxim about returning the money only if it exceeds a certain quantity to other situations where we tweak qualifying clauses to justify questionable actions. Avoiding this would require presupposed moral content, as Hegel describes.

The role of the thing in itself is to provide accountability for the functioning of reason, and without it reason has no objective grounding. Lacking the requirement of experience's contribution to knowledge, reason makes knowledge claims independently—that is, dogmatically—thus abstracting from its validating content. The price of this validating, however, is the actual tethering of reason. Synthetic a priori judgments do not only prevent reason from abstraction; they literally bind reason's knowledge claims to experience. This grounding does not strip the a priori characteristics of necessity and universality from reason, but it does restrict their application. In Kant's
epistemology, then, synthetic a priori knowledge is, in a sense, contingent. It has secure forms, and it contains necessity and universality, but it is ultimately dependent on experience for its validity. That is, reason's knowledge claims are dependent. In Kant's epistemology, this is not a problem for synthetic a priori propositions, for here, the goal of such propositions is critique, a delineation of the proper use and scope of reason. For morality, however, this contingency can be avoided only by abstracting moral claims from their empirical, anti-dogmatic grounding.

The regulative ideas that guide our knowledge claims, including those of the categorical imperative, cannot serve to ground the speculations of reason in the same way that objects can, because the regulative ideas cannot be known. Even though freedom allows Kant an apparently a priori construction of the moral law, it effectively serves to abstract moral decisions from the grounding of the thing in itself, which is crucial to their real application. That is, the thing in itself, qua ground of the moral law, detaches itself from the thing in itself qua ground of the applicability of the moral law. As such, it abstracts morality from the really possible world, resulting in rational reductionism, the dogmatic, reason-based regulation of reason's claims.

5. Transition: Theory and Practice

Martha Nussbaum disagrees with Kant's assertion that reason and its formulations of moral action, such as the categorical imperative, provide adequate guidance for moral decisions. In Love's Knowledge, she describes quandaries as rich situations that cannot be subsumed under Kant's reductionist expression of the moral law. Nussbaum emphasizes that moral decisions are complex endeavors that cannot be guided
sufficiently by general, all-inclusive rules, such as the categorical imperative, because quandaries are not general. Rather, making informed, correct moral decisions requires paying attention to the particulars of the situation, and acting appropriately consists of a response reflective of these particulars. Blunt application of a rule, though the rule may be internally coherent and rationally consistent, does not suffice for moral guidance. This is a broad topic, and I will further address Nussbaum’s position in the next section. Essentially, however, Nussbaum argues that the contingencies Kant wants to purge from moral decisions provide the very fabric for our moral decisions.

Kant’s moral theory provides us with a system of blamelessness. The person in a moral quandary proposes a maxim, asking, “Would it be moral to proceed with this action?” and then applies the categorical imperative. Those actions compatible with universalization, however, are merely those that are allowable, and they may not represent any positive definition of the moral. Rather, they are better characterized by being not immoral. Universalization at best distinguishes between moral and immoral actions, and, on the moral side, it fails to distinguish between permissible, obligatory, and super-erogatory actions. Even for those who might prefer Kant’s method of moral decision making, the categorical imperative cannot guide us in judgments of better or best. Few of us would agree that normative positions defined negatively carry sufficient force, let alone sufficient guidance. Judgments of better or best require a conception of the good, content that must be presupposed in Kant’s system. What Kant gives us, then, is a comprehensive system for distinguishing between moral and not-moral—a thin conception of morality. Such a theory stands in contrast to those described as thick or robust, theories that can lay out a prescription for behavior that is good, not merely not-
immoral. Generally, robust theories seek to more accurately reflect the real life aspects of morality, rejecting methods that abstract or detach morality from the vigor found in daily life. This may include giving a positive, decision-making role to the emotions, focusing on contingencies surrounding moral decisions, or considering the place of surprise or chance in morality.

Each of these possibilities conflicts with Kant’s project, where his overarching concern was to define an a priori system of morality that insulates morality from any possibility of contingency. Kant could not accept a morality that had any empirical qualifications in its definition. Earlier, I quoted him as saying, “All is lost when empirical and therefore contingent conditions of the application of law are made conditions of the law itself, and a practice calculated to effect a result made probable by past experience is thus allowed to predominate over a self-sufficient theory.” He continues by explaining that there are no practices not subsumable by theory. Practice is the application of theory. What works in theory works in practice. If there is conflict between the two, then the theory needs adjustment. If it is found that a theory is inadequate for explaining practice, then this is a problem of there being “not enough theory.” It is not the case that theory, in general, is unable to explain practice. David Harvey explains this in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, stating, “The enlightenment project . . . took it as axiomatic that there was only one possible answer to any question. From this it followed that the world could be controlled and rationally ordered if we could only picture and represent it rightly.”

Kant’s position assumes the existence of theory prior to action, whether or not we manifest and delineate it through writing or action. Our practice does not create new
theoretical territory; rather, it reveals what already existed and is capable of being
delineated in theory. Novel circumstances, then, are new to us only. They appear on the
surface of already established theoretical foundations, although these foundations may
not yet be delineated.

We can easily imagine the prior existence of theory when discussing physics. The
physical existence of the world can be explained through the interrelationships of
physical forces in time and space according to fixed laws, and any concrete circumstance
or practice can be explained as the manifestation of the theory that explains these
interrelationships. Underlying our activities in the physical world, including those we
undertake voluntarily, is a theoretical framework that we can neither transcend nor avoid.
In our daily lives, we understand our activity in the physical world partly as interactions
with a conglomeration of real forces. However, these forces do not derive their validity
from empirical circumstance; rather, they correspond to theory that can explain them
regardless of whether these forces are manifest.

This conception of theory and practice, however, has interesting results when
applied to morality. When we drop a rock, it falls toward the earth because of the force
of attraction between two masses we call gravity. Morality, however, has no such force
over us. We not only act autonomously within our conception of morality, but we can
autonomously opt whether to acknowledge a particular morality in the first place. Any
prior existence of moral theory consists primarily in the terms we use to describe it.
Whereas, in physics, the theory that is prior to concrete circumstance explains forces
whose relation to us is one of heteronomy and that exist in our lives whether or not we
choose to conscientiously acknowledge them, the theory Kant claims is prior to action in
practical morality exists only in the realm of abstract reason. For Kant, morality has an inherent relation to us because of its grounding in reason. However, due to our being positioned between desire and Kantian autonomy, this grounding has no compelling force unless we side with morality. Physics, on the other hand, will reveal itself and impose its underlying theory to us, even violently, whether we choose to accept it or not.

To discuss practical morality as the application of theory, then, does not have the same argumentative force as a similar discussion of physics. We may predict action in the physical world because we understand its underlying theory, and its heteronomy over us tells us which predictions will work and which will fail. To predict action in the moral world is always precarious.

In contrast to Kant, Nussbaum relies on Aristotle’s ethics to explain the process of moral decision making. Standards can exist prior to perception, but these are not the rules against which the morality of an action is compared. Rather, they may exist as summaries of worthy judgment—guideposts for future decisions that are “valid only to the extent to which they correctly describe good concrete judgments, and to be assessed, ultimately, against these.” Rules, as formulations stated prior to their application, lack the subtlety to address the particular details of a complex moral situation, and they lack the flexibility to incorporate new circumstances. Kant’s appeal to the rationality of humankind is an attempt to appeal to a rule that is constant, and therefore timeless, in the face of changing circumstances, however, even this source of constancy proves insufficient.

In *Love’s Knowledge*, Nussbaum reveals much of what is wrong with Kant’s method, and the primary difference between her method and Kant’s can be found in the
pivot of the moral decision. For Kant, is a necessary and sufficient theory, secured a priori in reason. For Nussbaum, the emphasis is quite different, and one Kant explicitly rejected, the particular, contingent details of each individual moral situation.

6. Nussbaum's Moral Method

In Love's Knowledge, Martha Nussbaum presents a substantial alternative to traditional theories of morality and moral decision making. She presents two major critiques of standard philosophic morality. First, she redirects the decision process, focusing it on perception of details particular to a moral situation. In this, she elevates the place of both contingent circumstances and human emotions, counting each as essential to a thorough, invested decision process. Second, Nussbaum argues that there is an organic connection between form and content in written texts, a connection particularly relevant for morality, and that certain forms are more capable than others of expressing certain content. Much of the book, then, is devoted to examples demonstrating the greater effectiveness of fiction over analytic philosophic prose in communicating moral content. The second critique is not directly relevant to my discussion here, but, as integral to Nussbaum’s project as a whole, it requires recognition. In this section, then, I will discuss the theses of Nussbaum as she presents them in Love's Knowledge and the lengthy article “In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism.” My intent, as in the section describing Kant’s morality, is not to argue for her, but to give a sufficient account of her position for use in further discussion.

Fundamental to Nussbaum’s position is the claim that general formulations of moral theory, expressed prior to any situation calling for a moral decision, are insufficient
for guidance. She does not want to eliminate general moral rules; rather, she disagrees with Kant’s under-characterization of humans as intelligent creatures. For Nussbaum, humans’ rational capacities are not a greater part of their composition than are other characteristics, such as emotions. Thus, the particulars of a situation demanding a moral decision and our ability to perceive these particulars play an equal, and even greater, role in the decision than does a rationally pure rule for action.

Nussbaum recognizes that any decision must arise from some starting point, and that no starting point is neutral. Rather, the starting point for a decision method reflects that position’s fundamental assumptions about what is important in human morality. It contains a preconceived bias, determining where those at the method’s decision point should look for guidance. For this reason, Nussbaum rejects general decision strategies conceived prior to the strategy’s application, even if this prior formulation withstands internal critique. That is, her rejection of a theory such as Kant’s reaches beyond a critique of its formalism or its technical coherence as a philosophic system. Rather, Nussbaum argues that prior formulations of moral action miss the point completely. She specifically addresses utilitarianism, both traditional and contemporary, and Kantianism, rejecting the already value-freighted approaches of both. Utilitarianism relies on a pre-established conception of equality and the value of maximization, thus requiring some degree of commodification for purposes of comparison. Kantianism, as already explained, overvalues the role and scope of abstracted reason in moral life. Neither of these approaches captures the true significance of the decision process in human morality. In contrast to prior formulations, she proposes a reorientation of the decision
process, "an account of ethical inquiry that will capture what we actually do when we ask ourselves the most pressing ethical questions."\textsuperscript{59}

In contrast, Nussbaum claims that acute responsiveness to the contingent particulars of a moral quandary is the very essence of moral decision making, and she offers an explanation of ethical reasoning that places primary importance on the contingent, particular details of each situation calling for an ethical decision. She claims that ethical decisions are themselves complex endeavors, arising from the complexities and contingencies found in real life, and that they cannot be subsumed by general theories of moral reasoning. The particular details of the context of a decision, including the emotions of the agent, are the details to which we are susceptive as humans, and, only by being deliberately aware of them can we make proper ethical choices.

Here, Nussbaum's organic connection thesis begins to develop. She observes that "an abstract theoretical styles makes, like any other style, a statement about what is important and what is not, about what faculties of the reader are important for knowing and what are not."\textsuperscript{60} If we understand human life and moral judgment in terms of an abstract rationality, then a scientific approach makes sense. Here, Wittgenstein's early work in the \textit{Tractatus} is a prime example. However, if we give credit to other aspects of human judgment, then we should seek a moral guide in keeping with these other aspects, a narrative of sufficient complexity and depth rather than a thorough bulleted list. Nussbaum notes this different thought in Wittgenstein's later \textit{Philosophical Investigations}: "What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgments. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can
apply them right. Unlike calculating-rules. What is most difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words.”61

This last sentence illuminates the problem, or richness depending on how one views it, of this alternative approach to moral judgments. Wittgenstein accurately captures the underlying debate of competing moral theories with his term correct and unfalsified indefiniteness. Nussbaum, Wittgenstein, and Williams all recognize that what is at stake is the applicability of a scientific approach to reasoning in morality. We want the assurance of correctness, yet, as Kant’s approach reveals, this assurance comes at the high price of abstraction from the richness of human life. In Love’s Knowledge, then, Nussbaum argues that correct and unfalsified indefiniteness is not a complete paradox, and the lack of security that accompanies non-scientific judgment does not automatically imply irrationality or unsound judgment. Rather, she relies on Aristotle’s work, beginning with his discussion of practical wisdom and intelligence. He states, “That practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge is [therefore] evident. As we stated, it is concerned with ultimate particulars, since the actions to be performed are ultimate particulars. This means that it is at the opposite pole from intelligence.”62 For Nussbaum and her appeal to Aristotle, this correct and unfalsified indefiniteness captures the essence of moral judgment and, perhaps more importantly for philosophical discussion, she explains that it is an equally rational approach. In doing so, she rejects the necessary association of rationality and scientific clarity.

Nussbaum argues that sound moral decisions need not be the product of scientific reasoning by making a strong Aristotelian argument for a more robust conception of rational judgment. This argument has three primary components. First, it claims that
goods, or values, are not all commensurable and therefore cannot be subject to simple measurement schemes. Second, it places priority on the particularity of singular judgments, emphasizing their importance over any universal approaches or formulations. Third, this approach recognizes, in contrast to scientific reasoning, the indispensable value of the emotions in sound judgment. Together, these components describe a rich and complete process for making correct moral decisions that reflects the goals of rational thoroughness and attention to details while avoiding abstraction from those aspects of our lives we consider morally salient.

Nussbaum's conception of incommensurability provides the strongest pillar of her moral theory. Here, she relies heavily on Aristotle's rejection of any science of measurement relying on quantitative comparison, specifically the idea that a "single standard of value can be found and that all rational choice can be recast as a matter of maximizing our quantities of that value." This quantitative measurement comprises four underlying claims, which she calls metricity, singleness, consequentialism, and end content. Metricity claims that all the alternatives in a situation of choice have some value in common and that the rational person will weigh the alternatives based on this value. Singleness claims that the same metric can be found in all situations of choice. Consequentialism places the emphasis of rational choice in the end product of the decision, stating that choices and resultant actions have value as means to this end, but not in themselves. Finally, end content defines the product to be achieved. Thanks to Mill, pleasure is the end content that usually comes to mind first, though he was not the first to propose, or reject, this.
Nussbaum rejects this science of measurement for the reason that moral judgments cannot be reduced to these four components, and she turns instead to Aristotle’s description of decisions between qualitative values. Here, she argues that all goods are not commensurable. This incommensurability has two components, which we can summarize as individual value and necessary loss. Together, these components keep the focus of the decision process on the particulars of the current situation and provide strong argument against all four components of the science of measurement.

Individual value recognizes that, when we choose between worthy alternatives, we choose based on unique values in each, not by seeing each as representative of a common value. As Nussbaum concludes from Aristotle’s discussion of the excellences, we pursue each of these unique values for its own sake. Here, context is important, and we should note that we are not discussing choices for the purpose of achieving some end. Thus, for example, if our end need was to move a heavy piano, the unique value of a pianist’s musical skill would make little contribution. Rather, to achieve this end, we would compare his level of strength to that of another person who also possesses a unique set of skills. On the other hand, Hamlet’s choice between becoming his father’s avenger and not committing murder presents two very different and incommensurable options in a context very different from the former one of achieving some end. In this case, consisting of the choice between items, the reasons for choosing one option are quite distinct from the reasons for not choosing the other. When considering individual value, then, the “choice among alternatives will involve weighing these distinct natures as distinct items, and choosing the one that gets chosen for the sake of what it itself is.” This is quite distinct from the moral test of the categorical imperative.
There is a further, and very important, aspect of the incommensurability of individual values that needs mention. Aristotle discusses this in terms of the excellences, and Nussbaum broadens it to encompass choice between individual qualitative values. Namely, the choice between some items is not a choice where the remaining item is dispensable. Rather, it is often the case that each is an irreplaceable component of the good life as a composite whole, and a life that lacked either of them "would be deficient or seriously incomplete, in a way that could not be atoned for by the presence of other items, in however great a supply."66

An obvious objection comes to mind here. How, one might ask, can a decision between two items be made and defended when there is no common basis for comparison? (This objection becomes even more potent when a choice must be made between multiple items.) Here, again, Nussbaum redirects the question, reframing it outside of metrical thinking. Whereas this objection presupposes a dichotomy between quantitative, and therefore measurable, comparison and mere arbitrariness, asking how a decision strategy can be rational without some common metric of comparison, she asks why, when a common standard flattens the richness of the real world, stripping each component of its distinctive contribution, we would consider deliberation in a way that eliminates this fullness. To ignore the full complexity and depth of incommensurable values is equally irrational. She says, "The really rational way to choose, says Aristotle with great plausibility, is to reflect on and acknowledge the special contribution of each item, and to make the understanding of that heterogeneity a central part of the subject matter of deliberation."67
Understanding many moral decisions as choices between unique and nonsubstitutable incommensurable goods means that, when a moral quandary presents us with a choice between two options, the choice of one alternative or good means that we have not chosen another. There is unavoidable loss in a decision between incommensurable goods. Unlike a decision based on calculated metricity, or one made to acquire a desired end, where the deliberation process for the decision ends with the actual decision, rational choice between incommensurable goods recognizes the loss of the good not chosen. Here, the temporal nature of a focus on particulars enters the equation. Whereas the categorical imperative functions in a timeless, abstracted moment where an agent simply re-enters life and moves on after the decision, ethical decisions between incommensurable options are not so simple. A decision is not a singular action; it does not take place in a vacuum, and a rational decision between incommensurable goods for qualitative reasons does not ignore the recognized loss that must accompany the decision. The decision is not like a threshold to cross, where deliberation takes place prior to the threshold (or in an abstracted moment prior to the threshold), and where life simply continues after the decision. Recognizing the unique contribution of individual options necessitates a consideration of the greater temporal situation, which includes the sense of loss that accompanies the unchosen, and thus unavailable, alternative after the decision.

How, then, do we choose? If we reject metricity, singleness, consequentialism, and end content, and if rationality requires us to recognize the full value of each incommensurable option, including the known and unavoidable loss of the other alternatives, then what criteria do we use? Nussbaum answers this with Aristotle's
second reason for rejecting the science of measurement: the priority of particulars over broad principles in practical guidance.

Priority of the particulars rejects the position that "rational choice can be captured in a system of general rules or principles which can then simply be applied to each new case." It thus rejects, for example, the catch-all nature of Kant's categorical imperative. Rather, practical wisdom requires the skill of perception for making "concrete situational judgments." Perception is requisite for responding to novel circumstances and recognizing the loss that accompanies decisions between incommensurable goods. Perception also allows for flexibility in moral judgment. Aristotle compares practical judgment to the practices of medicine and navigation. In each, it is easy to see the important role of prior formulations and strategies. These are indispensable guideposts. At the same time, it is easy to see that the practical wisdom needed to approach novel circumstances cannot arise from a set, immovable formulation.

This required flexibility stands in contrast to the connection between support for general, encompassing rules and commensurability. Nussbaum shows that both general rules and commensurable standards are approaches to moral navigation seen as "progressive stratagems that we can use to extricate ourselves from the ethical vulnerability that arises from the perception of qualitative heterogeneity." This statement has two important components, a perception of progression and the perceived insecurity of morality, and critique of each is crucial to Nussbaum's position. The concern over insecurity reminds us of the David Harvey quotation cited earlier: "The enlightenment project took it as axiomatic that there was only one possible answer to any question. From this it followed that the world could be controlled and rationally ordered.
if we could only picture and represent it right.” This control, order, and security was Kant’s approach, and, if, after critiquing his system, we sought to replace his decision strategy with a better one, we would not succeed according to Nussbaum. We would only be making another futile attempt within the same framework of thinking. Thus, her critique also questions the first part, where a conception of progression is associated with security. The problem with strategies that seek security through prior formulation and commensurability is that they face in the wrong direction, asking the wrong initial questions. The first step, then, is to reorient our thinking about practical judgment away from the idea that the better system is the one that conflates the qualitative heterogeneity of our lives.

Instead, an emphasis on perception recognizes that a strict ought cannot accurately guide all moral situations. Note the contrast between this observation and Kant’s “So act...” Nussbaum offers three reasons for this flexibility. First, practical matters are not fixed and predictable. The circumstances that prompted a general rule, even those surrounding an appeal to the fixed entity reason, limit the rule to that which has already been experienced. A refocusing on concrete particulars reveals that practical life may contain surprise. Improvisation, and not fixed rules, may be required. Second, practical judgment requires flexibility to adjust to the circumstances before it. This is different from improvisation, where novel circumstances appear at a later place along a timeline. Flexibility, like improvisation, acknowledges that future, unpredicted circumstances may arise; it differs by acknowledging also that each situation is too complex for general rules. Flexibility, then, addresses the depth of each situation. Third, the priority of perception over general rules recognizes the unique character of each
situation. Concrete, moral situations may contain “ultimately particular and non-repeatable elements,” which prevent the universalization of any particular decision. Even though some situations may resemble others, it is not appropriate to bluntly, or even carefully, re-apply decisions. Universalization of a previous judgment is limited by the contingent details of each additional situation.

For Nussbaum, prioritizing particulars over general rules offers substantial guidance for navigating complex moral situations. Through careful perception, an agent recognizes that changing circumstances, the complexity of real life situations, and the unique and non-repeatable aspects of some situations require an approach to moral judgment characterized by practical wisdom and not the application of general rules. This practical wisdom perceives the complex particulars of each situation and acts with the appropriate level of spontaneity, flexibility, and recognition of uniqueness. However, even this approach may still resemble the emphasis on rationality promoted by other theories. A complex utilitarian calculus, for example, is not incompatible with perception of particulars. Indeed, full perception of particulars, especially those that may arise as a result of the judgment (thus acknowledging that decisions between incommensurable goods do not end with the decision), prompt utilitarians to seek simpler applications. Therefore, Nussbaum emphasizes Aristotle’s third reason for rejecting the science of measurement, the role of the emotions in moral judgment.

Here, the objection of irrationality is strongest. The history of philosophy consists, in part, of a continuous endeavor to purge those aspects of ourselves that may interfere with knowledge and acute perception of the truth. Plato argues that truth is most accessible in the absence of bodily distractions, and his forms represent the goals of an
uncluttered grasping, by the intellect, of that which we only know imperfectly. The Stoics likewise avoided a role of the emotions. Montaigne's skepticism specifically notes that love can seriously misrepresent our lover's physical beauty to us. For Kant, the passions are ultimately selfish, directing us toward action other than that pursued by the perfectly good will. More recently, positivism most poignantly sought to excise intangibles, such as the emotions, from our grasping of truth. In each of these cases, then, the emotions are viewed as obstacles clouding our rational perception of truth.

In contrast to this tradition, Nussbaum proposes Aristotle's twofold role of the emotions. First, rather than cloud our vision, the emotions add an additional perceptive ability, helping us grasp the complexities and subtleties in a situation that might otherwise be overlooked, or intentionally ignored, by reason. This approach is, again, intricately tied to conceptions of commensurability and our understanding of rationality. To those opposed to reliance on the emotions, our emotions prevent us from seeing, rationally, the essence of the situation. They keep us from grasping the metricity of its core. To Nussbaum, in contrast, the emotions flourish in their role in moral judgment among incommensurables, and it would be irrational to deny them this place. Some values may even be perceived more accurately by the emotions than by reason. Moral knowledge "is not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling."72

The second role of the emotions relates to the perceiver. Moral decisions are not cold, calculated decisions, even when a difficult decision must be made. A hard and
unavoidable decision between incommensurables should be accompanied by some sort of struggle or pain in the sensitive agent, and these feelings should not end when the decision is made. The emotions, then, are not distractions from true perceptions. They are powerful aides that give us both increased depth of insight and appropriate responses to our decisions. In emphasizing perception and perception’s emphasis on concrete particulars, we must remember that the perceiver plays a role at least as important as that of the contingent details. This tangible contingency of the perceiver is in deliberate contrast to any system of abstracted decision making.

Nussbaum calls this overall approach “perception as morality.” Yet, she recognizes that perception emphasizing the priority of particulars and guided by the emotions is only a partial explanation of what needs to happen. Accurate perception plays an important role in practical wisdom, but it does not comprise the whole of practical wisdom. An emphasis on the present-tense aspect of perceiving particulars avoids generalization; however, it appears to suggest a clean palate for each new decision, which does not help us. Although the categorical imperative overlooks the richness and complexity of concrete life, it does, after all, give us a strategy for moral judgment. Universal reason, not practical wisdom, serves as the basis for the categorical imperative. It is available to every person, and it does not require training or experience for its application. For this reason, we praise Kant for developing a moral system that begins with an argument for metaphysical equality and recognizes the dignity inherent to each person. In contrast, practical wisdom is not available to all from the outset, and Aristotle describes it as developing over a lifespan.
This development, then, unless we assume it to be arbitrary or haphazard, implies a process. Although perception focuses on the particulars of a situation, it would be uncharacteristic of a perceptive observer to be locked in the present tense and to make decisions with a narrow range of focus. Rather, we expect her to make connections to other perceptive judgments and to recognize themes among them. We expect her, if she remains perceptive, to accumulate such experiences over time, to compare new situations to prior ones, and to compare the experiences of others against her own. In short, the continually perceptive person has no choice but to grow in practical wisdom. Here, Nussbaum suggests a system of dialectic she calls perceptive equilibrium, an approach to continued moral judgment that comes out of Aristotelian thought.

Aristotle gives us the inclusive dialectic method, and Nussbaum favors this starting point because its mode provides for “continuity with ‘our actual adventure’.” This method compares alternate positions, “holding them up against one another and also against the participants’ beliefs and feelings, their active sense of life.” It is both empirical and practical. As empirical, it relies on experience in the real realm of life for its evidence; as practical, it seeks a picture of life, a mode for us to function well. “The participants look not for a view that is true by correspondence to some extra-human reality, but for the best overall fit between a view and what is deepest in human lives... for coherence and fit in the web of judgment, feeling, perception, and principle, taken as a whole.”

Like the other components of Nussbaum’s perceptive approach to moral judgment, all positions within perceptive equilibrium are subject to revision. The particulars of any individual situation may challenge any held understanding. “Nothing
is held unrevisable in this process, except the very basic logical idea that statement implies negation, that to assert something is to rule out something else. Further, and related to her position on commensurability, perceptive equilibrium is “an equilibrium in which concrete perceptions ‘hang beautifully together,’ both with one another and with the agent’s general principles; an equilibrium that is always ready to reconstitute itself in response to the new.”

Perceptive dialectic consists of two competing elements. On the one hand, the approach is one of dialectic. Perception and increased wisdom are, to some degree, inseparable; this process of continued perception and comparison is the accumulation of practical experience. On the other hand, her description of perceptive equilibrium, in which individual perceptions “hang beautifully together,” is anti-hegemonic. New perceptions can at any time challenge existing wisdom and rules that have arisen from accumulated concrete, perceptive experiences, and these challenges may dictate a rewriting of experience, or they may co-exist in a state of tension. This mosaic-like coexistence maintains the richness and complexity of a morality that recognizes incommensurables.

There is a further layer of incommensurability, however, that even perceptive equilibrium cannot address. Nussbaum suggests that a sustained equilibrium, even one of tension where elements hang beautifully together, may not be possible, resulting in an end condition that is not really an end. She calls it perceptive oscillation. Perceptive oscillation recognizes that even a method of acute perception may still be too much method, resembling too closely the timelessness of the categorical imperative. Her point here is that the reflection that necessarily accompanies the comparison inherent to
dialectical perception is itself a moment distinct from the actual living of life, that to be immersed in the potential depths of experience does not allow us to perceive the needs of those around us, to be finely aware in a way that promotes perceptive reflection and equilibrium. To recognize this “complicates still further our idea of what might be the practical goal of ethical inquiry.” Specifically,

[the] recognition that there is a view of the world from passion’s point of view, and that this view is closed to the perceiver, shows us that perception is, even by its own lights, incomplete. The perceiver as perceiver cannot see it all; to get the whole he must at times stop being the sort of person who cares for wholeness. . . . For so long as our eyes are open, we are wonderful and lovable and finely responsive; but when we immerse ourselves in the most powerful responses, entering silence, closing our eyes, are we then capable at all of asking questions about our friends, of thinking of the good of the community? . . . Without this depth life seems incomplete and perception itself seems blind; but it cannot itself be ordered inside the equilibrium of perception or seen by its fine-tuned vision of the complete life.

To acknowledge this oscillation is to reconsider the question “How should one live?” Thus far, we have proceeded with Nussbaum’s holistic, comprehensive approach to moral judgment with the assumption that this question and her method, by eradicating the artificial distinctions between moral and non-moral and refocusing moral inquiry on the concrete particulars of each real-life situation we face as emotional beings, presents
the condition we should aspire to as moral beings. Here, however, Nussbaum distinguishes moral judgment that considers the emotions from our sometimes-state of immersion in the emotions themselves, a state that is not commensurable with that of the perceptive judge.

Without this emotional immersion, we are, perhaps, still too rational for Nussbaum. If we are to respond to situations perceptively and in keeping with our emotional knowledge, then this condition is food for our practical wisdom. She observes, "If there is for us any prospect held out for a life that combines fine perception with the silence and the hidden vision of love, it would only be in a condition that is not itself 'equilibrium' at all, but an unsteady oscillation between blindness and openness, exclusivity and general concern, fine reading of life and the immersion of love."80

This oscillation asks us not only to reconsider the question "How should one live?" Rather, it also acknowledges the "limits of that ethical question itself. It gestures toward the limits of ethical consciousness, making us aware of the deep elements in our ethical life that in their violence or intensity lead us outside of the ethical attitude altogether, outside of the quest for balanced vision and perfect rightness."81 Here, then, is the final blurring, the end condition of our ethical inquiry in which perception and immersion oscillate, distinct and yet unified, in a way that makes all we know the ethical life or, simply, the human life.

7. Critique of Nussbaum’s Method: Empirical Reductionism

In this section, I will critique Martha Nussbaum’s foundation for moral judgment. This will be unlike my Kant critique, where I reject his fundamental emphasis as

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Specifically, the accessibility of reason, and thus dignity, to all, especially as expressed via the moral law's discussion of means and ends, provides a remarkable account of moral equality. In a somewhat different fashion, I sympathize with Nussbaum's project as a whole and agree enthusiastically that her refocusing of the moral discussion is correctly placed. Concrete, tangible life, including the emotions, must be a foundation for moral clarity. Further, although it is not a point I wish to develop here, literary narrative may be the necessary technique for shifting philosophic approaches to morality from the abstract to the concrete, and Nussbaum's pioneering work here is indispensable to this position.

I will limit my disagreement with Nussbaum to one aspect of her project. There are practical difficulties with her approach, such as the overwhelming task of integration that inevitably results from a full consideration of particulars—a critique we can recognize without falling back into a system of metricity and singleness. Full perception of the detail temporality and the resultant, nearly-infinite range of potential effects our decisions may have on others over time can paralyze the decision process.

Where I disagree with Nussbaum is in her lack of a substantially-grounded normative position. This statement requires further clarification, especially since Nussbaum's rejection of abstract morality seems to offer us exactly the substance otherwise lacking, and I will develop this claim in this section. For now, however, I hold that Nussbaum's approach is fundamentally descriptive and, as such, fails to be sufficiently normative. From within a position of morality, she offers us a thorough discussion of the process of moral judgment, including which steps should be taken to better this process. She calls her position "perception as morality," and while
maintaining the position that a process that is not abstract is better than an abstract one because it accords better with the actual fabric of our moral lives, she does not offer a sufficient account of the what of this fabric. A thorough discussion of how our moral lives actually work and which approach is therefore most fitting still does not offer us guidance for determining moral direction unless we presuppose norms of some sort. In short, what Nussbaum gives us is a thorough description of the concreteness of our moral lives and a corresponding argument for why her approach is most appropriate to it, all without taking a substantial position as to its content. We are left, then, with a description of a thick moral decision process whose locus is the details of individual, particular situations that does not provide the foundation to connect these instances into a normative whole. Here, we are reminded of Hume, and I therefore call her moral position empirical reductionism.

This critique will have two parts. First, it will present her position as fundamentally descriptive, and therefore Humean in its lack of necessary coherence. Second, it will examine why such an approach is problematic for morality. Again, it is important to clarify that I agree with much of Nussbaum’s overall account of the process of making moral judgments, as well as her shifting of the moral crux from prior theory to tangible experience, and I argue rather that she shifts the locus of moral guidance too far into subjective, lived human experience, thereby failing to ground it in a way that provides broader continuity between individual situations involving moral content.

Before presenting my critique of Nussbaum’s position in Love’s Knowledge, however, it is necessary here to address an essay published two years after Love’s Knowledge, in which she offers what she considers to be a thorough account of a
substantive foundation for normative content. Her argument in the essay is interesting; she defends a position of human essentialism while rejecting any claims of metaphysical realism. Here, definitions are important. Nussbaum begins by distinguishing metaphysical-realist essentialism from what she calls internalist essentialism.

"Metaphysical realism claims that there is some determinate way that the world is apart from the interpretive workings of the cognitive faculties of living beings. A description of the world is true just in case it corresponds to that independently existing structure, false insofar as it does not so correspond." Nussbaum rejects metaphysical realism as a foundation for human interaction with the world and for normative content, claiming that it wilts under even mild skepticism, for it requires access, preferably apart from human mediation, to the truth of this independent, external structure. Therefore, in contrast to such a metaphysics and in keeping with her focus on the human realm, Nussbaum claims that a form of essentialism is still possible, where the "deepest examination of human history and human cognition from within still reveals a more or less determinate account of the human being, one that divides its essential from its accidental properties." She then proceeds with an account of this essentialism, arguing for a politics that guarantees, at minimum, the fulfillment of human essential needs and qualities.

Nussbaum clearly describes the origin of her essentialist claims, recognizing from the outset that she considers a human account of human needs and understanding to be the only legitimate form for such an account. She states that her position is "emphatically not metaphysical." In rejecting a metaphysical realism, however, Nussbaum is careful to avoid any relativist shift into the other end of the spectrum. She rejects the assumed, general understanding of the Academy, where "the collapse of metaphysical realism is
taken to entail not only the collapse of essentialism about the human being but also a
retreat into an extreme relativism, or even subjectivism, about all questions of
evaluation." In contrast, she argues for the existence of an indubitable human
essentialism, founded internally and grasped concretely.

She begins by enumerating a list of properties that describes non-negotiable
humanness. I will not duplicate the list, but some examples include the housing of life
within “bodies of a certain sort,” a finite lifespan and the corresponding recognition of
earthly mortality, “separateness” (an understanding of the individual human as a distinct
entity separated in mind and body from others), and a “sense of affiliation and concern
for other human beings.” Importantly, Nussbaum recognizes the influencing role of
culture, religion, and metaphysics when detailing this list, and she is careful to distinguish
her account of essentialism. Thus, when discussing the common feature of life housed
within a body, she acknowledges and then avoids the potentially varied cultural,
religious, and metaphysical understandings of this concept in favor of indisputable
features such as the need for food, drink, and shelter. All such lists encounter difficulties
with stringent critical theorists, but it is, nonetheless, a list difficult to disagree with.

Nussbaum continues by then enumerating a list of “basic human functional
capabilities” that arise from the characteristics of essential humanness. These
capabilities represent specific aspects, arising from the first list, of what she calls the
“thick vague theory of the good.” This list contains normative content; it is thick to
contrast minimalist theories of the good; and it is vague so that it has flexibility to
accommodate the varied terrain of human life on our planet. The list describes the type
of life that should be expected given the essentialist description of the first list. Thus, for
example, the functional capability that arises from the fact of inevitable human mortality states, "Being able to live to the end of a complete human life as far as it possible; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living."\(^{94}\)

Her argument here is that if we accept the first list, then we will accept the second one. Whether we choose to act on the obligations of the second list in a way that makes the capabilities accessible to others is our choice, but we cannot deny the natural connection between the two—to deny the functional capabilities is to deprive people of their essential humanness. Interestingly, to ignore the second list is, by her terms, to fail to be human by the conditions set out in the first list. That is, by not recognizing the basic human rights of the second list, we fall short of the characteristic to "recognize and feel some sense of affiliation and concern for other human beings," thereby failing, by our actions, to qualify for the essentialism in the first list. Assumed qualification for the first list, in turn, binds us to the second list. Further, consistently with her discussion of commensurability in *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum states, "The Aristotelian essentialist claims that a life that lacks any one of these, no matter what else it has, will be lacking in humanness."\(^{95}\) I will address the implications of these claims for morality at the end of this section. For now, my focus is on the relationship of Nussbaum's essentialist claims to her description of moral judgments in *Love's Knowledge* and to my critique of them.

Nussbaum's description of essentialism is important to my critique of her discussion of moral judgment in *Love's Knowledge* because it appears to provide a basis for moral judgment in a way that serves to ground the otherwise disconnected instances of moral decisions arising from a focus on particulars. The critique I intend to make describes Nussbaum's emphasis on particulars as the basis for moral judgment as
ultimately Humean, that is, while empirically rich in each instance, they contain no underlying foundation for their overlap apart from what we choose to bring to our interpretation of them. In contrast, essentialism offers such a foundation: shared, non-negotiable humanness. This essentialism is not a metaphysical position, but, as Nussbaum describes it, it provides a base that has been relatively consistent across human history and is sufficiently insulated from critical attacks on its position. It stands in sharp contrast to cultural relativism, subjectivism, and other such interpretative frameworks. In “Aristotelian Essentialism,” it serves as the platform from which Nussbaum argues for a normative politics, and in this context it is a strong base.96

This context of politics and international human rights, however, is not the context of individual moral decisions, and it would be improper to rely on Nussbaum’s account of essentialism to provide the thread of consistency running through all moral judgments made from an emotionally-guided, acute perception of particulars. In Love’s Knowledge, Nussbaum emphasizes the priority of the particular situation over general strategy and, within this, the priority of the particular details unique to a situation. The guiding list of functional capabilities, however, is general. Its points advise broad and generic principles for action, applicable in all situations. Nussbaum calls these points vague, encouraging malleability when interpreting and applying these principles across a diverse range of cultures. Yet, there is an unmistakable gap between malleability as cultural inclusiveness and malleability as acute response to particulars. The first relates to the broader functional capabilities and remains general; the second describes Aristotelian perception within unique situations as Nussbaum presents it in Love’s Knowledge.
This distinction is the functional difference between a priori and a posteriori theory—the great difference between fitting a prior formulation (whether grounded in abstract, metaphysical reason or the essentialism of lived experience) into the context of an individual situation and deriving a judgment through careful perception. Nussbaum grounds her prior formulation in the empirical world—the lived understanding of human essentialness—and not the abstracted realm of reason. She thus provides tangible contrast to Kant on the theoretical level. However, the relation of this theory to practice brings us back to the two types of theory-practice relations Kant describes. I will quote them again: “All is lost when empirical and therefore contingent conditions of the application of law are made conditions of the law itself, and a practice calculated to effect a result made probable by past experience is thus allowed to predominate over a self-sufficient theory;” and, “Is it not of the utmost necessity to construct a pure moral philosophy which is completely freed from everything which may be only empirical and thus belong to anthropology?” Thus, although Nussbaum derives her essentialism from an internalist human position and does not seek an a priori foundation like Kant, the distinction he makes between the two types of guidance describes the difference of the two approaches Nussbaum gives us in “Aristotelian Essentialism” and Love’s Knowledge.

In defense of Nussbaum, it is important to note that this essentialism is designed for political action. Government-level policies are general; guiding international decisions about human rights cannot be too particular. Her thesis in “Aristotelian Essentialism” is a deliberate contrast to the academic ennui toward social injustices in the name of pluralism and diversity. It provides a baseline for evaluation. Thus, we should
not criticize the relation of this essentialism to her position about particulars too much. The point here is to observe that the essentialism she describes cannot serve as the foundation that connects individual moral responses to the particulars of unique situations. The two lists in “Aristotelian Essentialism,” then, cannot serve as a rebuttal to the critique of disconnectedness in Love’s Knowledge.

Before moving on, there is one additional clarification. It could be argued that essential humanness serves as the backdrop against which we perceive particulars in our moral lives. The lists of essential characteristics and functional capabilities, then, function as parameters demarcating the realm in which correct moral judgment can be found, but we still respond to the particulars we perceive in each individual situation we encounter. The variety of judgments, however, based on the particulars of individual situations, is almost limitless, at best hemmed in by only the most fundamental aspect of shared humanity. If we understand the relationship of humanness to particular situations in this way, it only seems as though the generality of essentialism can guide us through individual moral judgments. Nussbaum’s essentialism, though connecting to morality as perception by providing necessary conditions that put restrictions on what is permissible moral perception, still leaves us with a gap between these minimal necessary conditions and the guidance required for a more nearly sufficient conception of the proper moral life.

Further, here also we find ourselves just relying on prior formulations. Although Nussbaum’s appeal to essentialism is not Kant’s appeal to reason, it does similarly describe a method in which we approach the details of a particular moral situation with a preconceived strategy for navigating the details to reach a decision. This backdrop—the
context of life—is what we reference for determining moral correctness. The difference between appealing to Nussbaum's essentialism or Kant's reason when seeking a foundation for morality is merely the difference between internalist and metaphysical realism. As frameworks for understanding morality in theory, they are both helpful in their own ways. As strategies for navigating individual moral decisions in practice, they are both prior formulations that fall short of fully addressing the unpredictable uniqueness of an individual moral decision. Here, the similarity is great. Nussbaum appeals to shared humanness known from experience, and Kantians appeals to the dignity inherent in each person as a result of being human. We cannot, then, draw on her discussion of essentialism when seeking a foundation from which to draw or a backdrop from which to navigate when approaching moral judgment as she describes in Love's Knowledge.

As discussed in the previous section, Nussbaum offers a thorough account for the process of moral judgment in Love's Knowledge. Claiming the incommensurability of values, the priority of the particular over the general, and the validated, important role of the emotions, she refocuses the moral decision process from the realm of simplified, general, and abstract thought to the lived, concrete experience of the given situation. This refocusing places the locus of our moral lives where we actually live, even in the contingent details of a particular situation, acknowledging that, while we may be reflective about our decisions during the process, most decisions and actions take place in the lived crux of life.

When Kant secured the moral law in a priori reason, he did so to provide it with continuity through an immovable foundation, to remove the possibilities of contingency and exception. In contrast, Nussbaum makes this very contingency her emphasis, even
discussing the importance of surprise. Indeed, this is her goal, to retrieve morality from generality and abstraction, placing it in the lived tangibility of human life. Kant also sought, however, to establish a metaphysical foundation for morality, which he understood as necessary for this continuity. Without a common foundation from which each instance of the moral life can draw, morality would be secondary to the material at hand—it would be, in a sense the dependent result of connecting the dots of individual situations calling for moral content. It is again the relation of self-sufficient theory to practice, and for morality, which Kant describes as supreme norm and guide, the foundation cannot be secondary.

Nussbaum is correct in her realignment of the moral emphasis. We certainly do not make moral decisions in abstracted, timeless moments apart from the details of the situation, including our emotional responses to the situation. Her realignment also revives the idea that values are not commensurable, and to seek a single metric to compare them flattens the richness of lived moral experience. In Love's Knowledge, however, Nussbaum's discussion of the moral life leaves itself open to the critique that it creates a disconnect between individual situations of moral judgment. Although the perceptive agent will draw on prior experience and will be able to imagine analogous situations for the purpose of comparison and contrast, there is no necessary, underlying similarity.

This disconnect happens in two ways. First, Nussbaum's discussion of the moral judgment process is limited to a description of the process. Her emphasis on perception, details, incommensurability, and emotions tells us where to look for guidance when navigating moral decisions, but it does not guide us through this content. We know
specifically which data are pertinent, and she tells us that decisions made from acute perception are better than those made more bluntly, but she does not provide a foundation for judging which of these acutely perceptive decisions is better, other than leaving us to assume that a more perceptive decision is better than a less perceptive one. Her position of perception as morality, then, is fundamentally descriptive, explaining which decision process is better, and why, without guiding us as to which decision is itself better, and why. To make this latter judgment, we need to insert presupposed norms or deduce similarity in content from several decisions Nussbaum would deem morally correct (begging the question by what norms she deems them correct). Using the method she gives us in Love’s Knowledge, we will accumulate a string of decisions made with the correct judgment technique, yet without the security of knowing we judged correctly.

Second, because of the descriptive nature of her approach, when Nussbaum emphasizes the role of perception to the degree she does, she creates a situation where morality’s shape is subject to the shape of individual experiences and an individual’s experience, not an integral, foundational component of a greater, human experience. A new set of particulars, unique either to an individual, or to general history for that matter, may dictate a morally correct decision contradictory to one made previously, even if the previous decision is still understood as correct at the time of the latter decision. This allows both to be morally correct and, at the same time, contradictory. Without developing any examples here, a brief consideration of telling “white lies” to avoid hurting a person’s feelings at a crucially sensitive moment in his or her life gives us a good starting point for understanding how a morally correct decision may differ according to circumstances. We may bring some preconceived conception of correct
judgment regarding truthfulness, honesty, respect, and friendship to the situation, but any correct decision will be determinable only after a consideration of the contingencies of that situation, including the current and future emotional states of the other party. Further, and equally important, the judgment we reach will not be repeatable, because the details of the situation are not likely to reoccur. Nussbaum addresses this non-repeatability arising from the uniqueness of a particular decision in her discussion distinguishing general and universal principles.103

Together, these two aspects of Nussbaum’s approach reveal the problem that arises with her approach. The emphasis on perception and method as the mode for determining moral rectitude and a dependence on particulars and uniqueness as moral guides narrow the scope of morality. They create a disconnect between individual instances of moral judgment such that assurance of moral rectitude is reducible to, and limited to, these singular situations. There is an irony here. While reinvigorating the moral life by emphasizing the tangible contingencies we know and feel in actual human life, Nussbaum actually limits the richness of this moral life by focusing it on the singular situation, stripping it of depth and comprehensiveness. This degree of narrowing and focusing may not be her intent; however, it is the functional effect of her approach. It stands in stark contrast to the abstraction and timelessness of Kant’s approach, yet it does not accomplish the thickening of morality as she suggests it does. Instead, we are reminded of Hume, both in the emphasis on empirical description and in the lack of necessary connection between separate occasions of similar activity. What we can know is what we observe, and we can have no assurance that any observation (or moral decision) will be repeatable. Because of the restrictions inherent to uniqueness and
particularity, we can only cross-check with other similar moral decisions, and any overlap between them will be on a level of generality only mildly helpful when facing a unique situation. In practice, then, Nussbaum leaves us with an empirical reductionism that cannot provide us with a sufficient standard for morality as Kant claims is needed in the *Foundations* and as Nussbaum presupposes in her discussion of essentialism.

Two objections in defense of Nussbaum arise here. First, her description of dialectical understanding and eventual perceptive equilibrium provides a basis for a coherent practical wisdom. Individual decisions are not, then, isolated instances, anchorless and subject to contingent circumstances. Rather, a dialectical understanding of morality provides the foundation against which we compare and evaluate new circumstances. It is a lifelong process, rich in perceptive content and inclusive of our mistakes. Future and completely unique circumstances, then, although calling for a perceptive judgment singular to the situation, are understood in terms of this accumulated practical wisdom. Their ability to redirect morality through their difference is mitigated by the accumulation of this lifelong wisdom. Further, and importantly, we do not encounter new circumstances and compare them to this understanding solely in a calculated, rational way, but we perceive and process with help from the imagination and the feeling of the soul. This perceptive dialectic, then, provides a thorough account for our understanding of morality.

Second, her approach is, after all, what we do when making moral decisions. She accurately represents the most realistic and plausible alternative to academic discussions of morality, and she succeeds in presenting "an account of ethical inquiry that will capture what we actually do when we ask ourselves the most pressing ethical
questions." To bring a philosophical, analytical critique to her method places morality back into the realm of abstract theory and exhibits exactly what she is rejecting. I will address each of these objections here, although the latter depends on the fuller discussion in the following section.

Two problems arise with Nussbaum’s discussion of dialectic. In the first place, the standard process of dialectic is one of incorporation—sublation into a new whole. Application of this standard understanding of dialectic to perception and morality gives us an eventual generality rather than a rich equilibrium of incommensurables. We do not need to think of this generality as generic; it can still be thick and complex. However, as an agent becomes more finely aware and richly responsible, that is, as the moral agent dialectically accumulates moral experience and hones her sense of moral perception, her approach to moral decisions moves closer to that of applying a general theory. It is unavoidable. Even the continually poised agent, who can place each moral decision in the context of previously-trained perception and still interpret each additional decision freshly, will inevitably make connections and references to successful learning, and, as this stock of successful learning increases, the ability to make these connections will increase also. A decision arising from keen, thorough, and sympathetic perception need not be novel. Nussbaum recognizes this process in the term of a person’s life, but we can easily imagine its application to a family, a community, and, eventually, to the succession of generations. A perceptive agent will remain aware and does not act from convention. Yet, even though one is continually perceptive and aware, each moral decision brings her one step closer to an eventually antecedent general theory. This is not what Nussbaum wants.
Therefore, she does not discuss moral decisions in these terms of standard dialectic, which leads to the second problem. Instead, as already discussed, she offers us a stasis of sorts, which she calls perceptive equilibrium. Here, accumulated moral knowledge exists as a body of incommensurable values and experiences—a mosaic that, when taken as a whole, contributes to practical wisdom. We compare situations of moral decision to this body, finding pieces of similarities and differences that contribute to our method of rich perception. In this version of dialectic, incorporation of new experience does not occur via sublation, and negativity is not resolved. It is an ever-growing body of practical experience and increasing wisdom, where dialectical incorporation consists of properly placing a new situation in relation to parts of the accumulated body and that maintains the uniqueness of incommensurable values without necessarily resolving them. This version works well within the context of Love’s Knowledge, where Nussbaum’s emphasis is on the process of moral judgment. Again, however, we are left with the problem, beyond the process, of finding a consistent position within the dialectic’s resultant equilibrium, both to connect together what already exists and to provide guidance for future decisions.

Both versions of dialectic can accommodate conflict, and they can change accordingly; neither claims a static, categorical correctness, and they grow according to context. They differ in that the result of the standard dialectic process is a new, coherent entity. Sublation involves a merging and transformation into a cohesive unit that leaves behind the contributing components. Further, it can have a critical mass from which its incorporation of a negative position may be to negate it, still transforming itself into a new entity. It represents a substantial critical position.
In contrast, perceptive equilibrium, as Nussbaum describes it, cannot claim such a stance. It has no coherent foundation intrinsic to each of its incommensurables grounding its array of accumulated moral experiences. To call this body practical wisdom or to understand it as a unified, singular set is to place an organizing framework on, or subjectively deduce one from, this equilibrium of individually-grounded decisions that are the results of individual sets of particulars. Such a framework, however, does not represent a necessary coherence that runs like a common thread through all of them. Indeed, the practical wisdom of perceptive equilibrium may contain simultaneous, contradictory positions. And this is exactly what Nussbaum wants and what she promotes in her discussion of the incommensurability of values. After all, it does reflect our lives.

The problem with perceptive equilibrium as a normative position, then, is that it contains no inherent cohesion. The organizing framework we are calling morality or practical wisdom is one we designate, subjecting it to both competing frameworks and to potential future perceptions. Because of the uniqueness resulting from the details of a particular moral situation, and because of the unique array of individual moral decisions within a single person’s life, there is no reason to suspect that two individuals will understand the details of a moral judgment situation in the same way. Subject to whatever perceptions perception may bring, an understood conception of morality can be dismantled at any time, as Nussbaum describes, by a novel or challenging set of particulars.

Here, Nussbaum’s appeal to human essentialism resurfaces as a strong candidate for this common thread. Could we not, from this essentialism, recognize commonality
among all people, thereby assigning an inherent dignity—grounded not in abstractions of reason, but in concrete, lived observations of common humanity—to each person? Could this not serve as a normative, critical position for organizing and directing the various decisions made within a morality of perception? More importantly, could it not only unify the experiences of a single person but represent also a substantial foundation for relating the moral experiences of different people? As Nussbaum notes in her rejection of metaphysical realism, “The failure to take an interest in studying our practices of analyzing and reasoning, human and historical as they are, the insistence that we would have good arguments only if they came from heaven—all this betrays a shame before the human. On the other hand, if we really think of the hope of a transcendent ground for value as uninteresting and irrelevant, as we should, then the news of its collapse will not change the way we do things: it will just let us get on with the business of reasoning in which we were already engaged.”

Initially, it appears that the answer to the above questions is yes. Unless we appeal to some conception of metaphysical realism, a morality derived from an internalist understanding of humanness will include a starting point similar to Nussbaum’s essentialism. However, we can make a distinction within an internalist understanding of humanness, one Nussbaum does not make, from which we can offer a foundation for morality that does not rely on Nussbaum’s essentialism and presents a final rejection of her method. The distinction is subtle, but it is not without a difference, and I will develop it further in the next section. For now, however, it observes that, within an internalist account of human essentialism, there are two ways to ground morality.
Nussbaum overlooks this distinction because, in her emphasis on an internalist understanding of humanness that is motivated by a rejection of any claims of a metaphysics, she fails to consider the force of material context when describing her account of internalist essentialism. Similar to her critique of the Academy's default acceptance of relativism as the only alternative to metaphysical realism, she too, in her rejection of a metaphysical realism, moves too far away from the position she rejects. Although she argues for a normative position grounded in essentialism and revealed through perception, thus contrasting it with both relativism and metaphysical realism, the primary role she gives to perception places too much emphasis on the subjective interpretation of this understanding. The distinction she overlooks, then, notes that within a position of internalist essentialism we may also emphasize the force of the material context without stepping away from perception into abstract metaphysical realism.

Once we note this distinction between two emphases within an internalist account of human essentialism, we can make two objections that provide a final rejection of Nussbaum's account of essentialism and her method's connection to it while still allowing us to preserve an internalist account of essentialism. Each of the two objections reveals where Nussbaum's emphasis on the subjective interpretation of an internalist essentialism falls short. Each also suggests where a greater emphasis on the material context of this internalist understanding would avoid the shortcomings of Nussbaum's method. The first objection claims that Nussbaum's account of essentialism cannot provide a substantive base to ground and connect the various instances of individual perceptions because this essentialism itself is subjective and susceptible to redefinition.
The second objection observes that Nussbaum’s account of essentialism can offer grounding only within a social context and fails to offer a foundation for moral guidance when we are alone. In the remainder of this section, I will address these two objections to Nussbaum’s account, explaining for each why it presents difficulty for her method. In the next section, I will offer an alternate approach to grounding a theory of morality that relies on the material emphasis of the distinction within an internalist account of humanness.

As described in this section, Nussbaum offers a description of essentialism to both establish a foundation for a method of moral decision making and counter the default relativism that accompanies a rejection of metaphysical realism. However, her discussion struggles to provide a basis for continuity between moral decisions. Her account of essentialism, understood internally, falls short of its grounding role because this essentialism is itself subject to perception.

For Nussbaum, the locus of moral judgment within an internalist understanding of humanity rests with perception. It is, thus, ultimately the product not only of the details of a particular situation, but also of a perceiver’s filtering understanding of these details. As described in the previous section, in her emphasis on perception Nussbaum rejects the use of prior formulations for moral guidance. However, without an underlying orienting framework, particulars do not give guidance unless we subjectively interpret overlaps and similarities among those particulars as “morality.” The difficulty with this approach, of particular import here, is that the perceiver’s ability to interpret those details is not itself a constant. It, too, is a contingent detail of a particular situation. To depend on the perceiver’s ability to perceive, orient, and interpret places great faith in each member of
humanity and assumes sufficient perspicacity on the part of all perceivers. Yet, Nussbaum herself admits that, at times, even the most perceptive agent will lose focus when immersed in the full experience of a moment, resulting in perceptive oscillation. We can only imagine what perception by others, such as those raised in negligent households who do not know the security and depth of loving relationships, might look like.

This problem of subjective perception creates problems for an essentialism derived from within an internalist understanding, because a conception of essentialism is itself, even as Nussbaum describes it, subject to interpretation and therefore cannot provide a rebuttal to a critique of subjectivism. In other words, although Nussbaum’s conception of essentialism appears to be sufficient and solid, if this understanding of human essentialism changes radically, then we are left holding on to nothing. There is, then, a further level on which subjective perception is problematic in addition to the role it plays in individual decisions. If a major transition occurs in our understanding of human essentialism, through which we understand *human-qua-human* in a way that does not coincide with Nussbaum’s description of essentialism, then the coherence provided by her essentialism can no longer serve as a substantial normative foundation for our otherwise distinct moral situations. Nussbaum leaves morality exposed to the peril of the potential of a radically changed understanding of humanness.

Yet, who can disagree with her conception of essentialism? Here, Nussbaum’s discussion of essentialism reveals her contextual position in history. That is, it fits now, offering a sufficient and solid account for humanness. Were this understanding of humanness to change—as the rapid progression of technological innovation suggests
could happen—this “business of reasoning in which we were already engaged” could look very different.

At the end of “Aristotelian Essentialism,” she offers a short narrative myth about essentialism, in which another planet houses human-like creatures that descended long ago from humans. They lack several features Nussbaum considers essentially human, and, therefore, we are led to conclude that they are not human. Specifically, in addition to physical differences, they “have discarded—not just in theory but in the fabric of their daily lives—the Earthly tendencies of thought that link the perception of one’s neighbor’s pain to the memory of one’s own and the perception of a stranger’s pain to the experience of a neighbor’s, all this through the general idea of the human being and human flourishing.”

This story accomplishes two goals for Nussbaum. First, it demonstrates in narrative what she has described in the previous pages of the essay. Second, it allows her to argue that her version of essentialism is correct; any other compilation of features, as exhibited by these other creatures, would not be that of humans. Her approach to morality, then, is applicable to us, as humans, for it coincides inextricably with this essentialism. It is evident that we do not hold the inhabitants of this other planet to our moral standards—our moral understanding does not apply—because they are not human. In this, she presents a circular argument for her thesis, claiming that, as long as conditions are as they are, then our moral obligations are as she has explained.

A little thought experiment, however, reveals a problem with her story. If we do not give these creatures physical appearances different from ours and we do not place them on another planet, but, rather, we distinguish a subset of people via another
characteristic Nussbaum considers essential, then we have a grave problem. Consider, for example, the no longer distant and unimaginable potentials of biotechnology. Future parents already have the ability to select for certain genetic features; what if abnormally-extended lifespans were an option for those who could afford it? The gap between the wealthiest and poorest citizens of the world, even within the United States, is such that it is not impossible to imagine such physical enhancements for some and not for others. What if these people sought to associate only with others in a similar condition? What if, after many years, they began to understand themselves as different? What if they chose to reproduce primarily with each other? Although this may seem extreme, we can easily project the potentials of this near-future technology, and we can extrapolate from other situations where we have become acclimated to an otherwise repugnant concept. It does not require a cynical mind to suggest that the potential for profitability, mixed with proper marketing and lobbying, can transform previously held standards.

Memory altering drugs are another recent technology. What if those who could afford it could selectively remove certain memories? Although we currently direct this developing technology toward those who have faced extreme circumstances, such as abuse, rape, or war trauma, we can easily imagine where market forces would eventually broaden the tolerable application of this technology. If we extrapolate from the currently broadening application of pain medications, we can imagine where memory altering drugs, designed for a specific, well-intentioned use, could also become easily accessible.

The past seventy-five years of our human history has seen several instances of attempted genocide. Why should it seem distant that a select group of humans could begin to see themselves, through genetic enhancement or selective memory, as different
from others? By removing recognized kinship, they are not human by Nussbaum's definition. The point here is not science fiction. Rather, it is to show that a one-eyed race of giants on another planet misguides Nussbaum in framing her example. Instead, if we imagine two different groups of people existing on the same planet, one of which defines itself outside the parameters of the moral legislation derived from Nussbaum's conception of human essentialism, then the two groups are not bound by the same obligations. We, instead, find ourselves back at Bernard Williams' discussion of moral skepticism. What if a group of people, specifically those who through their ability to access the technologies above have distinguished themselves from the rest, simply opt out? To what do we appeal without shared essentialism?

The second objection also becomes visible when we make a distinction between the emphases in an internalist understanding of human essentialism. In Love's Knowledge and "Aristotelian Essentialism," Nussbaum's description of moral decisions has a notable bias. She provides an effective method for navigating, through careful perception, the ethics of human relations. She describes how to approach unique, individual situations calling for moral judgment, including the appropriateness of our personal, emotional responses to the decision. She also describes the threshold of human essentialism to guide us through decisions of broader policy, both within a single government and for use internationally. In both contexts, unique, individual situations and broader policy, she focuses her discussion of morality on human relationships. How do I respond toward this person in this particular situation? How do I act sensitively given this other person's needs? How do we protect the dignity of a particular social class in light of hundreds of years of established, cultural discrimination?
In this context of relationships, Nussbaum’s work is to be commended for properly retrieving morality from abstract realms and reinstating it as a human function. After all, if we cannot justify an act of generosity with love, or sympathy, rather than reason, we function robotically and apart from a major aspect of our lives. However, Nussbaum limits her discussion of morality to human relations only, and the problems of sufficient grounding for her theory become especially clear when we change the context for perception as morality.

That is, both her discussion of perception as morality and her description of human essentialism do not give us any suggestions for guiding our moral lives when we are alone. As I discussed in the introduction, the gravitas we associate with morality is particularly manifest in the presence of others, but the situation is different when we are by ourselves.

When we are alone, perception as morality fails us, for there is no greater accountability for our perception—no other person or broader context to serve as a foil for our interpretation of our perceived needs. Alone, I am free to perceive, in as much sensitive detail as possible, that today’s installment of Oprah is more suited to my particular needs at this time than is a walk through the winter hills behind my house. I am free to take my moral cues from Nora Roberts rather than Henry James—perhaps for reasons as basic as the accessibility of the prose of each. In the same way that the particular details of an individual situation involving human interaction dictate our decisions, such as navigating the gradations of truth and white lies, so also the details of a situation where we are alone guide our decisions. The crucial difference, however, is that decisions made in response to contingencies within the context of relationships have their
focus somewhere other than on me solely. If I have had a long day at work, I am still responsible to the other person in the common moral space we share. Alone, after a long day, however, weariness may be the primary factor influencing my perception of my needs.

There is no need to elaborate this further. What Nussbaum gives us is a thorough account for perception and moral judgments within the context of relationship, and any consideration of the moral life when I am alone reveals her method to be lacking. The reason for this lack is her method’s ultimate grounding in subjective perception.

Both objections become evident only when we make a distinction within an internalist understanding of human essentialism. We may, as Nussbaum does, emphasize subjective perception as the mode of understanding our morality, but this exposes an account of essentialism to the vagueness of our perceptions, relinquishing a conception of essentialism to changed understandings of humanness. It also fails to provide moral guidance when we are alone. If, however, we make this distinction within internalist essentialism, recognizing subjective perceptions as fitting into a broader context that is itself still an internalist conception, then we can provide a more sufficient and substantial basis for moral guidance without reaching into metaphysical realism.

The need, then, is to begin with Nussbaum’s redirection of the moral focus from abstract realms to the concrete particulars of our daily lives, but to develop it in a way that does not reduce a conception of morality to the individual situations calling for moral judgment. By placing perception in a broader material context, we respond to each of the two objections, providing an internalist account of essentialism less subjective than Nussbaum’s and able to provide moral guidance when we are alone.
9. Alternative Position: Centered Coherence

Any critique must depart from some initial position. Here, I have critiqued Kant’s approach to moral theory for its abstraction from the experience he sought to guide. His position is ultimately one of rational reductionism. Although I hold that Nussbaum’s alternative closely resembles our tangible process of moral judgment, I have also presented the argument that her approach is one of empirical reductionism. Were I to stop here, it would appear from these two critiques that I reject any kind of moral reductionism. This is not the case.

As I described in the introduction, we understand the presence of morality in our lives. Whether, in our grasp of morality, we see this is a dichotomous moral, not-moral position or the more holistic question “How should one live?” we recognize some distinction between actions that are better and actions that are worse. We approve of individual actions and social policies while scorning others. We readily recognize acts of kindness and examples of courage, both public and private, and we readily disapprove of cruelty and laziness, both public and private. Again, whether we attribute this recognition to social conditioning or some greater metaphysics, it is the case that we possess some conception of morality and a corresponding sense of value. This conception is something to which we attribute significant gravity and, importantly, is one we are willing to defend.

This gravity and defense encourage reduction in morality. In order to back up our moral positions, which represent some of our most deeply held beliefs, we seek the decisive foundation of an Archimedean point, that which is unquestionable. For Kant, this is the a priori, universal, and necessary realm of reason. For Nussbaum, this point is
known a posteriori in the concrete particulars of shared human experience and ultimately
defined in the details of each experience. The reductionisms of Kant and Nussbaum are
similar in that they both focus, although with very different emphases, on single
moments. The moment of decision for Kant is so narrow in its scope that an agent is
morally accountable for the judgment itself only, and there is no accountability for the
agent's success in enacting the decision. Moral judgment for Nussbaum focuses on the
particular details of a single decision, limiting both the moral moment and a greater
conception of a moral whole to the particular situation at hand. By emphasizing concrete
particulars, Nussbaum does offer a richer reductionism than Kant. Her characteristic
phrase "finely aware and richly responsible" suggests more than the rhetoric of moral
obligation, but even this more robust account cannot respond to the two objections I
raised in the previous section.

As an alternative to the reductionisms of Kant and Nussbaum, I would like to
sketch how we might think differently about reductionism. My position is reductionist in
that, if pressed, it will claim a defendable foundation. However, it differs from the
reductionisms of Kant and Nussbaum in that it seeks a broader foundation; it is reducible
to an Archimedean whole, rather than a point. Its locus is not the narrow, abstracted
realm of reason; it is likewise not the narrow, though rich, set of details defining a
particular situation. Rather, it seeks to combine these in a way that gathers the individual
perceptions known to us through experience under a common banner of cohesion.
Importantly, this moral foundation is a theme that courses through these various
experiences, and not an interpretive framework we assign to them in reflection.
I will proceed with the awareness that the following discussion will be tentative. This comes partly from the incomplete nature of a sketch, and partly because it borrows from other, established systems. Kant's system of morality received much of its strength from the underlying logical consistency of his greater metaphysics. Transcendental logic works as a whole; it is irresponsible to simply remove a section for use elsewhere. Thus, where borrowing occurs, it will be done selectively and carefully in an attempt to avoid this carelessness.

This alternate perspective begins with a consideration of the following two statements:

- Our perceptive actions have meanings (and we may connect them into a greater whole).
- A perceptive action has meaning because it is part of a greater whole.

These statements have several similarities. Both recognize meaning and value as revealed through experience. Both are consistent with a position of internalist essentialism. (The latter, although resembling claims of metaphysical realism, does not depend on the existence of a universal and timeless in-itself or on any form of the transcendental.)

The first statement represents Nussbaum's perceptive equilibrium, where decisions are made in response to particulars and overarching coherence is secondary. Concrete perceptions "hang beautifully together" as an equilibrium that is "always ready to reconstitute itself in response to the new."

The second statement implies something more. It too is essentialist. That is, it agrees with Nussbaum's statement that the "deepest examination of human history and
human cognition *from within* still reveals a more or less determinate account of the human being, one that divides its essential from its accidental properties."\(^{109}\) This position differs from Nussbaum, however, on the basis of the distinction mentioned in the previous section. It rejects an internalist conception of morality that is inseparable from perception. A position that does not seek a foundation apart from perception defers its composition to this perception, for it lacks an intrinsic cohesiveness and critical standpoint that can appeal to that cohesiveness. Instead, I suggest that the distinction be made, within an internalist understanding of humanness, grounding this understanding in a subjective and an objective component. The former does not suggest abstraction or relativism; the latter does not rely on metaphysical realism. Rather, the latter seeks a broader foundation for this essentialism, one that can provide moral guidance when we are alone as well as when we are in relationship and that can contest arbitrary or changing conceptions of humanness.

There is a recognized trade off here. Kant's system, although abstract, provides an absolute foundation. Nussbaum's method, although lacking the cohesiveness of Kant's system, grounds morality securely in the most tangibly-known aspects of our experience. By remaining somewhat distant from both, this alternate reductionism, paradoxically, relinquishes the full security provided by these two other methods. It instead brings us back into Bernard Williams' discussion, where we realize morality is a different game.

In "The Moral First Aid Manual," Daniel Dennett describes what a guide for morality might look like. Regarding the issue of security, he states, "One cannot expect there to be a single stable solution to such a design problem, but rather a variety of
uncertain and temporary equilibria, with the conversation-stoppers tending to accrete pearly layers of supporting dogma which themselves cannot withstand extended scrutiny, but which do actually serve on occasion, blessedly, to deflect and terminate consideration.” At first, this sounds quite a bit like Nussbaum, but he continues: “It might seem then that ‘rule worship’ of a certain kind is a good thing, at least for agents designed like us. It is good not because there is a certain rule, or set of rules, which is provably the best, or which always yields the right answer, but because having rules works—somewhat—and not having rules doesn’t work at all.”110 We need rules, norms, or landmarks. Williams suggests in the postscript to Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy that we begin with truth, truthfulness, and the meaning of an individual life. That is, while we must recognize the shifts and rearrangements of the furniture within morality as we gain deeper understandings of ourselves through perception, science, and experience, we must also identify and rank those pieces of furniture, recognizing that rearrangement and refinishing is different from claiming that all pieces of furniture are equally important. Not having rules or landmarks from which to gain orientation does not work.

Bernard Williams suggests that we consider rationality as one such piece of furniture, although the skeptic or the dogmatist, functioning autonomously apart from any moral norm, may simply choose to be irrational. I suggest instead, in keeping with Nussbaum, that a moral outlook does not overemphasize rationality, but instead borrows a concept related to rationality: coherence. This does not reach for the categorical universality of Kantian morality, and it recognizes perceptive equilibrium and oscillation as lacking the unification required for sufficient guidance. In exchange for the security
otherwise provided by rational or empirical reductionism, it offers a broad but definable concept, coherence known in experience.

The following is a sketch of some tenets for coherence as a foundation for morality. I will discuss two components of this. First, I will discuss how coherence functions within an internalist understanding of humanness and how it establishes standards while being receptive to rich perception. Second, I will discuss where we need to look for guidance in delineating a morality of coherence.

A position of coherence is ultimately reductionist, but, importantly, it does not narrow to a single point. By its essence, it is a whole; the locus of a morality focused on coherence reaches outside human nature. This does not mean it is distinct from human nature, only that human nature, and its perception, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for grounding it. Here, a distinction made by Hannah Arendt is helpful. In *The Human Condition*, she separates human nature from the human condition, noting that “the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature.” In making this distinction, she notes that human nature—the essentialism Nussbaum discusses—is insufficient for describing the human life. Rather, a full account must recognize that human life is contained within a material context. She states, “The human condition comprehends more than the conditions under which life has been given to [humanity]. . . . Whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human experience.” Further, “Whatever enters the human world of its own accord or is drawn into it by human effort becomes part of the human condition. . . . The objectivity of the world—its object- or thing-character—and the
human condition supplement each other; because human existence is conditioned
existence, it would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated
articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human experience. 

From this, we can better understand the subjective-objective distinction within an
internalist understanding of humanness and therefore morality. We do not live in a
timeless universe, as Kant has it, nor does our understanding of morality reside in the
context of human-to-human relations only or in the confines of an individual situation.
Rather, morality, as related to the full context of humanness, must address the greater
human condition. Its foundation must be one where the emphasis does not rest with a
subjective interpretation of perception.

For this reason, coherence gives us a good starting place. Importantly, we must
recognize at the outset that this coherence becomes visible in a phenomenological
description. It is understood internally and does not appeal to a metaphysical foundation.
Importantly, it represents a conception of the good and can thus serve as an orienting
framework. We can define this coherence both negatively and positively.

Negatively, it recognizes strong dissonance in our lives as significant and
problematic, a deviation from the understood good. This is not an appeal to the complete
unification of experience; periods of perceptive equilibrium are allowed. However, if
morality is to provide guidance, then coherence as a moral position cannot offer a blanket
acceptance of dissonance in the name of incommensurability and Nussbaumian dialectic.
For example, we have a strong scientific understanding of what human physical health
looks like and what diminishes this health or adds to it. Certain foods and activities,
whose independent values we may perceive to be worthwhile to us and in certain contexts
may be acceptable and even good, are incommensurable with this overall conception of health. A moral discussion must be able to name a generally sedentary lifestyle, a diet of frozen, processed lunches and suppers, or non-genetic obesity as dissonant with the coherence of health in accord with our physical and psychological needs. Given our known description of human overall health, derived from an internalist understanding of humanness but grounded more broadly (in science also rather than in subjective perception only), we would never condone such a lack of activity and unhealthy diet. Instead, we could name and prescribe certain actions and behaviors as better.

Positively, coherence represents the phenomenological experience and understanding of participation in something greater than that which is immediately apparent. Again, this is known in experience and does not appeal to a separate metaphysical reality. It functions along the concept of synergy, where the whole of the experience is qualitatively different than the sum of its parts, and is evident as a sense of transcendence. This transcendence need not be religious or spiritual (although it does not dismiss the validity of religion). We know it in the experience of art, both for the performer or creator and the observer. We know it in the exuberance of mind and body after a strenuous physical activity. We know it in the midst of an overwhelming natural landscape, whether grandiose or utterly simple. We know it in the emotions of love, hurt, and sympathy a person comes to be present in. Importantly, in all of these, we recognize that content comes from the intrinsic dignity of a greater setting. Neither the perceiver nor the context solely defines the moment by itself, and only together do they describe the full experience.
From these negative and positive sketches of coherence as a foundation for a conception of morality, we can see how a centered and situated coherence might provide a valid alternative to the reductionisms of Kant and Nussbaum. In contrast to it, we see how dry Kant’s reductionism really is. Although he provides a foundation that is seemingly categorical and universal, it removes us from those aspects of our lives we find most powerful. Our physical bodies and emotional intelligences contribute too significantly to our understanding of value to be ignored. We also see how Nussbaum’s method of perception as morality focuses too narrowly on details and thus cannot provide sufficient guidance within relationships and fails to address our moral lives as anything other than perceptual. As an alternative to the rejection of these two systems, centered coherence offers an outlook on our moral lives that reflects the tangible details we actually experience while offering sufficient landmarks for navigation. It can define what is immoral, both when we are in relationship and when we are alone, and it can also offer a conception of the good beyond what is blameless. It recognizes individual value and incommensurability, but it can still define some standard by which certain incommensurables, perhaps those that remain perpetually unresolved, are understood as blameworthy.

In exchange for this comprehensiveness, it offers a foundation that is not clearly demonstrable. This foundation is sufficiently competent to reach into all aspects of our lives, and, within these, it can provide detailed accounts of bad, good, and better. However, situated coherence as a moral starting point, as a conception of the good, represents the Archimedean foundation of a broad whole, not a definable point or set of
points. It is not clearly definable like reason, and it is not concretely identifiable like tangible details.

As a conception of the good, situated coherence provides, within an internalist understanding of humanness and in the context of concrete particulars, an orienting framework. It is teleological. This teleology need not be a Hegelian progression, and it need not be one of movement, but it has directional emphasis. It claims better and worse, this and not that, and in each case can state why. It can recognize deviations from this conception of the good, including shifting understandings of humanness. If morality’s role is to provide guidance among the contingencies of lived experience, then it must be able to offer orientation, not just a method for perception. This is why Kant includes the “Kingdom of Ends” expression of the moral law. It is an attempt to provide an orienting framework for the categorical imperative to save it from the critique of emptiness, while at the same time avoiding contingencies and heteronomy. Morality is not arbitrary, and a grounding of coherence provides sufficient stability from which to provide guidance. From within an internalist conception of humanness, it can name what is good and thus guide our action.

Beginning with coherence, then, we can offer guidance for rich perception. We can navigate the contingent details of a moral decision, still paying close attention to the uniqueness of the situation. Yet, within this approach, morality’s shape is not dependent on these details. On the other hand, this guidance is not a general, one size fits all method. Rather, grounded coherence is an inherent quality of our internal conception of humanness, and it reflects the significance and gravity we experience in our moral lives as well as the comprehensive context—both individual details and broader connections—
in which we live. This ability of coherence to provide a blend of gravity, orientation, and perception can be seen most notably in centering acts of grace, such as the Bishop of Digne’s response in *Les Misérables* when Jean Valjean is found to have his silver or in the Christian Gospels when Jesus prevents the stoning of the woman caught in adultery. Each of these actions arises from close perception of the particulars and is incommensurable with a general mode of moral judgment (a system of exceptions to the rule defeats the point of rules). Yet, these decisions are not dependent, secondary responses to the particulars. Rather, each decision constitutes a greater conception of the good, the center of a coherent spiritual whole for the person receiving the act of grace. Each exhibits all the gravity, emotion, sensitive perception, and wholeness we want in morality.

How do we begin to understand this coherence? How do we define and set its parameters? Where do we look for its orientating landmarks? Coherence complies with an internalist understanding of humanness. Even though it seeks a more objective foundation than perception, it too connects up with the immediacy of human experience. A source, sufficiently compelling and content-rich is needed. As these two examples suggest, and as Nussbaum shows in her organic-connection thesis, narrative offers a strong starting place. However, since coherence, and not narrative per say, is the objective, one place we might look is the genre of grand narrative. Grand narratives traditionally provided and, for many non-technologically advanced societies and religious and social groups today, still provide the meta-level framework for orienting our knowledge, including our morals. Hegel, for example, gives us one of the more celebrated grand narratives—dialectics of Spirit—within philosophy. Others include the
“hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.” Likewise the dominant religious texts also offer similar grand narratives. Lyotard defines grand narrative as a narrative with a “legitimating function.” They require no further justification for their legitimization.

I refer to the use of grand narratives carefully and tentatively; Lyotard defines grand narrative because he critiques it. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, he traces the relationship of science and technology to knowledge, describing the breakdown of science’s claims to legitimacy and the resultant dissolution of the grand narrative within contemporary capitalist society. He explains,

> Legitimation is the process by which a “legislator” dealing with scientific discourse is authorised [sic] to prescribe the stated conditions (in general, conditions of internal consistency and experimental verification) determining whether a statement is to be included in that discourse for consideration by the scientific community. . . . The question of the legitimacy of science has been indissociably linked to that of the legitimation of the legislator since the time of Plato. From this point of view, the right to decide what is true is not independent of the right to decide what is just, even if the statements consigned to these two authorities differ in nature. The point is that there is a strict interlinkage between the kind of language called science and the kind called ethics and politics: they both stem from the same perspective, the same “choice” if you will.
Lyotard notably defined postmodernism as characterized by “incredulity toward metanarratives,” and we do not have to be fans of his to accept his rejection of grand narratives. Further, we do not need to view the flux of language games Lyotard proposes—perceptive equilibrium on a global scale—as a helpful alternative. Rather, Lyotard’s role is important in recognizing the difficulties in establishing a single meta-narrative and critiquing the tendency of such narratives, from within their framework of self-legitimization, to make claims of universality.

Thus, I do not suggest that we blindly accept any given one as the official, definitive statement of human morality, but that we examine the primary function of these narratives, their provision of orientation and their resultant relation to coherence. Even though a singular, universal grand narrative cannot be legitimized, this does not diminish the fact that the individual attempts at such a narrative accurately reflect much of our internalist understandings of humanness. That said, a full discussion of grand narrative requires adequate consideration of critical theory. I will save such a discussion for a later time, but not without noting that criticism is either arbitrary and aimless or it too departs from some cohesive center, however distant.

Grand narrative takes several forms, and from these forms we can understand their orienting role, as well as begin to establish some basic criteria for wading through their many claims. A grand narrative can represent and explain the metaphysical worldview of a particular cultural group or broader society, such as can be found in the creation stories of pre-technological societies. It can, as in the case of nationalism, tell the story of a people, thus providing a sense of pride and belonging. A grand narrative can, in the case of an institution such as democratic government, provide a
comprehensive foundation for a wide array of policies and activities, and it can, as with science, offer a validated, provable perspective. As the text of a religion, grand narrative can follow the life of a single person, such as Jesus of Nazareth or Mohammed, unifying various precepts under a single banner, or it can tell the story of a people, such as the ancient Hebrews. Important to their role of orientation, grand narratives are not individual snippets of narrative; they are not equivalent to myths, fables, stories, or individual pieces of fiction. Rather, they seek to make connections between events and to provide explanation, not just description. They thus orient us in moral space, offering us a significant level of coherence. This orientation and meta-level connectivity distinguishes them from the role individual works fiction, as passages or full texts, play in perception.

Certain characteristics make grand narratives good starting places. First, as narratives, they can include a rich array of context and details. They incorporate these concrete tangibles into their accounts as inherent attributes—context is the nature of narrative—reflecting key aspects of human life known and validated through experience. Nussbaum provides full explanation of the value of this. Beyond Nussbaum’s explanation, however, grand narratives provide a mode for relating perception to broader context.

As narratives, however, they are told; that is, there is a voice to the teller. Lyotard describes the subject in the telling of a narrative as “obligated in the way of a relay that may not keep its charge but must pass it on.” For Lyotard, this telling is a diminution and anti-privileging of the subject, and we can agree that it spreads the locus of the moral moment away from the teller of the story. In arguing this, Lyotard sought to reduce the
autonomous role of the subject and thus the ability to claim the superiority of any particular narrative over others. However, the telling of a narrative also subjects the account to the occasional twists and turns of the speaker. There is, then, a flexibility within grand narratives. Although they are meta-level accounts, they must reflect our internalist understandings of humanness; they must be communicable, emanating from the teller and resonating with their recipients.

As stated, this is a sketch. It is incomplete in its telling, and there are many problems and objections to be dealt with at a later time. The primary objection, however, notes that there are many grand narratives, requiring us not only to choose among them but also to explain how we made this choice. If grand narratives reflect our internalist understandings of humanness according to a situated teller and recipient, then they take us right back into the problem of subjectivism, only on the larger scale of orienting worldview.

To address this objection, we can begin by noting that anyone who is able to provide necessary and sufficient moral norms must speak from within some centered coherence. This position may be vague or incompletely understood, but it still provides the required grounding for understanding a robust and generally orienting morality. Importantly, a centered coherence is a position we have chosen. Although we interact with, and are influenced by, our material environment, we are not controlled by it, and we act autonomously within it.

The problem of plurality remains, however. Even though grand narratives arise from positions of centered coherence and help us identify the important landmarks within them, the grounding of grand narratives within a centered coherence still leaves the
problem of a pluralism of centered coherence. To take an account of essentialism, such as Nussbaum’s, and make it complete by integrating it with its material context, in whatever particular form this context takes, inevitably results in this type of pluralism. However, the key difference between this pluralism and the pluralism of an anti-essentialist relativism is that each instance of centered coherence offers both the necessary and sufficient conditions to construct a substantial, grounded, and non-arbitrary moral orientation. A pluralism of centered coherence does not, then, resemble at all the arbitrariness of pluralistic relativism.

After recognizing this crucial difference, the important next step is to identify the various instances of centered coherence and begin a careful conversation across the borders of our moral universes.
Notes:

3. Ibid., 396.
4. By using language describing morality as otherness and a greater entity, I am not implying a distinct metaphysical entity. Rather, morality represents an aspect of our lives of sufficient weight and comprehensiveness that we autonomously abide by our conception of it.
6. Ibid., 1117b25-1119b15.
8. Ibid., 396.
9. By using language describing morality as otherness and a greater entity, I am not implying a distinct metaphysical entity. Rather, morality represents an aspect of our lives of sufficient weight and comprehensiveness that we autonomously abide by our conception of it.
11. Ibid., 1117b25-1119b15.
13. Ibid., 396.
14. By using language describing morality as otherness and a greater entity, I am not implying a distinct metaphysical entity. Rather, morality represents an aspect of our lives of sufficient weight and comprehensiveness that we autonomously abide by our conception of it.
16. Ibid., 1117b25-1119b15.
18. Ibid., 396.
19. By using language describing morality as otherness and a greater entity, I am not implying a distinct metaphysical entity. Rather, morality represents an aspect of our lives of sufficient weight and comprehensiveness that we autonomously abide by our conception of it.
21. Ibid., 1117b25-1119b15.
23. Ibid., 396.
24. By using language describing morality as otherness and a greater entity, I am not implying a distinct metaphysical entity. Rather, morality represents an aspect of our lives of sufficient weight and comprehensiveness that we autonomously abide by our conception of it.
26. Ibid., 1117b25-1119b15.
28. Ibid., 396.
29. By using language describing morality as otherness and a greater entity, I am not implying a distinct metaphysical entity. Rather, morality represents an aspect of our lives of sufficient weight and comprehensiveness that we autonomously abide by our conception of it.
31. Ibid., 1117b25-1119b15.
33. Ibid., 396.
34. By using language describing morality as otherness and a greater entity, I am not implying a distinct metaphysical entity. Rather, morality represents an aspect of our lives of sufficient weight and comprehensiveness that we autonomously abide by our conception of it.
36. Ibid., 1117b25-1119b15.
31 Ibid., 434.
32 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxvii-Bxxx.
33 This discussion assumes we accept Kant’s prerequisite transcendental deduction in the first *Critique*.
34 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxvi
35 Kant, “That May be True in Theory,” 277.
36 Kant, *Foundations*, 452.
37 Ibid., 453.
38 Ibid., 446.
39 Ibid., 448.
40 Ibid., 446.
41 Kant, “That May be True in Theory,” 275.
42 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A133/B172.
43 Ibid., A133/B172.
44 Ibid., A135/B174.
46 In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel offers a critique of the categorical imperative that describes Kant’s ethical theory as empty of content, a merely formal expression of law whose value and use does not extend beyond logical self-consistency. It is, he claims, equivalent to a tautological proposition able to assume varied content, where the principle of non-contradiction, rather than moral substance, determines moral right and wrong. It is further unable to place restrictions on the kind of maxims it judges. To have the use Kant intended, the categorical imperative must presuppose some moral content, which is the approach to ethics Kant sought to avoid.
47 Hegel’s critique is part of his larger critique of the relation of pure reason to content in Kant’s philosophy. A thorough examination is beyond the scope of this paper, and a more thorough discussion can be found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 252-262.
48 The categorical imperative could not justify the maxim to intentionally select pertinent details to ignore in a moral quandary, once these details are known. Increasing levels of ignorance or obtuseness shift moral quandaries closer to the general level Kant ascribes to them, and, when stating a maxim, a person is not accountable to information she does not know. However, once a person becomes aware of a pertinent detail, she cannot ignore it.
49 Ibid., 422.
50 Ibid., 422.
51 An obvious objection to this states that we should always try to do the right thing anyway, even if we are aware of its potential futility. Thus, the maxim “In any circumstance, make efforts to return money that does not belong to you” makes sense when considering this example. Consider, however, a life-threatening situation, such as rescuing someone from a burning building, where rescue attempts are difficult for even professionally-equipped firefighters. Here, futility has a very different meaning, i.e., a threat to the rescuer’s life. Granted, there is a wide range of examples between excess change and a burning building, and the point here is to note that the general maxim to pursue both the letter and the spirit of the law cannot be applied bluntly.
52 Kant, “That May be True in Theory,” 61-92.
54 Nussbaum relies on Aristotelian foundations in describing the process of making moral decisions. Here, and in the next sections, where the subject is Nussbaum, I will present references to Aristotle as they appear via Nussbaum.
56 Advances in technology present the rational agent with options never dreamed of by Kant. For example (although I do not intend to develop this), the medical technologies of feeding tubes and artificial respirators blur the line between life and death, presenting complex problems for anyone attempting to apply a broad, preexistent theory.
57 Kant, *Foundations*, 452: “Now man really finds in himself a faculty by which he distinguishes himself from all other things, even from himself so far as he is affected by objects. This faculty is reason. . . . For
this reason a rational being must regard itself qua intelligence (and not from the side of his lower faculties) as belonging to the world of understanding and not to that of the senses.”

58 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 24. Importantly, Nussbaum maintains that general rules and principles play an important role in our moral judgments, and she does not jettison them completely. Her rejection of Utilitarianism and Kantianism represents her disagreement with their starting assumption that prior formulations of moral strategy are sufficient for a rich moral life.

59 Ibid., p. 24. Here, and throughout, I will be using the terms ethical and moral interchangeably. The Lewis White Beck translation of Kant's *Foundations* I cite uses the term moral, and Nussbaum prefers the term ethical. Many writers, such as Bernard Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, specifically distinguish the two. Similarly, Nussbaum has deliberately chosen ethical. Developing such a distinction is beyond the scope of this thesis, and I will instead use terms such as thin, thick, abstract, rich, and robust when describing different aspects of moralities.

60 Ibid., p. 7.


64 For additional description and critique of these four concepts, see *Love's Knowledge* pp. 56-63.


66 Ibid., p. 60.

67 Ibid., p. 60.


69 Ibid., p. 66-67.

70 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 72. Nussbaum distinguishes between general and universal rules. General rules are broad, all-encompassing prior formulations, like the categorical imperative, meant to be applied to each situation calling for moral judgment. Universal rules, in contrast, arise from concrete moral judgments, and have potential applicability in additional circumstances. Perceptive application of universal rules recognizes the uniqueness of each situation and that these rules have limited application, serving more as guideposts or initial sources for direction. Each situation ultimately requires judgment tailored to it.

71 Nussbaum includes the imagination in this discussion of the emotions. In her writing, both represent that which is traditionally considered not-rational. For brevity, I am summarizing only the emotions.


73 Ibid., p. 189.

74 Ibid., p. 25.


76 Ibid., p. 26.

77 Ibid., p. 183.

78 Ibid., p. 189.

79 Ibid., p. 189.

80 Ibid., p. 190.

81 Ibid., p. 190.

82 Whether aspects of Kant's system, which function as part of a logical whole, can be isolated is a discussion for a later date.

83 By calling Nussbaum's theory descriptive, I am not making a metaphysical claim or entering the is-ought discussion. Rather, from within the position of morality, I claim that her account gives us the how of moral decisions, but not the what of morality.


85 Nussbaum argues that intuition does play an important role, but this intuition


87 Ibid., p. 206.

88 Ibid., p. 207.

89 Ibid., p. 215.

90 Ibid., p. 209.

91 For the complete list, see “Aristotelian Essentialism,” pp. 216-221.
Nussbaum, “Aristotelian Essentialism,” pp. 222-223. Nussbaum recognizes two thresholds in this list: the lower one demarcates the absolute minimum requirements for humanness, and the higher one separates what would be required for a life where good represents anything beyond the absolute minimum. For my purposes here, I will not discuss these two thresholds as both describe normative content, and I do not believe this to diminish Nussbaum’s argument.

As the foundation for political action that is an alternate to cultural relativism, Nussbaum’s account of essentialism is a worthy candidate.

Kant, “That May be True in Theory,” 277.

Kant, Foundations, 389.

Nussbaum, Love’s Knowledge, p. 38.

On the other hand, Nussbaum’s literary examples of proper moral judgment resemble each other in their emphasis on kindness, sympathy, and concern for the dignity and emotional well being of others. A defender of Nussbaum could argue that, assuming humans to be generally good and not malicious by nature, close perception of particulars will reveal this goodness, which can then serve as an overarching, organizing normative framework for the navigation of individual situations. Nussbaum, however, does not make this argument.

In “Aristotelian Essentialism,” Nussbaum clearly rejects metaphysical realism, and there is not reason to assume she was defending a position of metaphysical realism for morality at the time of Love’s Knowledge.

Nussbaum, Love’s Knowledge, pp. 70-73.

To understand a set of experiences or situations as unified does not require the comparative devices of singleness and metricity. We are distinguishing here between the similarity of relationship and a common standard for comparison. The former preserves incommensurability; the latter collapses it.


As humans are creatures endowed with reason, that is, the ability to perceive, think, and judge, we are not wholly subject to natural desires. Rather, we deliberate and act on those deliberations. I do not intend, then, to discuss the claim that even the subject morality is a conditioned or conventional anecdote, separable from humanness.


Kant, Foundations, 433: “The concept of any rational being as a being that must regard itself as giving universal law through all the maxims of its will, so that it may judge itself and its actions from this standpoint, leads to a very fruitful concept, namely that of a realm of ends. By realm I understand the systematic union of different rational beings through common laws.” See Paul Guyer’s “The Possibility of the Categorical Imperative,” (The Philosophical Review, Vol. 104, No. 3, July 1995) for a thorough defense of the coherence in Kant’s four expressions of the moral law.


Ibid., p. xxiv.

See Lyotard’s “Adorno as the Devil” (trans. Robert Hurley, Telos, 19, Spring 1974, pp. 128-137) and Just Gaming (Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) for Lyotard’s explanations for why a multiplicity of narratives, and not critique and negation, is the
only means for opposing hegemony. In short, Lyotard argues that negativity and critique do not represent the sufficient notion of otherness—avoiding a relation of dependence on the system it critiques—required for an affective dialectic. His description of capitalism eliminates the possibility of an outside position; he describes the individual, subjectivity, and any resultant critical standpoint as products of capitalism, the most effective institution of libidinal deployment. Thus, there can be no original originality, no critical position that is not of a relation to capitalism. "The emergence of a new deployment, 'radical,' critical [is] inside the womb of the old" ("Adorno as the Devil," p. 129). Both negativity and critique are dependent concepts, subsisting parasitically on the entities they are opposed to. By proposing a positivity of libidinal intensities and, later, a plurality of narratives, Lyotard strips the possibility of foundation for any one, overarching position. The irony, of course, is the question of whether Lyotard is giving us his own meta-narrative when rejecting the possibility of others.


121 Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, p. 35.
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