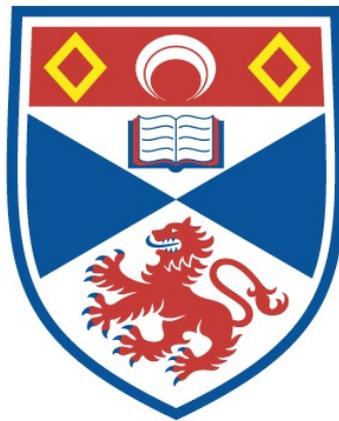


GENERIC, MODALITY, AND MORALITY

Ravi Thakral

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
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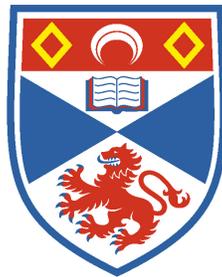
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Generics, Modality, and Morality

by

Ravi Thakral



University of
St Andrews

THIS THESIS IS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF

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MARCH 2019

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ABSTRACT

The issues in this dissertation reside at the intersections of, and relationships between, topics concerning the meaning of generic generalizations, natural language modality, the nature and role of moral principles, and the place of supererogation in the overall structure of the normative domain. In 'Generics and Weak Necessity', I argue that generics—exception-granting generalizations such as 'Birds fly' and 'Tigers are striped'—involve a covert weak necessity modal at logical form. I argue that this improves our understanding of the variability and diversity of generics. This chapter also argues that we can account for variability concerning normative generics within a modal approach to generics. In 'The Genericity of Moral Principles', I provide evidence for the view that moral principles are generic generalizations, and, on the basis of this claim, argue that moral principles do not provide adequate support for reasoning about the moral statuses of particular cases. In 'Supererogation and the Structure of the Normative Domain', I investigate the diversity of the central normative modal notions and argue that we should distinguish between two senses of supererogation based different ways deontic modals are sensitive to background information.

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1

Introduction

1.1 THE APPRECIATION OF MODAL DIVERSITY

When we say that a principle or concept involves some modal element, there is a wide variety of notions we might have in mind. However, the diversity of modal notions is not carefully acknowledged enough. One interesting example of this phenomenon comes from the literature on the norm of assertion. Several authors, who presumably take themselves to be discussing the very same norm, will use different normative modals when stating the norm of assertion.

Here is Timothy Williamson's statement of the knowledge norm of assertion:

(1) One **must** assert p only if one knows p .¹

Here is Jennifer Lackey stating the same norm:

(2) One **should** assert p only if one knows p .²

In a radical twist, John Turri uses a permissive modal:

(3) One **may** assert p only if one knows p .³

Finally, here is Jessica Brown, omitting any mention of a modal when stating the knowledge norm:

¹Williamson (1996, 494). Also see Williamson (2000).

²Lackey (2007, 594).

³Turri (2013, 559). It is explicitly acknowledged that Turri takes himself to be talking about the knowledge norm and cites Williamson, but in a footnote notes that while Williamson uses *must*, he prefers *may* for the formulation of the norm.

(4) Assert p only if one knows p .⁴

Perhaps one reaction to have here is that these authors are not being precise enough. Although they have the same notion in mind—namely that there the knowledge norm of assertion is a *constitutive* norm—they have not settled on which of these formulations correctly represents the intended notion.

The need for further attention to detail when it comes to acknowledging the diversity of modal terms is especially important in moral philosophy as well. As [Snedegar \(2016, 159\)](#) writes:

“Ought” is, or at least was, often treated as the central term in moral philosophy. Moral principles and rules were stated using “ought,” moral obligations were ascribed using “ought,” and deontic logicians use a big “O,” for “ought,” as their deontic necessity operator. In fact, deontic logic—which deals with deontic necessity and possibility—is sometimes described as “the logic of ought.”

But more recently philosophers and linguists have emphasized that this is a mistake. “Ought” is too weak for these purposes. Rules, requirements, and deontic necessity more generally, are much more naturally expressed using words like “must” and “have to.”

There is a huge difference between *weak* necessity modals such as *ought* and *strong* necessity modals such as *must*, especially because *must* entails *ought*, but not the other

⁴See [Brown \(2008, 89-90\)](#). At the same time, the aim here is to cite [Williamson \(2000\)](#). However, it should be noted that, later in the paper, [Brown \(2008, 98\)](#) uses *must* in the formulation of the knowledge norm.

way around. The upshot is that many philosophers are presumably using a notion that is weaker than intended.

This kind of confusion with modals generally feels a bit too common. One of the overarching themes in this dissertation is the acknowledgment and appreciation of the great diversity associated with these modal notions in natural language. My focus in investigating this diversity will be primarily on the implications for theorizing in problems in the philosophy of language and in moral philosophy.

The core themes in this dissertation are *GENERICIS*, *MODALITY*, and *MORALITY*:

- The meaning of generics—exception-granting quasi-generalizations such as ‘Birds fly’ and ‘Tigers are striped’—and how to account for them in terms of natural language modality.
- The nature of moral principles and whether moral reasoning should be based upon them.
- The diversity of normative notions and how to characterize the concept of supererogation.

The following are the core theses defended in this dissertation:

- That a modal approach to generics should be based on weak necessity modals and that this helps account for the variability associated with generics.
- That moral principles are generic generalizations and that this supports a particularist model of moral reasoning on which moral principles do not have a distin-

guished role in supporting inferences about particular cases.

- That we need a more diverse conception of supererogation—based on acknowledging differences between deontic modals which are sensitive to actual circumstances and those which are not—in order to account for how it can be sometimes wrong to sometimes go beyond the demands of morality.

The aim of this dissertation is to develop and defend these main theses while engaging in various supplementary arguments related to issues in the philosophy of language and moral philosophy along the way.

This introductory chapter provides background material on the topic of modality in natural language (Section 1.2). Following this, I provide previews of each of the main chapters in this dissertation (Section 1.3).

1.2 MODALITY IN NATURAL LANGUAGE

1.2.1 THE DIVERSITY OF NATURAL LANGUAGE MODALS

Natural language involves a phenomenon known as *displacement*. Language does not always concern the *here* and *now*—we also express, for instance, what *could* be the case or what *should* be the case. We can also use language in order to express thoughts about different times or other counterfactual scenarios:

- (5) Over here it is sunny but over there it is raining.

(6) Ernie should be coming home soon.

(7) If Big Bird was not present at the meeting, then Oscar the Grouch will take his place.

Our focus here will be on the sort of displacement which concerns *possibility* and *necessity*. Modal claims and judgments are widespread. These are claims and judgments about, for instance, what could, should, or must have been. They come in many forms:

- (8) a. You cannot bring coffee to the library.
b. You should not break a promise.
c. You cannot drive faster than 500 miles per hour.
d. You must pay your taxes.

Claims about what is possible or necessary are communicated through a diverse range of constructions. Some of the paradigm means by which we communicate what is possible or necessary involves the use of modal auxiliaries and semimodal verbs such as *may*, *might*, *can*, *should*, *ought*, *must*, *ought to*, *has to*, or with the use of certain adverbs such as *possibly*, *probably*, or *likely*.

These different modal terms can also be interpreted in a number of different ways. For instance, we can distinguish between various senses of what it means to be necessary or possible. We might mean that something is necessary in a legal sense, or perhaps in a logical sense. Some event might be possible nomologically speaking, but might be impossible biologically speaking.

The following sub-section provides an overview of the leading semantic theory of natural language modality which aims to accommodate this diversity.

1.2.2 KRATZER'S SEMANTICS FOR MODALS

The aim in this section will be to present an overview of the unified semantics for modality in natural language due to Kratzer (1977, 1981, 1991, 2012). There are three dimensions of variability that will concern us which promise to account for the overall variety of modal meanings:

- Quantificational strength
- Modal base
- Ordering source

One kind of variability has to do with *quantificational strength*: some modals involve existential quantification whereas other modals may involve further varying strengths of universal quantification. Another form of variability concerns what we might call *modal flavor*: modals restrict the domain of quantification in different ways according to background information given by context. And, finally, there is variability of *source*: once the domain of quantification is restricted, there is further variation in how the restriction is made in the sense that the set of worlds we quantify over are ordered with respect to certain circumstances or ideals. I will now discuss these dimensions of variability in more detail.

The first dimension of variability concerns quantification. Possibility modals appear weaker than necessity modals. One way to make sense of this idea is that there is an important parallel between the difference between these modal notions and the difference between existential and universal quantification. The idea, then, is that we can understand necessity modals in terms of universal quantification and possibility modals in terms of existential quantification.⁵ Indeed, following Horn (1972), observe that *may* and *must*, just like *some* and *every*, can be analyzed as duals:

- (9) a. Ernie must be home \implies Ernie may be home
 b. Ernie must be home \implies It's not the case that it may be the case that Ernie isn't home
 c. Ernie may be home \implies It's not the case that it must be the case that Ernie isn't home
 d. Every muppet is on Sesame Street \implies Some muppet is on Sesame Street
 e. Every muppet is on Sesame Street \implies It's not the case that some muppet isn't on Sesame Street
 f. Some muppet is on Sesame Street \implies It's not the case that every muppet isn't on Sesame Street

The second dimension of variability concerns the fact that modal terms get different readings depending on what *flavor* we are to use when reading the modal. Here are some examples of the variety of readings we can assign to modal expressions:

⁵However, matters are not exactly this straightforward. There is some sub-variability in modals which involve universal quantification: some modals express weak necessity (e.g. *should/ought*) and others express strong necessity (e.g. *must/have to*). This ends up making for certain complications in the Kratzer account, especially the question of how it is we are to distinguish between weak and strong necessity modals. This is the topic of the next sub-section.

- (10) a. **Epistemic:** Cookie Monster *must/might/may* have stolen the cookies from the cookie jar. [given Elmo's beliefs]
- b. **Teleological:** Cookie Monster *must* eat less cookies. [given that he wants to be more healthy]
- c. **Dispositional/Root:** Big Bird *can* sing the alphabet. [given his abilities]
- d. **Deontic:** Ernie *must* be home by 6pm. [given Bert's orders]

Epistemic modals pertain to what is known or believed by an agent; teleological modals pertain to goals and plans; dispositional or root modals pertain to abilities and propensities; deontic modals pertain to sets of laws, rules, requirements, and obligations. The set of worlds we quantify over is known as the modal base, and this will be determined in a number of different ways according to context. If we take it that an epistemic modal quantifies over a set of worlds, we must have a restriction in place according to the kind of modal flavor in question. Then an epistemic modal quantifies over a set of worlds that is compatible with what is known or believed by an agent. A dispositional modal will quantify over a set of worlds that is compatible with the various abilities or propensities of an agent or object. And so on for a number of different modal flavors.

The third form of variability is variability of source. Once we have a quantifier in place, and a domain of quantification, we need something to fix a ranking of the worlds in the modal base. It will be the best worlds according to this ranking that will ultimately form the modal's domain of quantification. In the case of deontic modals, as will be relevant for Chapter 4, for instance, this means that we can further distinguish between further kinds of deontic meaning. For instance:

- (11) a. Sesame Street residents may not use Oscar the Grouch's trash can. [moral norm for residents]
- b. Every student ought to take a logic class. [recommendation of philosophy professors]
- c. Library users must pay their fines. [library regulations]

In these examples, the modal will quantify over a set of worlds accessible in the deontic way, so to speak, but the worlds that form the relevant domain of quantification varies according to the source of the modal. Sources inform the background information that further differentiates the various occurrences of deontic modals. Sources allow us to prioritize the worlds whichever conform to whatever norm or standard is in question. The sense in which Sesame Street residents are not permitted to use Oscar the Grouch's trash can is moral. The underlying modal nature, however, could have been different had we varied the source. For instance, the impermissibility of the use of Oscar the Grouch's trash can could also be due to whatever regulations may be in force in Sesame Street. There are a plethora of possible sources, and this variability holds for all uses of modals.

Modal statements have three components: a *conversational background*, a *modal particle*, and the *prejacent* proposition φ which the modal takes scope over. The basic logical form of a modal statement can be given as:

(12) CB (Modal φ)

The *conversational background*, CB , is what every sentence is uttered against: modals are interpreted with respect to conversational backgrounds. The basic picture is that

conversational backgrounds comprise of the contextual information needed in order to provide an interpretation of modals in natural language. These deliver the best of the worlds that modals quantify over.

Conversational backgrounds supply information from context which is usually left implicit; however, with some reconstruction we can use phrases such as *in view of* to examine the influence of context on the meaning of modal terms. These free relative *in view of* clauses determine a substantial portion of the meaning of modal sentences in natural language.

To observe this, let us consider the following sentences with an eye on the meaning of *must* in each of them:

- (13) a. Oscar the Grouch *must* have been in the trash can for at least 4 hours straight.
- b. Cookie Monster *must* share his cookies.
- c. Ernie *must* be home by 6pm.
- d. Elmo *must* learn to use pronouns properly when he speaks.

We can supplement these sentences with *in view of* phrases, allowing us to unpack much of the meaning of the occurrences of *must* in (13):

- (14) a. *In view of his dispositions*, Oscar the Grouch *must* have been in the trash can for at least 4 hours straight.
- b. *In view of Sesame Street community norms*, Cookie Monster *must* share his cookies.

- c. *In view of Bert's demands*, Ernie must be home by 6pm.
- d. *In view of the norms of the English language*, Elmo must learn to use pronouns properly when he speaks.

These *in view of* phrases paraphrase much of what it is the sentences in (13) are about. The occurrences of *must* in (14) then end up being neutral occurrences of *must*. Such phrases do not tend to be linguistically realized. The relevant information typically comes from context. We need to do some reconstruction to make explicit their influence in determining the meaning of natural language modals. Given that we are engaging in some reconstruction, *in view of*, at times, can sound quite unnatural. Sometimes it might be helpful to consider some cousins of *in view of* such as *according to*, *given that*, *in light of*, and so on.

Conversational backgrounds are ultimately relative to two parameters: a *modal base* and an *ordering source*. Let f be a modal base and let g be an ordering source. The role of the modal base is to tell us which worlds are accessible; the ordering source induces an ordering on the accessible worlds. These are both functions from worlds to sets of sets of worlds (sets of propositions). In this way, we can see that the basic picture is that modals quantify over the *best* worlds.

There are two sorts of modal bases: the *epistemic modal base* and the *circumstantial modal base*. Modal bases restrict the worlds a modal quantifiers over. Epistemic modal bases yield the accessible worlds where what is known by an agent at the world of evaluation holds. The circumstantial modal bases return the accessible worlds where certain circumstances of the world of evaluation hold.

The modal bases then combine accordingly with the ordering source. The epistemic modal base pertains to information and the circumstantial modal base pertains to things like ideals and obligations. And it is from the circumstantial modal base that we get an understanding of the dispositional or root modality.

Provided these various elements, we can give the official Kratzer semantics for *must* and *may* as follows:

$$(15) \llbracket \text{Must } \varphi \rrbracket_{f,v} = \{w \mid \cap f(w) \subseteq \llbracket \varphi \rrbracket_{f,v}\}$$

$$(16) \llbracket \text{May } \varphi \rrbracket_{f,v} = \{w \mid (\cap f(w)) \cup \llbracket \varphi \rrbracket_{f,v} \neq \emptyset\}$$

Hence, modal statements of the form $\text{Must}(\varphi)$ are true just in case the propositions of the conversational background are true in all worlds; and modal statements of the form $\text{May}(\varphi)$ are true just in case the propositions of the conversational background are true in some worlds. Note that we have decorated the lexical entry as being relative to f , whose job is to assign a set of propositions to every world. We can understand this as being the accessibility relation in modal logic: to say that for some world $v \in \cap f(w)$ is simply to say that Rwv , or that world w has access to world v . So, in particular, we can derive the accessibility relation by taking the intersection of the set of propositions that f assigns to a world w .

This account can be supplemented by adding the ordering source parameter. The ordering source, g , is a function which ranks worlds according to how well they satisfy the ideals prescribed by g .

We can define an ordering relation $\leq_{g(w)}$ as follows: $w' \leq_{g(w)} w''$ iff:

$$(17) \{p \in g(w) \mid w'' \in p\} \subseteq \{p \in g(w) \mid w' \in p\}$$

This means that given a proposition from $g(w)$, if it makes w'' true, it makes w' true as well. So w' is at least as ideal as w'' . Furthermore, the relation $\leq_{g(w)}$ is a preorder.⁶

Provided the ordering source parameter, we can accordingly update the semantics for the necessity modal and possibility modal and make explicit the notion of optimality:

$$(18) [[\text{Must } \varphi]]_{f,g,v} = \{w \mid \text{BEST}(f(w), g(w)) \subseteq [[\varphi]]_{f,g,v}\}$$

$$(19) [[\text{May } \varphi]]_{f,g,v} = \{w \mid \text{BEST}(f(w), g(w)) \cap [[\varphi]]_{f,g,v} \neq \emptyset\}$$
⁷

1.2.3 WEAK AND STRONG NECESSITY

As noted in the previously quoted passage by [Snedegar \(2016\)](#), one prevailing idea is that the central modal notion in the philosophy of normativity is the notion of *ought*. However, as noted before, there is a general problem with the idea that the central modal notion at stake is the notion of *ought*: it is too weak for the usual purposes it is meant to serve. The stronger modal *must* is more suited for the statement of moral rules and obligations, and it is this modal which corresponds to the notion of requirement.

Distinguishing between weak necessity modals (such as *should* or *ought*) and strong necessity modals (such as *must* or *have to*) is a matter of great general importance, not

⁶That is, reflexive and transitive. Although [Kratzer \(1991\)](#) actually defines $\leq_{g(w)}$ as a partial order (so reflexive, antisymmetric, and transitive). However, see [Portner \(2009\)](#) for discussion regarding dropping antisymmetry.

⁷The formalization in terms of the BEST function follows [Portner \(2009\)](#) and the semantics here assumes the *limit assumption*. The BEST function selects the most ideal worlds from its input, and obeys the ordering $\leq_{g(w)}$. The limit assumption says that there are always accessible ideal worlds.

only from the perspective of understanding the core moral notions, but for semantic theorizing more generally.⁸

One salient kind of difference concerning the behavior of weak and strong necessity modals can be observed in certain asymmetries in felicity. Following some observations from [Ninan \(2005\)](#), consider the case of Cookie Monster, who is discussing his issues with sharing cookies with others:

(20) I should share my cookies but I am not going to.

Then consider Elmo, who could report on Cookie Monster's behavior:

(21) Cookie Monster should share his cookies but he's not going to.

Elmo could try to command Cookie Monster to share his cookies, but then admit that such an order would be futile:

(22) You should share your cookies, but you're not going to.

The previous sentences all sound fine. But there is an asymmetry when using *must*. In particular, consider a case where Elmo is discussing Cookie Monster's behavior:

(23) Cookie Monster must share his cookies, but he's not going to.

Elmo could similarly try to could order Cookie Monster:

⁸For recent discussion and overview of various recent approaches to this problem, see [Becker \(2016\)](#).

(24) You must share his cookies, but you're not going to.

Finally, there is also an oddity in Cookie Monster discussing his own behavior as follows:

(25) I must share my cookies, but I am not going to.

The sentences involving *must* sound odd. The explanation of this presumably has to do with the asymmetry between the weak necessity modals and the strong necessity modals. The asymmetry somehow appears to be a difference in *force*. There appears to be a *prima facie* distinction in levels of force amongst different kinds of norms. Strong necessity modals appear more forceful and weak necessity modals appear less so.

We can make sense of this idea by noticing that the use of different modal vocabulary can perhaps imply different kinds of restrictions on what we ought to do. Statements involving deontic *must* tell us that there are no other options available except the preja-cent; statements involving deontic *should* or *ought* tell us that the preja-cent is a preferred option compared to the alternatives.

An additional feature of deontic *must*, as argued by [Ninan \(2005\)](#), is that it has the force of an imperative. This is not a feature shared with deontic weak necessity modals. In particular, one feature of deontic *must* is that it can be used to issue requirements. Consider the following examples in (26) and note that there is very little difference between them:

(26) a. You must dance.

b. Dance!

The apparent lack of (at least) pragmatic difference lies in the fact that both utterances amount to being orders to an addressee. Sentences containing weak necessity modals do not appear to have the feature that they can be used to issue orders or requirements. None of the following, for instance, would appear to have the force of an imperative:

- (27) a. You should dance.
b. You ought to dance.

If anything, the sentences in (27) appear to sound close to either one of the following:

- (28) a. I recommend that you dance.
b. I suggest that you dance.

The distinction in strength between weak and strong necessity modals will be a significant topic in Chapter 4 where I discuss the overall structure and diversity of the central normative modal notions. I will build upon this background material once we properly enter the relevant terrain.

1.3 PREVIEW

This thesis is divided into three main chapters, and is followed by a concluding chapter (Chapter 5) which discusses some further philosophical issues for research resulting from the various arguments discussed throughout.

The main chapters in this dissertation pursue a number of arguments and perspectives related to the themes and questions discussed above. These chapters are at the intersections between the topics of **GENERICs**, **MODALITY**, and **MORALITY**.

I will now provide a preview of each chapter in turn:

- **Chapter 2:** Generics and Weak Necessity
- **Chapter 3:** The Genericity of Moral Principles
- **Chapter 4:** Supererogation and the Structure of the Normative Domain

1.3.1 **GENERICs** AND **MODALITY**

The topic of generics—especially their meaning and their implications for our understanding of the structure of morality—is one of the core topics of this thesis.

Here are some examples of generics:

- (29) a. Ravens are black.
b. Birds fly.
c. Tigers are striped.

Each of the sentences in (29) are true even in the face of counterinstances and seem to have a kind of quasi-universal flavor. These sentences communicate generalities but do not have any overt lexical item which we can trace the generalization to.⁹

⁹Although generics come in a variety of other forms, such as the indefinite singular (e.g. 'A tiger is striped. '), my examples will mostly involve the bare plural.

In Chapter 2, 'Generics and Weak Necessity', I examine the links between weak necessity modals and generics. I discuss the modal approach to generics and argue that if generics involve a covert modal at the level of logical form, that this is a weak necessity modal.¹⁰

In this chapter, I provide evidence for the claim that generics involve weak necessity modals and sketch a theory. In particular, I will show that there are some important distributional parallels between generics and sentences with overt weak necessity modals: both sorts of sentences share behavior in nonmonotonic reasoning environments and also lack genuine epistemic readings. Acknowledging these parallels and the connection here is in the service of both our understanding of genericity and of weak necessity. I propose an understanding of generics as involving a covert weak necessity modal and argue that this is a promising path to pursue in relation to different issues related to the interpretation of generics.

Finally, this chapter features an appendix which focuses on normative generics (e.g. 'Boys don't cry' and 'Friends don't let friends drive drunk') where I argue that the phenomenon that it is coherent to assent to a generic like 'Boys don't cry' in one situation (perhaps involving a criticism of behavior) while also being able to assent to 'Boys cry' in another situation (perhaps where actual prevalence of crying is in question) is to be explained as a matter of context-sensitivity, and that a modal approach has the potential to accommodate this.

¹⁰This chapter is based on [Thakral \(2018\)](#).

1.3.2 GENERICS AND MORALITY

One of the core topics in this thesis concerns moral principles. These are generalizations about morality and about how one should act. We rely on commonplace generalizations such as the following in order to attempt to do what is right as opposed to what is wrong:

- (30) a. Stealing is wrong.
- b. You should never lie.
- c. It is wrong to act only for your own benefit.

My own investigation into the nature of moral principles focuses on their role in moral reasoning. In Chapter 3, 'The Genericity of Moral Principles', I argue that we should understand moral principles as generic generalizations and that this supports a model of moral reasoning in line with moral particularism. In particular, this chapter argues that the view that moral principles are generic generalizations supports a model of moral reasoning on which principles cannot serve a substantial role in supporting our knowledge of what is morally right or wrong in particular cases.

In providing these arguments, this chapter offers a conception of moral principles that is friendly to moral particularists and offers a new argument for a form of moral particularism. Additionally, it is argued that the generic conception of moral principles, in its capacity as a normative model of reasoning, has significant advantages over the default conception of moral principles which has been advanced in recent years.

1.3.3 MODALITY AND MORALITY

In Chapter 4, 'Supererogation and the Structure of the Normative Domain', I investigate whether and how the notion of supererogation fits into the standard framework for interpreting deontic modals. I propose that we can distinguish between two senses of supererogation based on a distinction between deontic modals which are evaluated with respect to a set of facts and deontic modals which are not.

Going beyond the call of duty in a suboptimal way can, at least in some cases, seem better than not acting at all. Yet it can sometimes be wrong to act suboptimally. Hence, it can be sometimes wrong to act beyond the demands of morality. The standard account of the structure of the normative domain does not seem to be able to account for this phenomenon.

The aim in this chapter is to demonstrate how we can appeal to the standard interpretation of the normative modal notions of permission, recommendation, and requirement in order to interpret and explain the phenomenon of suboptimal supererogation. The approach will not be to alter these notions but to instead investigate them in more detail and, as a result, propose that there is a need to distinguish between two notions of supererogation, one binary and one scalar.

2

Generics and Weak Necessity

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Generics express generalizations which lack explicit quantification, and do not appear to be straightforwardly analyzed in terms of any particular quantifier expression. Generic sentences are characterized by an incredible diversity—a diversity that is still to be reckoned with and uncovered further. Perhaps the most acknowledged form of diversity involving generics lies in their truth-conditional variability. The following examples help demonstrate this:

- (31) a. Ravens are black.
b. Ducks lay eggs.
c. Mosquitoes carry malaria.

It is now a very familiar point that generics can express a range of generalizations: while the majority of ravens are black, the majority of ducks do not lay eggs since only female ducks of reproductive age lay eggs. It is true that mosquitoes carry malaria, but this is not true of the majority of mosquitoes: only around one percent of mosquitoes carry the disease.

The focus of the investigation in this chapter is to argue for an approach which promises to accommodate this diversity of generics, especially by considering whether generics are related to other phenomena which have similar diversity.

I defend a modal approach to generics: I argue for the view that generics involve a covert weak necessity operator. My main tasks will be to present the arguments which

point to this view, and, in addition, I will also discuss how this approach promises to deal with the diversity associated with generics.

This chapter will proceed as follows. Section 2.2 provides the relevant background on the modal approach to generics and we will examine the covert structure of generics by looking at the interactions between generics and *in view of* phrases.

Following this, I discuss the main distributional parallels between generics and sentences containing overt weak necessity modals. Section 2.3 discusses the shared features of both sorts of sentences in the environment of defeasible reasoning; Section 2.4 discusses the claim that both sorts of sentences do not take genuine epistemic readings.

Section 2.5 sketches and discusses the proposal that the covert generic modality is a weak necessity modal.

Section 2.6 concludes. Following this, the chapter also features an appendix in Section 2.8 which discusses normative generics (e.g. 'Boys don't cry' and 'Friends don't let friends drive drunk') in relation to the modal approach discussed in this chapter. In this appendix, I argue that the variability between descriptive and normative generics is a matter of context-sensitivity familiar from the sort of context-sensitivity associated with natural language modals.

2.2 THE MODAL APPROACH TO GENERICS

There are good motivations going back to, for instance, Dahl (1975) and Heim (1982) that generics involve a covert modal operator. This chapter challenges the standard

version of the modal analysis of generics and argues that if we want to analyze generics in modal terms, we should instead hold that the covert generic modality is a weak necessity modal.

One dominant perspective in theorizing about generics is that they involve something covert at the level of logical form. In order to set up the necessary background, we will discuss one suggestion to begin with, which is that the covert element is something along the lines of an adverbial quantifier.¹¹

A standard test for whether or not a sentence is a generic involves adverbial quantifier insertion. This test, at least *prima facie*, gives reason to believe that generics involve something covert. [Krifka et al. \(1995\)](#) propose the following: check whether the addition of such adverbs results only in the slightest change of meaning. If so, we can take the sentence without the adverbial quantifier to be a generic.

For an illustration of this test, consider the following:

(32) Birds fly.

And combine with an adverb of quantification:

- (33) a. Birds *usually* fly.
b. Birds *normally* fly.
c. Birds *typically* fly.

¹¹For overviews of different approaches to the semantics of generics, see [Krifka et al. \(1995\)](#), [Leslie and Lerner \(2016\)](#), [Nickel \(2017\)](#), and [Sterken \(2017\)](#). For a recent defense and motivation behind the *Gen* operator, see [Sterken \(2016\)](#).

The additions of *usually*, *normally*, and *typically* seem merely to cause a slight change in meaning compared to (32).¹² Any sort of difference between the examples in (32) and (33) appears to be due to the former examples being somehow weaker—at least in the sense that the examples in (33) explicitly advertise their exception-grantingness.¹³

A related avenue to pursue might be to consider some other insertions which combine (32) with various modal auxiliaries and semimodal verbs. It is worth seeing what we might gather from this and whether any such insertions capture the generic nature of (32).

We can start by considering the strong necessity insertions:

(37) Birds *must* fly.

¹²Note, however, that not just any adverbial quantifier insertion will work to capture the genericity of (32). Consider:

- (34) a. Birds *rarely* fly.
b. Birds *occasionally* fly.
c. Birds *invariably* fly.

The adverbial quantifier test—at least on one way of understanding its import—tells us that if there is something hidden at the level of logical form, it is something which behaves like an adverbial quantifier of a certain kind.

¹³Note that the exception-granting property here may be witnessed by the following examples:

- (35) a. Birds *usually* fly, but some/many don't.
b. Birds *normally* fly, but some/many don't.
c. Birds *typically* fly, but some/many don't.

Somehow, the sentences in (35) appear more natural than:

(36) Birds fly, but some/many don't.

Three points. First, I take it that there is a difference between (35) and (36). This should be expected, for these adverbial quantifiers mentioned explicitly indicate the exception-granting character of the sentences in (33). Second, the many-readings in (35) sound slightly better when we think of them along the lines of 'It's normal for birds to fly, but many actually don't'. Third, it is worth noting that capacity readings are salient here; see Schubert and Pelletier (1989) as well as Nickel (2016, ch. 4) and Sterken (2015a) for further discussion. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for *Inquiry* for asking me to clarify these points.

(38) Birds *have to* fly.

These appear a bit odd. The oddness of both (37) and (38) is that they seem to be too strong: these paraphrases somehow fail to take into account the thought that 'Birds fly' admits of exceptions. Perhaps the oddness here is due to the oddness of the following:

(39) Birds *must fly*, but some/many don't.

(40) Birds *have to fly*, but some/many don't.

These sound odd because they appear to be, in some sense, instances of contradictory conjunctions.¹⁴ At least one lesson to learn from attempting to formulate a contradictory conjunction is whether the modals in (37) and (38) sound appropriate for capturing the putative exception-granting property of 'Birds fly'.

For another insertion, consider the permissibility modals *might* and *may*:

(41) Birds *might* fly.

(42) Birds *may* fly.

Both (41) and (42) clearly fail to capture the strength of 'Birds fly'. They simply appear far too weak. For another weak modal, also consider:

(43) Birds *can* fly.

¹⁴For further discussion of contradictory conjunction effects with generics, see [Sterken \(2013, 2015a\)](#).

Although it's doubtful that (43) captures the force of generics, there are certainly circumstances where this can sound appropriate. If we are making a list of the things that birds can do, a candidate item on that list would be (43). It may be that (43) isolates a particular reading of 'Birds fly', one that perhaps does not happen to be the ordinary, salient one.

Let us now consider:

(44) Birds *happen to* fly.

(45) Birds are *supposed to* fly.

It appears as though both (44) and (45) respect the apparent exception-granting character of generics, although (45) does this better. An issue with (44) is that adding *happen to* does not allow for the reading that *flying* is something that *characterizes* birds. A familiar feature of many true generics is that they attribute properties to noun phrases that are not merely accidental. One thing to consider is that the following does not lead to a kind of contradictory conjunction and sounds fine:

(46) Birds are *supposed to* fly, but some/many don't.

None of the previous insertions (with the exception of (45)) are so great, but inserting a *weak* necessity modal looks very promising:

(47) Birds *should* fly.

(48) Birds *ought to* fly.

There appears to be a good sense in which both (47) and (48) capture the *force* associated with ‘Birds fly’. That is, we do not get that some particular bird flies given (47) or (48), and this is an entirely desirable consequence. Indeed, we don’t get any oddness with the following conjunctions either:

(49) Birds *should* fly, but some/many don’t.

(50) Birds *ought to* fly, but some/many don’t.

It is important to note that exploring these examples is not meant to serve the aim of capturing the right modal auxiliary insertion that captures something like a ‘correct’ paraphrase of all generics in the bare plural. It has been noted before that no attested language has any overt manifestation of whatever is taken to be the covert generic operator.¹⁵ The aim here at the outset is only to perform an initial examination of whether any of these modal insertions can help us capture whatever kind of ‘force’ or ‘flavor’ we are apt to associate with generics.¹⁶ The main claim is that inserting weak necessity modals seems, at a first glance, promising.

This leads us to the background for the modal approach to generics. The target proposal of interest in this chapter is the idea that generics involve a covert modal operator. This proposal is explained in Krifka et al. (1995) according to Kratzer’s semantics

¹⁵See Krifka et al. (1995) for discussion of this point.

¹⁶Let us even suppose that there is a decent paraphrase available outside the examples we have already discussed. Here is one to consider:

(51) Birds *nonaccidentally* fly.

When we considered (44), we saw that it was an inadequate paraphrase because we want the connection between *birds* and *fly* to be a sort of nonaccidental connection. However, (51) is extremely unhelpful and *nonaccidentally* happens to be a sort of philosopher’s jargon. Given that this term is quite unnatural, it is hard to classify it alongside other more natural quantificational expressions in natural language.

for necessity modals. To begin with, consider the standard tripartite rendering of the logical form of generics:

$$(52) \text{ Gen}[x_1 \dots x_n; y_1 \dots y_n](\text{Restrictor}, \text{Matrix})$$

Here *Gen* stands for an unpronounced quantifier responsible for the genericness of generic sentences. A prominent approach to *Gen* is to treat it as a modal operator in the setting of possible worlds semantics.¹⁷ In particular, the idea would work something like in the following way. Start with the idea that generics resemble conditional sentences. On the restrictor theory of conditionals due to Kratzer (1986), the role of *if*-clauses are to restrict the domains of different operators associated with conditionals.¹⁸ Additionally, this domain restriction is present whether there is a overt operator present. If there is no overt operator, a covert operator is to be posited.¹⁹

Then, for similar motivations, if generics resemble conditional sentences, then we ought to posit a covert modal operator which lives at the logical form of generics.

Following Krifka et al. (1995), we can give an interpretation of (52) as follows:

$$(53) \text{ Gen}[x_1 \dots x_n; y_1 \dots y_n](\text{Restrictor}, \text{Matrix}) \text{ is true in } w \text{ relative to a modal base } f(w) \text{ and ordering source } \leq_{g(w)} \text{ iff:}$$

¹⁷Also see Dahl (1975), Heim (1982), Kratzer (1981) as well as Krifka et al. (1995) and Sterken (2017) for further discussion.

¹⁸Kratzer (1986, 656) writes:

The history of the conditional is the story of a syntactic mistake. There is no two-place *if...then* connective in the logical forms for natural languages. *If*-clauses are devices for restricting the domains of various operators. Whenever there is no explicit operator, we have to posit one.

¹⁹See also Lewis (1975), Heim (1982), Kratzer (1981, 2012).

for every $x_1 \dots x_n$ and every w' in $f(w)$ such that Restrictor $[x_1 \dots x_n]$ is true in w' , there is a world w'' in $f(w)$ such that $w'' \leq_{g(w)} w'$, and for every world $w''' \leq_{g(w)} w''$, $\exists y_1 \dots y_n$ Matrix $[x_1 \dots x_n; y_1 \dots y_n]$ is true in w''' ²⁰

Suppose we have a generic such as 'Bunnies are fluffy'. According to (53), we can, as it were, unpack this interpretation along the following lines:

(54) Everything which is a bunny in the worlds of the modal base is such that, in all the most normal worlds according to the ordering source, it will be fluffy.

In this way, we can see that a feature of this proposal is that (53) gives essentially along the same lines as the semantics of *must*.²¹ Hence, an important virtue of this approach to generics is that it captures the kind of restricted universal quantification over normal cases that seems to be needed in order to capture their generality while allowing for exceptions. In (54), we can see that universal quantification over normal bunnies does not mean that every bunny needs to be fluffy; worlds which include non-fluffy bunnies are considered less normal than worlds with fluffy bunnies. Furthermore, one of the most important benefits of this approach is that variability in the contextually determined parameters, namely the modal base and ordering source, can function to capture different flavors of genericity. Additionally, the positing of a covert modal comes from an independently motivated theory of covert modality in conditional sentences.

This chapter builds on the modal approach to generics by arguing that there is an important connection between generics and *weak* necessity that we should appreciate. The core aims are to provide some evidence for the view that generics involve

²⁰Where $w'' \leq_{g(w)} w'$ means that w'' is closer to the ideal as determined by the ordering source than w' .

²¹Barring differences in the binding of variables.

covert weak necessity modals. The core evidence for this view is based on some interesting and noteworthy distributional parallels between generics and sentences containing overt weak necessity modals. In addition, this chapter also provides a sketch of a theory of generics based on the weak necessity proposal.

To illustrate the view, I will largely follow the account of weak necessity modals due to [von Fintel and Iatridou \(2008\)](#). This approach allows for an additional context-sensitive parameter which will be useful in the interpretation of generics. On this approach, a weak necessity modal (e.g. *should/ought*) claim is true provided the proposition under the scope of the modal is true in the best of the best worlds. That is, weak necessity modals involve a further domain restriction measure. It is proposed that generics can be domain restricted twice over in the same way, with the secondary domain restriction involving a contextually determined notion related to normality, ideality, or some related notion.

2.3 MODALS AND *in view of* PHRASES

This chapter investigates the covert structure of generics. My aim is to provide evidence that generics involve covert weak necessity modals. Our initial lens from which we examine this covert structure will be to observe the interactions between free relative *in view of* phrases and generic sentences without overt modals. This will take place from the perspective of the unified semantics for modals in natural language given in [Kratzer \(1977, 1981, 1991, 2012\)](#). Hence, ultimately, the task is to look at the influence of context on the meaning of generics.

2.3.1 GENERICS UNDER *in view of*

The idea that I would like to establish in this section is that *in view of* phrases, when combined with generics, tell us what we need in order to determine a conversational background for generics. This means that *in view of* phrases, in the case of generics, must be supplying information to a *covert* modal.

If *in view of* phrases are supplying information to a covert generic modal, then different *in view of* phrases will affect the genericity, in some important sense, of a given generic prejacent. We can observe such affects as follows:

- (55) a. Birds, *in view of their DNA*, fly.
b. Birds, *in view of scientific testimony*, fly.
c. Birds, *in view of their dispositions*, fly.
d. Birds, *in view of what I've seen*, fly.

The examples in (55) show that 'Birds fly' can, on different occasions, receive variable interpretations. One way to account for the variability is that it is very much like the variability associated with different readings of modal sentences. This means that we need to think carefully about the features of the conversational background involved, in particular, the modal base and the ordering source.

[Sterken \(2015b\)](#) has recently discussed the contextual variability of generics. She claims that such variability is widespread and distinctive. I am proposing that at least one helpful way to examine this variability is in terms of *in view of* and related locutions.

For instance, let us discuss one of the cases Sterken highlights, which is originally discussed in [Nickel \(2008\)](#):²²

(56) Dobermans have floppy ears.

Dobermans are born with floppy ears, and so we can easily imagine that in a sort of evolutionary biology context that (56) sounds totally fine. However, (56) comes out as false in certain dog-breeding contexts. Consider Nickel's example text:

(57) While Labradors and Golden Retrievers have floppy ears, Dobermans don't. Dobermans have pointy ears.

These Nickel-effects can be easily recast using *in view of* phrases:

(58) Dobermans, *in view of evolutionary facts*, have floppy ears.

(59) Doberman, *in view of the practices of dog-breeders*, have pointy ears.

If we control the interpretation of (56), it is very easy to witness the variability here.

We could even construct a sentence which suitably combines (58) and (59):

(60) Dobermans, given evolutionary facts, have floppy ears, however, given dog-breeding practices, they have pointy ears.

²²Also see [Nickel \(2016\)](#).

In fact, perhaps the effect here could seem more ordinary and widespread: we even can imagine something similar for 'Birds fly'. Suppose there are bird-breeders who like to inject birds with a mystery non-flying juice. We could then have the following:

(61) *Birds, in view of the injection practices, do not fly.*

(62) *Birds, in view of evolutionary facts, fly.*

We could even imagine a person growing up in Antarctica who has only seen penguins. The context in such a case would have it come out as false that birds fly. And so on. Stepping away from the particular details of such cases, I should emphasize that the main point at hand is that the variability of generics can be easily witnessed in a systematic, principled way by supplementing with *in view of* phrases.

It appears as though the explanation of what is happening in such cases is that these *in view of* phrases make explicit the background information which informs and affects the interpretation of a covert generic modal. There are cases, however, where we have *in view of* phrases combined with non-modal, non-generic sentences. Consider such a sentence in (63) and then combined with a phrase to specify some background contextual information in (64):

(63) John danced with Sue.

(64) *Given what I've heard, John danced with Sue.*

On the basis of examples like (64) one might reasonably be skeptical that the combination of *in view of* phrases and generics tells us anything about the existence or nature

of a covert generic modal, for presumably there is no such modal in these seemingly more ordinary sentences like (63).²³ If *in view of* phrases provide information to a covert modal in generics, what are they doing in cases like (64)?

The proposed answer is that, in cases such as (64), we have made explicit some background evidential information.²⁴ English is not evidentially marked; however, the idea is that some reconstruction can tell us the source of information that a speaker possesses. Here is some reason to think that phrases like *given what I've heard* in (64) provide evidential information (presumably to a tacit epistemic modal). Following Murray (2010), evidentials contribute *not-at-issue* content to restrict the common ground. A feature of not-at-issue content is that it is not directly challengeable. The *at-issue* content, for instance the assertion that 'John danced with Sue', is challengeable. Consider the following two responses to (64):

(65) No, they didn't dance.

(66) # No, you didn't.

So, if a phrase like *given what I've heard* is providing us with not-at-issue content, then we should understand it as placing a restriction on the common ground which plays the role of providing evidential information.

Now consider *in view of* phrases which select non-doxastic conversational backgrounds to combine with non-modal, non-generic sentences. These do not seem to combine well. Here are just a few attempts at combining with (63):

²³I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Inquiry* for pressing me on various points related to *in view of* phrases.

²⁴I owe this point to discussion with Josh Dever.

- (67) a. *In view of the laws*, John danced with Sue.
b. *In view of their DNA*, John danced with Sue.
c. *In view of their dispositions*, John danced with Sue.

That such conversational backgrounds do not combine well with non-modal, non-generic sentences should be expected since there is obviously no overt modal available to affect, nor is there good reason to think with such sentences that there is a covert modal to affect (other than a tacit epistemic modal which receives evidential information).²⁵

Additionally, it is worth noting that not just any *in view of* phrase will affect any available modal, whether covert or overt. Consider the following combinations of *in view of* phrases and generics:²⁶

- (68) a. *In view of the weather*, birds fly north.
b. *In view of grandma's pets*, birds live in grandma's house.

Aside from the point that these examples sound a bit strange, even perhaps ungrammatical: if the *in view of* phrases in (68) combine well with the generics they are attached to, then there is a worry that we can overgenerate readings for many bare plural sentences. But there is good reason to think that these *in view of* phrases do not combine well at all. Let us try adding an overt modal to the sentences in (68):

²⁵There is more to be said about the interactions between the evidential *in view of* phrases and generics, I come back to this issue in Section 2.5. There I argue, *inter alia*, that doxastic *in view of* phrases do not affect the generic covert modal at all.

²⁶The examples considered here belong to an anonymous reviewer for *Inquiry*, and I thank them for bringing this point to my attention.

- (69) a. *In view of the weather*, birds must fly north.
b. *In view of grandma's pets*, birds must live in grandma's house.

When we add *must*, it is not obvious that these *in view of* phrases are really helping to unpack the meanings of the overt modals in (69). But if these latter examples with overt modals sound better, then this confirms discomfort with the examples in (68), since these *in view of* phrases seem to be looking for an overt modal, maybe one with an epistemic flavor. In particular, this gives us reason that such *in view of* phrases would not be affecting the interpretation of a generic covert modal.

There are plenty of complexities here. However, I believe these observations are sufficient to allow us to proceed with the hypothesis that there are at least certain, relevant kinds of *in view of* phrases which restrict the domain of generics. This should help us achieve some further insights concerning genericity, in particular, concerning the nature and interpretation of the covert generic modal.

The rest of the chapter will focus on making the case that the covert generic modal is a weak necessity modal. In the next two sections, I provide some evidence to hold this view by showing some parallels between generics and sentences with overt weak necessity modals.

2.4 GENERIC DEFEASIBLE REASONING

In this section, I argue that generics display very much the same behavior as sentences with overt weak necessity modals in nonmonotonic reasoning environments. In both

cases, we see that reasonable defeasible consequences follow. And although reasoning via general principles with overt weak necessity modals or with generics may not always be reasonable, they seem to at least share this feature in common. This parallel gives us reason to believe that generics involve a covert weak necessity modal.

2.4.1 PARALLEL PATTERNS OF REASONING

The theorists who investigate the link between generics and defeasible reasoning are motivated by the need to account for the defeasible validity of inference patterns such as:

(70) **Defeasible Modus Ponens**

- If Tweety is a bird, (normally/generally/etc.) Tweety flies.
- Tweety is a bird.
- So, Tweety flies.

(71) **Generic Modus Ponens**

- Birds fly.
- Tweety is a bird.
- So, Tweety flies.

The conclusion that Tweety flies in both (70) and (71) follows not deductively, but given some adequate nonmonotonic consequence relation between a set of premises Γ and a

set of conclusions φ .²⁷

My interest here is to examine what is happening when we draw defeasible consequences from generics. In particular, we will take a look at what are the adequate ways to characterize the *conclusions* of defeasible reasoning in order to, in a sense, gauge the force of these consequences. So, suppose we have the premises of (71), that is, that 'Birds fly' and 'Tweety is a bird'. What we will do is look for a paraphrase that, in some sense, respects the potential for retraction that is characteristic of defeasible reasoning.

Let us start with the following:

(72) Tweety *must* fly.

(73) Tweety *has to* fly.

Both of these strong necessity conclusions would be inappropriate, for they are clearly too strong. Now consider:

(74) Tweety *might* fly.

(75) Tweety *can* fly.

²⁷Briefly, a logic is nonmonotonic if the following monotonicity property fails of its consequence relation: if φ is a consequence of Γ , then φ is a consequence of $\Gamma \cup \psi$. If the monotonicity property fails, then a conclusion can be prevented by adding further premises. The aim in these frameworks is to reach *defeasible* conclusions. An important feature of nonmonotonic logics is that they allow for retraction: given the information that 'Tweety is a bird', and that 'birds fly', we infer that 'Tweety flies'. But if we find out that Tweety has a broken wing, then we would retract our conclusion that 'Tweety flies', and instead infer that 'Tweety doesn't fly'. This is a major contrast to the situation in classical deductive formalisms where, once a conclusion is established, it remains established, since adding additional premises keeps validity intact. So it is in this sense that nonmonotonic logics allow for retraction and monotonic logics do not. Indeed, this is taken to be reason that nonmonotonic logics are held to be useful in characterizing common sense reasoning as well as the role generics play in such reasoning patterns.

It appears as though (74) is too weak of a conclusion to draw, though I imagine that there are contexts where (75) can sound appropriate—perhaps this would depend on how we are reading the premise that ‘Birds fly’.

Let us now consider the weak necessity conclusions:

(76) Tweety *should* fly.

(77) Tweety *ought to* fly.

I submit that both (76) and (77) sound appropriate as conclusions of defeasible reasoning. In particular, paraphrasing things this way respects the potential for retraction:

(78) Tweety *should* fly, but doesn’t.

(79) Tweety *ought to* fly, but doesn’t.

It then appears as though generics license defeasible consequences with, as it were, the force of weak necessity. Sentences with overt weak necessity modals license consequences in the same way. Let us consider a defeasible pattern of reasoning using a sentence with such an overt modal in the major premise.

- (80)
- Residents of Sesame Street ought to share their cookies.
 - Cookie Monster is a resident of Sesame Street.
 - So, Cookie Monster ought to share his cookies.

It would be odd to conclude that ‘Cookie Monster shares his cookies’; things sound much better when we add *ought*. It is true that Cookie Monster ought to share his cookies, though we all know that he’s not actually going to (or at least do so very reluctantly). It would not sound appropriate to say that he *might* share his cookies; likewise, it would not sound appropriate to say that he *must* share his cookies. It is in this sense that sentences with overt weak necessity modals share something in common with generics: the defeasible consequences we derive sound appropriate when we add an overt weak necessity modal. Additionally, if we were to take the generic version of the premise of (80), that is, ‘Residents of Sesame Street share their cookies’, the appropriate way of embedding the defeasible conclusion would be the same.

The foregoing reveals that generics and sentences with overt weak necessity modals share an important link to each other in nonmonotonic reasoning environments. What we should take away from the parallel behavior is that generics must involve something like a covert weak necessity modal, for this would be an explanation of the parallels. And this also means that if we want to understand the relationship between generics and defeasible reasoning, we should also look to study reasoning patterns involving *ought* and *should*.

2.4.2 A REMARK ON THE REASONING DATA

Before moving forward, it is worth noting that there are generics from which it does not appear that we can draw any reasonable consequences. This makes for a general worry for those who investigate the links between generics and defeasible reasoning, as it undermines the strength of such links.

A challenge of this form is put forth by Leslie (2007). The challenge is based on inferences such as the following:

- (81)
- Mosquitoes carry West Nile Virus.
 - Buzzy is a mosquito.
 - So, Buzzy carries the West Nile Virus.

Leslie holds that this is not a very attractive inference and that the existence of such cases means that schemas like (70) and (71) do not hold for all generics. However, I think this challenge is perhaps a bit too quick, and that it is worth taking another look at her case.

Let us begin by finding an *in view of* phrase that helps us make sense of the generic premise in (81). Perhaps the following are some bad attempts:

- (82)
- a. Mosquitoes, *in view of scientific testimony*, carry West Nile Virus.
 - b. Mosquitoes, *in view of their dispositions*, carry West Nile Virus.
 - c. Mosquitoes, *in view of their DNA*, carry West Nile Virus.

I am inclined to hold that under these *in view of* phrases, we get false interpretations of 'Mosquitoes carry West Nile Virus'. Suitable non-doxastic readings do not appear easily available. Perhaps the following *in view of* phrases with an apparent 'epistemic' flavor help provide some 'reasonable' readings:

- (83)
- a. Mosquitoes, *in view of what I've been told*, carry West Nile Virus.

- b. Mosquitoes, *in view of what I've seen*, carry West Nile Virus.

These doxastic *in view of* phrases help us draw out some suitable contexts for the major premise of (81).²⁸ A consequence is that the conclusion that 'Buzzy carries West Nile Virus' seems reasonable—given a sort of doxastic *in view of* phrase in the generic premise—when read in the following ways:

- (84) a. Buzzy, *in view of what I've been told*, carries West Nile Virus.
b. Buzzy, *in view of what I've seen*, carries West Nile Virus.

In particular, we should read the sentences in (84) as restricted according to some evidential information. So the idea is that these conclusions are warranted on the basis of the source of evidence given in the major premise, thereby making these conclusions defeasibly acceptable.

The main upshot of looking at Leslie's example in a different way is that perhaps there is a way to salvage such cases where it does not appear as though reasonable conclusions can be drawn from generics. The suspicion is that, at least in some cases, those who judge (81) as bad do so because they may be interpreting the premises and the conclusion with respect to different sorts of conversational backgrounds.

Yet there is the overriding intuition that inferences such as (81) are bad. Indeed, generally, there is some kind of difference between the reasonableness of inferences like (71)

²⁸However, stay tuned for some remarks in the following two sections on the status of generics evaluated with doxastic *in view of* phrases. I will argue that such *in view of* phrases do not affect the covert generic modal. This makes for another distributional parallel with sentences containing overt weak necessity modals—there is good reason to believe that such sentences do not admit of genuine epistemic readings. Anyway, there is an intuition that 'Mosquitoes carry West Nile Virus' is a true generic, so it presumably must have some suitable non-doxastic interpretation or other.

and (81), whether or not there is a way to salvage (81). It is worth noting that, strictly speaking, these defeasible inferences involving generics such as (71) and (81) are bad. There is a sense in which such inferences appear fine because they are reasonable unless we have defeating information. However, there is a sort of oddity. Consider the case of 'Birds fly'. It is plausible to think that this generic is somehow about ideal or normal birds. But Tweety is an actual bird. The oddity is that when we conclude that Tweety flies we do so on the proviso that the normal or ideal birds of interest are relevantly similar to the actual birds. Without such an auxiliary assumption even the inference involving 'Birds fly' is going to be unreasonable. The reason why there is a kind of inferential badness in the case of the mosquito inference is because we are unable to make a similar auxiliary assumption. On the reading that makes 'Mosquitoes carry West Nile Virus' true, we would have it that this sentence talks about mosquitoes in a certain ideal or normal way. But Buzzy is an actual mosquito. We know that most actual mosquitoes do not carry West Nile Virus. So we do not operate under the assumption that the actual mosquitoes are relevantly similar to the ideal or normal ones that we are talking about.²⁹

Anyway, even if such inferences are not salvageable, that is, even if we cannot find contexts in which we can draw reasonable inferences from a given number of generics, I hold that there is no genuine, general worry here. This is because sentences with overt weak necessity modals share the same feature. Many of them do not allow us to draw reasonable consequences from them. Suppose there is a scenario where hardly any resident of Sesame Street shares their cookies. Then it would appear unreasonable, in many cases, to conclude something like 'Cookie Monster ought to share his cookies'. Likewise for other major premises that feature overt weak necessity modals.

²⁹I thank Matthew McKeever for helpful discussion on this point.

To recap, the main point of interest is the parallel behavior of generics and sentences with overt weak necessity modals. We observe this through the relationship between generics and the defeasible conclusions we draw from them. While it appears as though many generics do not warrant reasonable conclusions, the same holds for sentences with overt weak necessity modals. Given this, I claim that there is indeed interest in investigating the nonmonotonicity of inferences from generics. In the next section, we move on to discussing another parallel between generics and sentences with overt weak necessity modals, namely that both sorts of sentences do not receive genuine doxastic interpretations.

2.5 DOXASTIC BACKGROUNDS AND GENERICITY

In Section 2.3, it was noted, in the case of non-modal, non-generic sentences, that doxastic *in view of* phrases affect the interpretation of a tacit epistemic modal. In particular, such conversational backgrounds concern the evidential state of a speaker. It was also noted that non-doxastic *in view of* phrases do not combine well with non-modal, non-generic sentences.

The present section begins by observing that there are generics that do not receive any reasonable non-doxastic interpretations. What we learn from this observation is that only non-doxastic conversational backgrounds affect the interpretation of a generic. I will argue, here, for the claim that generics do not receive genuine epistemic interpretations and that this is a feature that is shared with sentences that have overt weak necessity modals. This gives further reason to believe that the generic covert modality is a weak necessity modal.

2.5.1 PREJUDICIAL GENERICS AND DOXASTIC BACKGROUNDS

There are many generics that seem as though to only have true readings given doxastic *in view of* phrases. For instance, consider the following prejudicial generics:

- (85) a. Blondes are dumb.
b. Black people are violent.
c. Muslims are terrorists.

There is no non-doxastic reading that could make any of the sentences in (85) true. For instance, consider:

- (86) a. *In view of their DNA*, blondes are dumb.
b. *In view of scientific testimony*, blondes are dumb.
c. *In view of their dispositions*, blondes are dumb.
- (87) a. *In view of their DNA*, black people are violent.
b. *In view of scientific testimony*, black people are violent.
c. *In view of their dispositions*, black people are violent.
- (88) a. *In view of their DNA*, Muslims are terrorists.
b. *In view of scientific testimony*, Muslims are terrorists.
c. *In view of their dispositions*, Muslims are terrorists.

These readings of the various sentences in (85) are plainly false. The following doxastic readings of (85) can only come out as true just in case an agent has the appropriate states of mind:

- (89) a. *In view of what I've seen*, blondes are dumb.
b. *In view of what I've heard*, Black people are violent.
c. *In view of what Smith tells me*, Muslims are terrorists.

However, this does not mean that any of the sentences in (85) are true generics.³⁰ The doxastic *in view of* phrases present in (89) do not affect the covert generic modal at all; instead, they provide information to a tacit epistemic modal. This is because doxastic *in view of* phrases, when combined with generics, contribute non-at-issue content, which does not end up affecting the *genericity* of the underlying proposition.

There are a number of generics that only have 'reasonable' readings under *in view of* phrases. I will not claim that this is a general feature of prejudicial or 'troublesome' generics. The claim of interest concerns the variance between doxastic and non-doxastic conversational backgrounds and their interactions with generics. My aim in this section is to argue that sentences with overt weak necessity modals share the feature that doxastic conversational backgrounds do not affect their interpretation; that is, there are no genuine epistemic interpretations of such sentences.

³⁰Think of the sentences in (85) as being very much as bad as the following:

- (90) Philosophers have wings.

(90) is plainly false and can only receive true readings under doxastic *in view of* phrases. And the likely reason (90) is judged to be false is because, uncontroversially, there is no non-doxastic *in view of* phrase that can make it true. The asymmetry between the sentences in (85) and (90) is that there are people out there who judge sentences in (85) as having reasonable interpretations.

2.5.2 THE LACK OF DOXASTIC INTERPRETATIONS FOR GENERICS

If generics can have genuine epistemic readings, we should reasonably expect there to at least be some case where the only available reading of a generic is an epistemic one. That is, we need a case where the only available interpretation of a generic is under a doxastic *in view of* phrase. Let us consider a generic with such a doxastic conversational background:

(91) In view of what I believe, mosquitoes carry West Nile Virus.

This claim is true so long as an agent has the appropriate belief states. However, that the doxastic generic claim is true is entirely uninteresting. When we divide generic claims into true and false sentences we do not hold that this division at all depends upon belief states. If we did care about doxastic readings, then what it means to be a true generic is entirely trivial. We do not want (91) to come out as a true generic in any interesting sense. Another reason doxastic conversational backgrounds are irrelevant when theorizing about genericity is that such statements are akin to belief sentences:

(92) I believe that mosquitoes carry West Nile Virus.

The irrelevance is that belief sentences are not generic sentences: genericity does not survive through embedding under doxastic operators. We would not hold that the embedded proposition (whatever its underlying nature may be) is true just because the belief sentence is true. Then even having a case where the only available reading seems epistemic does not matter if we want to investigate whether generics can have genuine epistemic readings.

Second, for further evidence, let us see if there can be genuine cases of faultless disagreement involving doxastic readings of generics. But as we have already observed, if a generic is true, it is true provided a non-doxastic *in view of* phrase. Then whatever is going on with disagreement involving generics under doxastic *in view of* phrases is irrelevant and uninteresting. We can imagine two parties disagreeing over whether philosophers have red wings or blue wings, but we do not take it that the disagreement has anything to do with the covert modality of generics; it instead can be diagnosed in terms of thinking of belief operators. Additionally let us consider a case of disagreement involving a true non-doxastic generic claim and a contrary doxastic generic claim. Suppose someone disagrees with 'Birds fly' and holds 'In view of what I believe, birds do not fly'. We take it that the former party is correct and the latter party is wrong. Therefore, there is no interesting case of disagreement here that will tell us anything about whether generics can involve genuine epistemic modality.

Given the evidence that generics do not receive genuine doxastic interpretations, we want a view of the covert generic modality that allows us to block such interpretations. The weak necessity view is promising because there are independent arguments that sentences with overt weak necessity modals do not receive genuine epistemic interpretations.

[Yalcin \(2016\)](#) has argued based on some interesting observations that *should* and *ought* do not admit of genuine epistemic readings, and makes a strong case for this. He writes:

Consider a case which many would, at least initially, take as drawing out the putative epistemic reading of the English modals *ought* and *should*. Sup-

pose Jones is in a crowded office building when a severe earthquake hits. The building topples. By sheer accident, nothing falls upon Jones; the building just happens to crumble in such a way so as not to touch the place where he is standing. He emerges from the rubble as the only survivor.³¹

Suppose that, after the incident, Jones says either:

(93) I should be dead right now.

(94) I ought to be dead right now.

In such situations we do not have standard deontic readings of (93) and (94). These utterances do not involve considering, say, certain deontic or bouletic preferences. Given this, one would reasonably expect that we should go for epistemic readings of (93) and (94).³² However, the problem is that we cannot use a modal with an uncontroversial epistemic reading instead. For instance, observe that the following do not sound appropriate here:

(98) # I am probably dead right now.

(99) # I might be dead right now.

³¹Yalcin (2016, 231).

³²As Yalcin (2016) notes, the observation that weak necessity modals lack epistemic interpretations is anticipated by Copley (2004, 2006). This is based on data such as the following:

(95) # The beer must be cold by now, but it isn't.

(96) # The beer may be cold by now, but it isn't.

(97) The beer should be cold by now, but it isn't.

Given the apparent contrast present here, we get some initial motivations for thinking that the should in (97) is not epistemic.

(100) # I may be dead right now.

Yalcin notes that it is reasonable to expect that if a sentence entails a defective sentence it is presumably itself defective. However, Jones's utterances are not defective, so we should not take it that, in particular, (93) and (94) entail (99) and (100). Hence, this is additional support for the claim that there is no genuine epistemic reading of either (93) or (94).

The main upshot is that both generics and sentences with overt weak necessity modals share the feature that they do not take genuine epistemic readings. There are independent, yet related, reasons for why both types of sentences do not take such readings. This parallel gives support to the view that the covert generic modal is a weak necessity modal.

2.6 WEAK NECESSITY SEMANTICS FOR GENERICS

We have seen that we can track the variability of generics at least in part by noting how *in view of* phrases can govern their interpretation. This gives us evidence to hold that generics involve covert modals because the best explanation of the behavior of at least some sorts of *in view of* phrases is that they are affecting the interpretation of a tacit modal. If generics involve covert modals then there is a significant question about the nature of these covert modals, and whether this would contribute to explaining the core of the variability we get with generics.

In Section 2.4 and Section 2.5, we saw that there are some important parallels and

observations which provide evidence for the view that generics involve covert *weak* necessity modals. This section pursues the case for the weak necessity view further by discussing the relationship between the variability of weak necessity modals and the variability of generics and whether there are any important relationships between the dimensions of variability of both weak necessity modals and generics.

Accordingly, my task in this section is to give a sketch of an approach to generics based on the proposal that generics involve a covert weak necessity operator. I discuss how this approach helps us model the variability of generics with respect to some cases of interest. The overall argument I want to put forward in discussing these cases is that treating generics as involving covert weak necessity modals gives us a new option for modelling the variability and diverse features of generics.

The aim will not be to give a fully worked out formal semantics for generics, but rather to give a sketch of an approach. The core of the conceptual payoff of pursuing the weak necessity approach to generics lies in revealing that the contextual variability associated with weak necessity modals is of a similar nature as the contextual variability associated with generics.

2.6.1 DUAL ORDERING SOURCES

A weak necessity approach to generics would have to take on board some account of the difference between weak and strong necessity modals. There are potentially a number of options to explore, but for the sake of the discussion here, it is useful to restrict our focus to the influential account given by [von Stechow and Iatridou \(2008\)](#). If generics can be modelled in terms of weak necessity modals, then it is useful to see how

things would work when considering a widely discussed approach but importantly because it builds directly upon the Kratzer framework for natural language modality.

The main idea behind the proposal of [von Stechow and Iatridou \(2008\)](#) is that weak necessity modals arise from the promotion of a secondary ordering source of a strong necessity modal. In particular, the idea is that strong necessity modals tell us that the prejacent is true in all of the preferred worlds; weak necessity modals tell us that the prejacent is true in all of the best of the preferred worlds. Hence, weak necessity modals carve out a finer portion of the modal base due to a secondary ordering source. This feature, in addition to the various other parallels between generics and sentences with overt weak necessity modals, will turn out to be important for an account of generics.

The guiding idea will be that the generic covert modal is sensitive to two ordering sources: a primary ordering source and a secondary ordering source. The former ordering source will be given by the proposition picked out by an *in view of* phrase; the latter ordering source is determined by another measure.

Thus far, we have observed the various ways in which generics get their domains restricted by *in view of* phrases. These free relative clauses that we supply come with a proposition that helps us specify a modal base and allows us to impose an ordering on the set of worlds in question. For instance, we are able to specify different conversational backgrounds for a given generic:

- (101) a. *In view of their DNA*, birds fly.
b. *In view of scientific testimony*, birds fly.
c. *In view of their dispositions*, birds fly.

The information, however, given in the free relative clauses in (101) will not be enough for our purposes. These clauses give us what is required to restrict the domain of a strong necessity modal. The intuitive way of determining the truth conditions based on what is given in (101) will be to take the contextually determined best worlds and see whether in all of those worlds the prejacent is true. A further restriction will give us weak necessity, which will give us what we need to capture genericity.

The subsidiary ordering source, from a cross-linguistic perspective, according to [von Stechow and Iatridou \(2008\)](#), can be brought about by counterfactual marking.³³ They claim that in a wide variety of languages, counterfactual morphology, in combination with a strong necessity modal, returns a construction that is semantically equivalent to the English *ought*. Generics do not manifest themselves with overt modal lexical items, so the strategy here will be to introduce some counterfactual marking to help us capture the secondary restriction.

A precedent for introducing counterfactual marking as a way to interpret sentences containing weak necessity modals comes from [Yalcin \(2016\)](#). At least in the cases where a weak necessity modal takes a non-genuine epistemic reading, the suggestion is that it receives a reading that has something to do with the way things *normally* unfold.³⁴ Recall either utterance of Jones after the earthquake:

(102) I should be dead right now.

(103) I ought to be dead right now.

³³See also [Silk \(fc\)](#).

³⁴Although Yalcin's suggestion was, in particular, about non-genuine epistemic readings, I think that things generalize.

The idea is that the interpretation of these sentences is somehow restricted according to normality, in some sense or other. Furthermore, an initial gloss of the relationship between weak necessity modals and normality is given as follows:

(104) α should/ought to $F \approx$ It is normal for α to F

However, the problem with this gloss is that it would be odd for Jones to say:

(105) # It is normal for me to be dead right now.

But (105) does sound better when adding some standard counterfactual morphology:

(106) It would be normal for me to be dead right now.

So, following Yalcin (2016), a better gloss of the relationship between weak necessity modals and normality is as follows:

(107) α should/ought to $F \approx$ It would be normal for α to F

We can then use (107) to make manifest an overt construal of the affect of a secondary ordering source:

- (108) a. In view of their DNA, *it would be normal* for birds to fly.
b. In view of scientific testimony, *it would be normal* for birds to fly.

- c. In view of their dispositions, *it would be normal* for birds to fly.

The counterfactual morphology present in (108) represents a further restriction which then allows the modal to quantify over the very best of the worlds picked out by the various *in view of* phrases. We then check whether in this more restricted set of worlds whether the prejacent holds. Additionally, and crucially, the subsidiary restriction may rule out the actual world, thus allowing for the coherence of sentences of the form ‘Should p but not p ’ and helps make sense of the fact that generics grant exceptions.

It is also important to note that the subsidiary restriction need not be a normality restriction. We can have any sort of restriction which is capable of a counterfactual displacement which may remove the actual world from the information states relevant to assessing the truth-conditions. Let us begin by taking a look at the following generics:

- (109) a. Oysters make round pearls.
- b. Scots wear kilts.
- c. Stealing is wrong.
- d. If you make a promise, you should keep it.

Now, we consider the generics in (109) supplemented by the counterfactual morphology which makes the subsidiary ordering source overt:

- (110) a. *It would be ideal* for Oysters make round pearls.
- b. *It would be ideal* for Scots wear kilts.
- c. *It would be wrong* to steal.

d. If you make a promise, *it would be good/right* for you to keep it.

The sorts of restrictions on the modal base given in (110) are preferred over normality restrictions. Consider (109)a. It appears as though many oysters produce pearls that are not perfectly round. At least in some sense, a normal pearl is one that is not perfectly round. A way to pick out the pearls of interest is to pick out certain ideal ones like we have in (110)a. The idea, then, is that we are likely talking about *ideal* pearls when we use (109)a. Similar remarks apply for (109)b. It isn't quite *normal* for Scots to wear kilts, though restricted in various ways to certain cultural ideals we get the worlds where the prejacent holds. Now consider the moral principle in (109). Taking for granted the idea that moral principles are like generics, the more suitable way of capturing their genericity is by selecting the worlds with the right normative facts. It is true that, normally, stealing is wrong, however the moral content of the generic is more aptly captured by (110)c. Similar remarks apply for the conditional construction in (110)d. This way of putting things does a much better job at capturing the moral content than an overt appeal to normality. We would have: 'If you make a promise, then it would be normal for you to keep it', which would not quite do the job.

One can think of these other ways of capturing the additional restriction as each having something to do with normality. That is, the additional restrictions can be thought of capturing different types of normality, as normality appears highly context-sensitive. It is convenient, though, in my mind, not entirely essential to think of the further distinctions we require to capture weak necessity in this way.

Here is another way to think about the additional measure provided by weak necessity modals. A suggestion from [von Fintel and Iatridou \(2008\)](#) is to think about it in a

metalinguistic fashion. Consider:

- (11) If we were in a context in which the secondary ordering source were promoted, then it would be a strong necessity that...

It is useful to compare this to a move by Nickel (2016) who suggests adding a counterfactual element into the semantics of generics, along with a reference to normality. One way of doing this, Nickel suggests, is to take a generic like 'Lions have four legs' and interpret it as follows:

- (112) If there was a lion that was normal with respect to the number of legs for lions, then all lions that are normal with respect to the number of legs for lions would have 4 legs.

The idea we are after in capturing *weak* necessity is that the weak necessity results from embedding a strong necessity claim in a counterfactual environment. The counterfactual embedding is what can move the world of evaluation away from the actual world. The *in view of* phrase places the restriction over the strong necessity claim. And the counterfactual restriction places a further restriction on top of this.

2.6.2 DOUBLY RESTRICTED GENERICS

The proposal is that generics work in essentially the same way as sentences containing overt weak necessity modals. Their initial restrictions come from *in view of* phrases. We have seen that such phrases play the role of determining different readings for a

given generic. This is because, at least with non-doxastic conversational backgrounds, we are able to specify contexts that affect the interpretation of a given generic. And, as we have seen, genericity, just like with sentences containing overt weak necessity modals, comes with an additional proviso: we not only select the best worlds given the conversational background, we select the best of these best worlds. This is the main idea behind the proposal. The best of the best worlds are the worlds determined by some sort of normative measure based on normality or ideality.

I now discuss how the theory sketched here would approach various more problematic cases of generics. In particular, we will consider cases of generics which appear true yet the prejacent holds only for a minority; we will also consider cases of generics which appear false yet the prejacent holds for a majority of instances.

First, the majority cases. A paradigm example of the kind of generic I have in mind is 'Books are paperbacks'. The standard suggestion is that such generics are false; the weak necessity view helps us see why this is so even though the majority of books are paperbacks. If we attempt to make the ordering sources overt, then we could have something like:

(113) In view of bookbinding practices, it would be normal for books to be paperbacks.

The basic idea is that we consider the set of worlds where a certain kind of bookbinding practice is held fixed (presumably one where many of the books are produced in paperback form). And then we consider a set of these worlds based on whatever ideals or norms we are apt to associate with books. But in this set of worlds it is not the case that it is considered normal for a book to be paperback. So, according to the weak ne-

cessity view, when we feed in information pertaining to norms and ideals, we would predict that 'Books are paperbacks' is false. The weak necessity restriction allows this sentence to be false no matter how prevalent the relevant bookbinding practices are.

Second, the minority cases. Examples of cases I have in mind are sentences such as 'Mosquitoes carry West Nile Virus'. One feature of this generic is that it does not easily appear to take a genuine non-doxastic reading. This is partly why this sentence is associated with a weak inferential profile. But there is the more obvious weakness that very few mosquitoes actually have the virus. What the weak necessity view has to offer is that it could capture such weakness. In particular, it captures the idea that it is false that many actual mosquitoes carry West Nile Virus, yet, at the same time, it is true that, in some sense, they ought to be carriers of the disease. Perhaps a plausible reading for the generic claim could be that it is somehow reasonable to expect that mosquitoes are carriers of the virus. Indeed, the idea is that they are the very species that is a carrier of the virus. The weak necessity view is positioned to capture this kind of intuition because of the nature of displacement associated with weak necessity modals. We pick out a suitable *in view of* reading and then consider a weak necessity restriction which asks us to consider norms and ideals. Weak necessity modal claims do not depend on actual circumstances; they instead very much depend on the ideals and norms we are apt to associate with these sentences—and this gives us leverage in the case of weak generics.

2.7 CONCLUSION

I have defended the claim that the generic covert modality is a weak necessity modal. The distributional parallels between generics and sentences containing overt weak necessity modals point us to this view. In light of these parallels, I have presented a way of thinking about the generic covert modal as a weak necessity modal and discussed how this would approach various cases of generics. The hope is that we have made some progress in both our understanding of generics and of weak necessity modals. There is much more to be said on understanding genericity in terms of weak necessity, and there is much more to understand about weak necessity.

This chapter features an appendix which investigates the variability of generics further, in relation to the modal proposal for generics defended here. In Section 2.8, I turn my attention to normative generics in particular. I argue that variability involving normative generics is a matter of context-sensitivity, and that the context-sensitivity in question can be explained by a modal approach to generics.

2.8 APPENDIX: NORMATIVE GENERICS

Normative generics—generalizations such as ‘Boys don’t cry’ or ‘Friends don’t let friends drive drunk’—seem to express norms or ideals. Oftentimes, however, their descriptive counterparts come out false: almost every boy cries and many friends let their friends drive drunk. Additionally, it is coherent to accept ‘Boys don’t cry’ in some contexts while also accepting ‘Boys cry’ in other contexts. Such normative generalizations raise particularly pressing empirical and philosophical questions for many accounts of generics, many of which are focused on giving truth-conditions for descriptive generics (e.g. ‘Tigers are striped’ or ‘Ducks lay eggs’).

In this appendix, I propose that a modal approach to generics is able to handle the diversity involving normative and descriptive generics: I argue that this variance is a matter of context-sensitivity, and that the kind of variance in question is familiar from natural language modality. Since the modal approach promises to accommodate for data involving normative generics, this provides an additional argument in favor of treating generic generalizations as involving a covert modal element.

2.8.1 INTRODUCTION

The following are examples of normative generics:

- (114) a. Boys don’t cry.
b. Friends don’t let friends drive drunk.
c. Politicians put the interests of citizens first.

Paradigm examples of normative generics can oftentimes betray their descriptive counterparts in truth-value.³⁵ While the examples in (114) can be read as broadly reflective of current norms and ideals, their descriptive counterparts do not necessarily express true generalizations. All of the examples of normative generics highlighted in (114) share in common the feature that their descriptive counterparts are false. It is generally true, for instance, that boys cry, that friends regularly let their friends drive drunk, and that it is likely that politicians do not always put the interests of citizens first.

These generics express norms or ideals as opposed to some descriptive characterization of kinds. As Leslie (2015, 112) notes:

It has long been noted that some generics such as “boys don’t cry” or “a woman puts family before her career” do not seem to express any kind of inductive generalization about the empirical world, but instead have a certain kind of normative force.

Additionally, normative generics have deeper social dimensions. As Leslie (2015, 134) explains:

These are generics that seem naturally tailored to advise or admonish. They have a characteristic ‘hortatory’ force. For example, ‘boys don’t cry’ is false as a description of the facts (since boys certainly do cry), yet assertions involving it can nonetheless serve to express an *admonition*, or an *encouragement* to hold back the expression of feeling. Similarly, ‘a woman values her

³⁵Recent work has brought attention to such generics which possess a normative flavor. See Haslanger (2014), Leslie (2015), Ritchie (2019), Saul (2017) Wodak et al. (2015).

family over her career' does not convey so much an empirical demographic observation as an *exhortation*, even perhaps, a *rebuke*. 'Friends don't let friends drive drunk' was not introduced into public consciousness as a banal descriptive observation; utterances of it rather serve as injunctions precisely because friends (descriptively speaking) all too often let their friends drive drunk, and activists wished to change this pattern.

This variability brings many challenges for theorizing about generics.³⁶ Not only does giving them closer attention help our understanding of genericity, it also helps us understand a significant dimension of human social cognition. One of the pressing research questions in the literature on generics concerns accounting for the difference between descriptive generics and normative generics, and whether an account of generics can capture this dimension of diversity amongst generics. One of the central questions I will focus on concerns the explanation of how it is coherent to accept a generic generalization such as 'Boys don't cry' when understood in a normative sense while also accepting 'Boys cry' as an adequate empirical statement.

On my view, the way to best understand the overall diversity of generics is to model them in terms of natural language modality. This is the view that generics involve a covert modal operator at logical form. I have discussed motivations for this throughout this chapter, especially why a modal approach to *Gen* should be based on weak necessity modals. In this appendix, the core argument for the modal perspective on generics is that this approach has the potential to deal with normative generics because

³⁶There are also further research questions concerning the grammatical form of these diverse generics. For example, there is evidence that generics expressing characteristic or principled generalizations can come in either bare plural or singular forms, whereas statistical generics only manifest in the bare plural form. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I am leaving aside complexities having to do with the diversity of generics in their surface grammar and their relation to logical form.

natural language modals themselves possess the flexibility to occur either normatively and non-normatively. This gives reason to believe that the best way to understand the context-sensitivity of generics is to understand it in terms of the context-sensitivity of modals. The focus on normative generics will help to illustrate the modal approach further, as well as provide an argument for it.

Modal terms such as *should*, *ought*, and *must* are context-sensitive in that they share a core meaning but different uses express different ‘flavors’ of modality in different situations. These modals occur with great diversity including epistemic, teleological, bouletic, probabilistic, and normative interpretations, amongst others. These diverse interpretations of natural language modals are determined by context: we start from a common modal semantics and supplement special parameters with background information from context which restricts the underlying modal quantification. In this way, the resolution of the context-sensitivity of modal expressions is a metasemantic matter.

[Sterken \(2015b, 3\)](#) has recently defended a metasemantic approach to generics; her approach can be summarized as follows:

When context-sensitivity is made the centerpiece of a theory of generic sentences, our theorising has to be reoriented. This includes moving what has been taken to be semantic work into the metasemantics. In other words, rather than attempting to provide a theory of what the semantic value of *Gen* is, I suggest we attempt to provide a metasemantic theory—that is, a theory which addresses the question: in virtue of what does *Gen* have the semantic value it has in a given context? It is the metasemantics, not the semantics, that determines the content of *Gen* relative to context (just as it is

the metasemantics, for the most part, which determines the content of *that*).

This keeps the semantics simple.

I agree that the core research problem here involves a metasemantic theory. While Sterken's approach is based on an interpretation of *Gen* which is based on indexical quantification modeled on the metasemantics of demonstratives, I will argue that a metasemantics for generics should be based on the idea that *Gen* is modal. I will argue that this view has at least as many advantages as the indexical quantification view, and that it has at least one more advantage, namely that, unlike the indexical quantification approach, my approach accounts for the variability between descriptive and normative generics.

The remainder of this appendix develops this line of argument. I begin by discussing normative generics and argue that there is a strong case in favor of interpreting them in terms of context-sensitivity (Section 2.8.2). After this, I explain how a modal approach to generics can deal with normative generics (Section 2.8.3). Finally, I end with some concluding remarks (Section 2.8.4).

2.8.2 CONTEXT-SENSITIVITY

I argue that the variance between descriptive and normative generics should be treated as a matter of context-sensitivity and that the fact that it is coherent to assent to 'Boys don't cry' in the normative sense while also assenting to 'Boys cry' in the descriptive sense is evidence of a form of context-sensitivity attributable to the generic character of these utterances. A coach on the football field might pressure a young boy after he has been injured while playing by telling him, 'Get back out there—boys don't cry!'

But in a different context, when accurate statistical information is in question, the very same coach may also reasonably assent to 'Boys cry', since this is widely and generally true of actual boys. This is one of the main phenomena which needs some explanation, especially the question of how a general approach to generics would be able to account for the relevant data.

The case for treating this variance as involving a form of context-sensitivity builds upon previous arguments for the context-sensitivity of generics. Sterken (2015b) has recently made a persuasive case for a distinctive form of context-sensitivity associated with generics, one that is not only across generic sentences, but across utterances of a single generic.³⁷ The nature of the context-sensitivity is distinctive in that it is not due to some other familiar type of context-sensitivity, such as the context-sensitivity which arises from domain restriction, or gradable predicates, or some other phenomenon; instead the context-sensitivity is argued to be traceable to *Gen*.³⁸

There are a number of cases considered by Sterken.³⁹ I will consider two of these cases where, at least on some interpretations, something along the lines of a rules or regulations reading is available; in such cases, the generic expresses some kind of prescription.⁴⁰

For a first case, consider:

³⁷Sterken (2015b) also points to a case by Nickel (2008) involving 'Dobermans have floppy ears', which provides a paradigm example for the context-sensitivity of generics. Dobermans are born with floppy ears, so in the context of evolutionary biology, this generic is true; however, in dog-breeding contexts, this generic is false. See earlier in this chapter for further discussion of this case.

³⁸Sterken (2015b, 10).

³⁹Although none of Sterken's examples involve the paradigmatically normative generics that we have been discussing here.

⁴⁰See Carlson (1995).

(115) Cabs are yellow.

Sterken asks us to consider two contexts.⁴¹ The first situation one is where there is a regulation that any licensed cab must only be painted yellow or pink. In actual practice, every cab is painted yellow. In such a situation, if one is asking about how to identify cabs in the relevant jurisdiction, then (115) is a suitable response and is intuitively true in such a context. However, for another situation, suppose that (115) is used in a scenario where one is describing what the cab coloring rules are in the jurisdiction, then (115) is intuitively false.

For a second case, consider:

(116) Frenchmen eat horsemeat.

For this example, Sterken reports that under the paradigmatic reading where distinctive, or at least characteristic, properties of French people are salient, (116) seems true. However, (116) is false in a different context where suppose 'a group of nutritionists is querying the unhealthy eating populations of the French'.⁴²

Hence, because it is possible for the generics in both (115) and (116) to vary their truth-values across different contexts of utterance, we have a standard case for context-sensitivity.⁴³

⁴¹Sterken (2015b, 7).

⁴²Sterken (2015b, 8) gives the following example text: 'Frenchmen eat croissants and baguettes. They don't eat traditional food, like horsemeat or grains.' In this context, I agree that (116) definitely looks false.

⁴³Sterken gives additional support for context-sensitivity here given the agreement test of Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009); I will discuss this below in relation to normative generics.

I agree that these examples help make the case that generics exhibit context-sensitivity; in addition, I think that they are also helpful in approaching the more general problem of how to account for the difference between descriptive and normative generics. I will now present the argument that variability between normative and descriptive generics constitutes a distinctive and paradigmatic form of context-sensitivity involving generics.

We have seen that generics such as 'Boys don't cry' and 'friends don't let their friends drive drunk' can vary between the descriptive and the normative in the sense that it is possible and coherent to accept and use these generics as norms while also accepting that, descriptively speaking, these generics are false. My claim is that context-sensitivity is the best explanation of the fact that it is not contradictory to assent to both 'Boys don't cry' and 'Boys cry'.

There are three remarks before proceeding.

First, while typical arguments for context-sensitivity exploit evidence that involves a divergence in truth-value of the same utterance across different contexts, examples such as 'Boys don't cry' does not seem to give rise to truth-value divergence in the usual sense because it is not obvious whether this sentence expresses a true or false generic. Perhaps the norm that boys should not cry reflects the ideals of society in some sense or other, but this is different from saying that it is true that boys should not cry. At the very least, if 'Boys don't cry' has a widely understood normative reading, which might have imperatival uses, then as long as it differs from 'Boys cry' in the statistical sense, this is what we need to keep track of.

Second, it is, I think, more important to consider the coherence of assenting to both

that *Boys don't cry* and that *Boys cry*. This datum serves the crucial role in my argument that normative generics can give rise to a semantic form of context-sensitivity.

Third, it is important at this stage to state a sort of caveat or hedge. Perhaps I have been speaking as though the primary divisions amongst generics are along descriptive and normative lines. I do not have a particular commitment about these matters of categorization; this is largely a matter of expository convenience. The main point I want to draw home is that if the diversity of natural language modality seems to correspond with the diversity of generics, then our theorizing is likely on the right track.⁴⁴

Moreover, I contend that it is possible to coherently assent to 'Boys cry' and 'Boys don't cry' and understanding this form of variance between descriptive and normative generics as a matter of context-sensitivity is supported by one of the industry-standard tests given by Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009), namely the Agreement Test. According to this test, if two speakers, in different contexts, cannot be reported as disagreeing about whether a sentence is true, then we have evidence for context-sensitivity.⁴⁵

⁴⁴For example, another category to consider aside from the descriptive and the normative is what we might call the *normality* reading which is something of a hybrid of the descriptive and the normative. A descriptive notion of normality involves concepts such as statistical frequency. For instance, people might have some notion of how long the average person actually spends time exercising per week. Perhaps it is so that the average person spends two hours per week exercising. Then, in the descriptive sense, it is normal to exercise for two hours per week. But there is also the prescriptive notion of normality. This has to do with concepts such as ideals. People, perhaps following some general health guidelines, might have some notion that the average person should ideally spend five hours per week exercising. Then, in the prescriptive sense, it is normal to exercise for five hours per week. Bear and Knobe (2017) have recently argued that people's beliefs about normality possess this hybrid character, so when people are asked about the normal hours spent exercising per week, they will tend to give an answer which is something of a mix of the descriptive and prescriptive senses of normality.

⁴⁵Here is a concise statement of the test:

Let u be a sincere utterance of a sentence S by a speaker A in a context c , and u' be a sincere utterance of $not-S$ by a speaker B in a context c' . If from a third context c'' , A and B cannot be correctly reported by A and B disagree whether S , then S is semantically context-sensitive. Meanwhile, if from a third context c'' , A and B can be correctly reported by A and B disagree whether S , then this is evidence that S is semantically invariant across c , c' and c'' . (Cappelen and Hawthorne, 2009, 54)

We can easily see that the Agreement Test gives us evidence of context sensitivity involving normative generics. As mentioned before, two separate utterances of ‘Boys don’t cry’ can give us plenty of cases where one can coherently assent to ‘Boys don’t cry’ but dissent to ‘Boys cry’. The important point is that we would not have the intuition that there is disagreement concerning ‘Boys don’t cry’ in such cases. When the coach on the football field is encouraging or perhaps reprimanding his players by telling them that boys don’t cry, we do not understand this as involving any sort of disagreement with someone who asserts that boys cry in a context where actual natural tendencies of male children are in question. Hence, the lack of disagreement gives us reason to hold that context-sensitivity is an explanation of the phenomenon at hand.⁴⁶

2.8.3 METASEMANTICS

This section argues that a modal approach can handle the context-sensitivity associated with generics, and the focus will be on normative generics. The core point I put forward is that the variability associated with generics is akin to the variability associated with modality in natural language. If this is on the right track, then we have reason to believe that a metasemantic approach to generics should be modelled in terms of the metasemantics of natural language modals.

While I agree with [Sterken \(2015b\)](#) that generics exhibit distinctive context-sensitivity and that the promising direction to pursue is to provide a metasemantic theory of *Gen*, my argument here is that a careful consideration of the dimension of variability related

⁴⁶I am aware that the Agreement Test is not conclusive; a more complete argument for context-sensitivity would require addressing alternative explanations, amongst other things. My aim, at present, is to provide suggestive but defeasible evidence for context-sensitivity.

to descriptive and normative interpretations of generics points to a modal approach to *Gen*. An overview of the argument is as follows. There is good evidence and precedent for treating generics in terms of modals. In natural language, modals are able to take on a variety of interpretations and the dominant approach to the semantics of modality due to Kratzer treats modals as context-sensitive. The resolution of context-sensitivity of modals involves an account of how parameters such as the modal base and ordering source are saturated by background information. This is one of the central issues underlying the metasemantics of natural language modality. Because a metasemantic account is needed to account for the context-sensitivity of modals, we should expect a similar strategy in accounting for the context-sensitivity of generics.

[Sterken \(2015b\)](#) appeals to the metasemantics for supplementives from [King \(2014\)](#), which is an account based on speaker-hearer coordination: on this view, the semantic value of a demonstrative, in a given context, is determined by speaker intention together with the hearer's knowledge of this intention. In this way, Sterken prefers to base a metasemantic theory of *Gen* on a theory which is generally applicable as a strategy for dealing with supplementives.⁴⁷

Her metasemantic theory based on the coordination account is stated as follows:

The semantic value of a use of *Gen* in a context *c* is the generalisation *g* that meets the following two conditions:

⁴⁷As [Sterken \(2015b, 19-20\)](#) writes:

As I understand it, the metasemantic question for *Gen* is an instance of the more general question: in virtue of what do supplementives get their semantic values in a given context? In this way, specifying an answer for the metasemantic question for *Gen* will likely appeal, in part, to the same sorts of resources as the corresponding metasemantic questions for demonstratives, domain variables, implicit argument places and the like.

- 1) the speaker intends g to be the value of *Gen* in c ; and
- 2) a competent, attentive, reasonable hearer who knows the common ground of the conversation at the time of utterance would know that the speaker intends g to be the value of *Gen* in c . (Sterken, 2015b, 21)

One of the core arguments in favor of this account of the metaseantics of generics is that it explains the apparent semantic underdetermination of *Gen*. To take one of Sterken's examples, consider the following generic in (117) and notice that there are a number of possible contexts which may go along with what a speaker says in uttering (117):

(117) Mammals lay eggs.

- (118) a. A biologist is discussing birds, and their relationship to other species, she utters, *Birds lay eggs. Mammals lay eggs too.*
- b. There is a homogeneous subset of animals such that all of them lay eggs.
 - c. Several mammals that reproduce in some way lay eggs.
 - d. Many mammals that have reproductive capacities lay eggs.

These examples demonstrate that there are many possible candidates which could further fill in what a speaker says when uttering (117). As King (2014) argues, semantic underdetermination is characteristic of supplementives; hence, this gives us reason to model generics in a similar way. That is, we can explain the semantic underdetermina-

tion of generics by giving an account of the resolution of context-sensitivity in the style of how we account for the underdetermination of supplementives.

The standard examples of rules and regulations generics and the standard examples of normative generics both appear to have something along the lines of a normative flavor. At this point, we must ask whether there are important differences between rules and regulations generics and normative generics. I will propose one way to think about the difference: normative generics license inferences or signal endorsement whereas there can be non-endorsing uses of rules and regulations generics.

Paradigm examples of generics which involve a salient rules and regulations reading include:

- (119) a. Bishops move diagonally.
b. Basketball players shoot free throws when fouled.

When the generics in (119) are used in the rules and regulations sense, they do not seem to presuppose that the speaker holds that a bishop should move diagonally or that a basketball player should shoot free throws after being fouled. Paradigmatic instances of normative generics, however, do seem to carry the propensity to license such inferences. [Haslanger \(2014, 367\)](#) writes:

in contexts where it is assumed that what's natural or good (at least for good things) is how things should be, that is, where such assumptions are part of the common ground, then the utterance of a generic enables a short

inference to the normative conclusion, giving the generic a kind of normative force.

[Haslanger \(2014\)](#) argues that this inferential propensity belongs to pragmatics. In the case of normative generics (as well as other non-statistical generics) she proposes that:

if one asserts that Fs are G, then it is implicated (or presumed) that under 'normal' circumstances it is something about being an F that makes an F a G, that Fs *as such* are disposed to be G.

I agree that the propensity to license inferences in this way is an important phenomenon we need to account for, and that this should indeed influence our theorizing about generics. There are a range of competing theoretical options to account for this propensity and while I am sympathetic to a pragmatic explanation, I think that there is reason to think that this phenomenon can, at least in part, be captured from the perspective of a metasemantic account, in particular, in differences in how the contextual parameters of natural language modals are saturated.

The central metasemantic parameters are the modal base and ordering source. These are the values that need to be fixed for any given context of utterance. The differences between rules and regulations generics and normative generics can, at least in part, be witnessed by differences in how these parameters are filled.

While I am sympathetic to the metasemantic approach to *Gen* due to [Sterken \(2015b\)](#) and agree that this approach is very fruitful in capturing a wide range of the data, I argue that there is reason to believe that the indexical quantification variant of this

approach does not possess the resources we need in order to capture the broader variability of generics involving normative uses.

The main point of contention against this approach is that it does not seem likely that a mechanism such as indexical quantification—which is modelled on the metasemantics for demonstratives—can handle the variability which arising from descriptive and normative readings of the same generic. This is because indexical quantification does not involve the sort of intensionality that we need in order to capture the meanings of a wider range of generics. The theory based on [Sterken \(2015b\)](#) would likely deal with such cases by variability in the lexical restrictor and allowing the adverbial quantifier to span over different kinds of situations, actual or non-actual. Aside from the point that many generics seem to involve some sort of intensionality, one doubt is that variations between quantifying over actual versus non-actual situations does not seem to be a general feature of supplementives. This would be problematic if the account is meant to treat generics in terms of the more general phenomenon of how we should account for the metasemantics of supplementives.

For the purposes of this appendix, I want to provide a simple illustration of how variation in the context-sensitive parameters of modals helps us with accounting for normative generics. The generic ‘cabs are yellow’, in a rules and regulations context can be characterized in modal terms by having a modal base whose set of worlds contains those worlds where a cab is painted yellow or pink; the ordering source we would need is one which restricts this set by narrowing things down to what the regulations provide. If what is in question is perhaps the stereotype that cabs are yellow, then the modal base would be restricted accordingly, and we would need an ordering source based on normality in order to complete the overall conversational background.

For 'Boys don't cry', the paradigmatic normative interpretation can be derived by considering a modal base which includes the proposition that boys do not cry, where the resulting worlds are ordered by what is considered ideal. Conversely, when what is in question relates to what is developmentally normal for a boy, then the modal base would include worlds where boys cry, and the overall flavor of the modal would then require an ordering source based on what is biologically normal.

In this way, we can see that a modal approach to generics has the resources and flexibility to account for the variability arising from normative generics. In particular, it is the contextual flexibility which helps provide an explanation for the phenomenon that it is coherent to assent to a normative generic while also assenting to its falsity in different situations. Whatever is the best account for how these contextual parameters get saturated in the case of ordinary natural language modals will be relevant here; at present, the main claim is that an approach to the context-sensitivity of generics can and should be modelled in terms of modality.

2.8.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Here is a summary of my arguments. I have argued in this appendix that a modal approach to generics promises to capture the overall variability of generics by showing how this approach can deal with the context-sensitivity of generics. The ability to provide a uniform setting to deal with the difference between descriptive and normative generics is a highlighted motivation for this approach.

It is worth stating one general point in favor of my account and one general strike against at least some competing account of generics is that my account allows for a

uniform treatment of descriptive and normative generics. For example, [Cohen \(2001\)](#) suggests that we need to depart from the usual logical form of descriptive generics in order to give a treatment of normative generics. But on the modal approach, we can keep one logical form with a unified semantics.

Previous work on generics includes several proposals for dealing with normative generics. I limit myself to a very brief discussion of the view defended by Leslie that normative generics involve lexical polysemy.

[Leslie \(2015\)](#) appeals to empirical work on dual character concepts by [Knobe and Prasada \(2011\)](#) which is motivated independently of theorizing about generics. Dual character concepts allow us to explain how it is possible to assent to 'Boys don't cry' without dissenting to 'Boys cry' by claiming that 'boy' is polysemous in the sense that in the former generic, 'boy' picks out an ideal, whereas in the latter generic, 'boy' picks out actual boys. Hence, on this style of explanation, the distinction between descriptive and normative generics itself should not be located in some feature particular to generics, such as differences in logical form, or appeal to a mechanism such as pragmatic implicature.

A modal account of generics offers a competing explanation without resorting to polysemy. At least one off the bat worry with a polysemy strategy is that there are potentially very many notions or concepts associated with social kinds such as 'boy' and we would not want an over-proliferation of too many senses of 'boy' and it is hard to see how this would follow from a conceptual duality. For example, what is ideal for a boy could easily vary from culture-to-culture. But it is hard to see how lexical polysemy would then be able to deal with the full diversity of concepts associated with

'boy'. While a context-sensitivity strategy for generics has to deal with the worry of overgeneration, there is an important sense in which we want to be able to predict and accommodate the potential diversity of generics by keeping only the right elements stable.

3

The Genericity of Moral Principles

3.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most central and contentious issues regarding the nature of moral reasoning concerns whether we can have knowledge of the moral features of particular actions on the basis of moral principles. This issue is at the heart of the dispute between generalists and particularists in moral philosophy. Moral generalists argue that moral thought and deliberation depends on moral principles. This position is associated with and supports a view on which moral principles have a central role in moral reasoning:

Role Generalism: Moral principles serve a substantial role in moral reasoning by supporting our knowledge of what is morally right or wrong in particular cases.

The central aim of this chapter is to argue against generalism by targeting **Role Generalism**. My opposition to this tradition in moral philosophy is based on the idea that moral principles are not apt to serve a distinguished or special role in moral reasoning because there is good evidence that such principles are of the more elusive sort expressed by generics in natural language. And because there is reason to believe that generics do not properly sustain reasoning about particular cases, I will argue, on this basis, that moral principles are not apt to support the role in moral reasoning that they are generally afforded.

The following are some examples of generics:

(120) a. Ravens are black.

- b. Birds fly.
- c. Tigers are striped.

Generics express generalizations with a kind of quasi-universal flavor: they communicate generalities without a full-on commitment and remain true even in the face of counterinstances. These generalizations are conveyed without any lexical item responsible for telling us about the nature of the generalization in question.

There is good evidence that we should understand moral principles as generic generalizations because they share paradigmatic features of ordinary generics. I argue that this should turn us against **Role Generalism**.

If moral principles involve the same form of generalization as ordinary generics, then there are two main consequences:

- The correct understanding of moral principles is then one on which there is an incredible amount of variability: moral principles remain true even without it being the case that they are successful in giving the right verdicts in particular situations.
- Moral principles do not come with any information about how many instances are required to conform to the generalization in order to be true: information about the prevalence of a particular property does not come from a generic generalization itself.

In this chapter, it is argued that these consequences generate a new argument against **Role Generalism**. In doing so, this chapter provides an argument in favor of a partic-

ularist conception of moral reasoning on which our judgments of whether a particular case possesses a given moral property cannot be supported by our knowledge of general moral principles. In particular, it is argued that the generic conception of moral principles supports the following thesis concerning the role of moral principles in reasoning:

Role Particularism: Knowledge of what is morally right or wrong in particular cases does not depend upon moral principles.

The generic conception of moral principles reveals a further angle in the controversy over generalism and particularism focused on the nature of moral reasoning. The resulting conception of reasoning is thoroughly particularist: the generic view challenges the salient competing models on which moral reasoning is either deductive or defeasible and instead provides motivation for a weaker theory of reasoning. The arguments also raise substantive questions about the nature of reasoning with generics; these are taken up along the way.

This chapter proceeds as follows. The issue of moral reasoning is discussed in Section 3.2 from the perspective of moral generalism and moral particularism. This section discusses how it is that different perspectives on the nature of moral principles inform and give rise to different accounts of moral reasoning.

Section 3.3 argues that we should accept a conception of moral principles on which they are generic generalizations because paradigmatic moral sentences share prominent features in common with ordinary generics.

Section 3.4 lays the foundations for an account of moral reasoning which is based on

the idea that moral principles are generic generalizations:

- In Section 3.4.1, it is argued that because generics do not come with any information about the prevalence of the properties in question, they do not provide sufficient support in reasoning about arbitrary cases.
- In Section 3.4.2, it is argued that the non-relationship between generics and prevalence yields an argument for moral particularism because moral principles also do not come with any information about prevalence, and hence cannot provide the appropriate support to sustain a central role in reasoning.

Section 3.5 concludes. Some further issues regarding moral epistemology and the interaction between overt deontic modals and covert generic modals are taken up in the concluding chapter of the thesis (Chapter 5).

3.2 MORAL REASONING WITH PRINCIPLES

Moral principles, at least in ordinary cases of moral deliberation, are usually expressed by sentences such as the following:

- (121) a. One ought not to steal.
b. Lying is wrong.
c. If you make a promise, you should keep it.

According to the generalist tradition in moral philosophy, the principles expressed by such claims both characterize and govern our actions. Consider the opening section of Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* where he presents an introduction to his account of the source and structure of morality. He argues that there are two features of the world, namely our inclination toward pleasure and our aversion to pain, which not only govern human behavior but also generate a standard of right and wrong.⁴⁸

Bentham (1970, 11-12) continues on these points by specifying what exactly he takes to be the role of the principle of utility:

By the principle of utility it is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or oppose that happiness.

The principle of utility gives us an example of how a principled conception of morality is meant to work. This principle is fully general. It applies to all situations, all acts, and all persons. This sort of indifference and impartiality is characteristic of a variety of traditionalist positions in ethics. On this account, the principle of utility provides a descriptive characterization of our proclivities, but also makes the normative claim that we are to be guided by the relevant proclivities. This is because the notions of right and wrong are defined in terms of pleasure and pain: the promotion of pleasure or happiness generates a standard of right and the opposition of such states generates

⁴⁸Bentham (1970, 11).

a standard of wrong.

Furthermore, accounts of the structure of morality not only differ according to which principles are the foundational ones, but also in terms of whether there ought to be a single foundational principle at all. An alternative conception of the foundations of morality might, for instance, have it that there is instead a series of commandments which may not turn out to be explained by some single rule or source. Such moral frameworks take the ordinary moral principles we use such as 'No one should steal' or 'No one should murder' as more basic or central whereas a view which subscribes to one core moral principle takes these as more intermediary and explained by the one core principle.

A part and parcel of such an account of the structure of morality is a theory of moral reasoning.⁴⁹ This is because a principled conception of morality needs to deliver on how it is we have knowledge of what is morally right and what is morally wrong on the basis of moral principles. The generality of moral principles should make them applicable in all circumstances (or at least a sufficiently wide range of circumstances) and thereby deliver a normative account of how we should reason about matters of morality.

The most orthodox theory of moral reasoning arising out of the generalist tradition is the theory on which moral reasoning is a form of deductive reasoning. The core idea behind this theory is that both the correct psychologically descriptive and normative account of moral reasoning is one which conforms to the structure of deductive argu-

⁴⁹There are, of course, a number of notions of 'reasoning', some which are particularly concerned with, for example, unconscious thinking including biases and heuristics which influence moral judgment. For further discussion, see [Sunstein \(2005\)](#), as well as references therein. The focus here, however, is on the philosophically more paradigmatic notion of moral reasoning which is reflective, and which can be carefully reconstructed.

ments.

The deductive model of moral reasoning enjoys a form of historical prominence in that it was arguably held throughout the history of philosophy up to recent times.⁵⁰ Demos (1958), who was, relatively speaking, an early detractor of the idea that moral reasoning is deductive, notes that:

The fact that moral principles are stated in the form of universal propositions has made it appear that they function as premises in a deductive inference. (Demos, 1958, 153)

Additionally, Hare argues, in *The Language of Morals*, in favor of the deductive model. He elaborates:

There are two factors which may be involved in the making of any decision to do something...They correspond to the major and minor premisses of the Aristotelian practical syllogism. The major premiss is a principle of conduct; the minor premiss is a statement, more or less full, of what we should in fact be doing if we did one or other of the alternatives open to us. Thus if I decide not to say something, because it is false, I am acting on a principle, 'Never (or never under certain conditions) say what is false', and I must know that this, which I am wondering whether to say, is false. (Hare, 1952, 56)

⁵⁰Demos (1958), for instance, proposes that Aristotle was perhaps the first to put forward the deductive model of moral reasoning. Although this is somewhat interesting because, at the same time, Aristotle is claimed to be the "forefather" of particularism (Ridge and McKeever, 2016).

Later, in *Freedom and Reason*, Hare claims that:

the only inferences which take place in [moral reasoning] are deductive...What we are doing in moral reasoning is to look for moral judgements and moral principles which, when we have considered their logical consequences and the facts of the case, we can still accept. (Hare, 1963, 88)

Suppose we consider the model of moral reasoning resulting from Bentham's principle of utility. It would involve starting from this principle as a major premise and then applying it to particular cases. We can consider a simplified version of the principle of utility for an example:

- (122)
- If an action x promotes the greatest pleasure, then x is morally right.
 - This action promotes the greatest pleasure.
 - Therefore, this action is morally right.

As a part of the reasoning process, we might imagine that one needs to especially supply reasons for the truth of the minor premise, for instance by justifying whether, in fact, the action in question does promote the greatest pleasure by considering a variety of potential factors.

Alternatively, since the principle of utility serves as the basis for various more pedestrian moral principles, moral deductive reasoning for the utilitarian can be said to proceed from these subsidiary principles instead. For example:

- (123)
- Stealing is wrong.

- This is an act of stealing.
- Therefore, this act is wrong.

Indeed, this is presumably the sort of more commonplace moral reasoning that ordinary people are said to engage in. These two different examples of the deductive model of moral reasoning are indicative and not exhaustive. There will be some variation amongst different potential examples, but this will be mainly due to differences amongst the formulations of general moral principles and not the inferential relationship in question.

In the remainder of this section, I discuss how different conceptions of moral principles give rise to different associated theories of moral reasoning. An examination of the available options reveals a number of positions for generalists, although the situation from the perspective of particularism seems less straightforward.

3.2.1 GENERALISM

The common commitment behind generalism in moral philosophy is that there are principles which specify the moral reasons which serve the role of determining the moral status of particular actions. Moral generalists tend to be committed to the truth of moral principles as well as the significance of such principles in deliberation. This position is aligned with the idea that moral principles can explain the moral status of particular actions and that such principles hold a central role in moral reasoning. However, as is well-known, the underlying nature of moral principles has been very well-contested within the generalist tradition. For our purposes, it is important to

make explicit how it is that different generalist conceptions of moral principles lead to different commitments regarding moral reasoning.

The proposal that moral principles fit the form of the major premise of an Aristotelian syllogism is one of the most traditional and simple accounts. We can understand the principle that 'Stealing is wrong' as a universally quantified material conditional:

(124) For any action x , if x is an act of stealing, then x is wrong.

Call a view which treats moral principles in this manner **Exceptionless Generalism**. This traditionalist conception of moral principles supports the idea that such principles have a very direct and stable role in the determination of right and wrong. This stability supports the idea that the moral status associated with some action is something that follows from the general principles of morality.

The stability is due to the fact that **Exceptionless Generalism** gives rise to a deductive model of reasoning as previously described. To say that a version of generalism gives rise to a deductive model of reasoning is to say that the conception of moral principles at hand is one from which we can infer deductive consequences. These are the strongest inferences we can make from exceptionless universal generalizations:

(125) **Exceptionless Generalism: deductive inference**

- For any action x , if x is an act of stealing, then x is wrong.
- This is an act of stealing.
- Therefore, this act is wrong.

This is essentially the idea discussed in the passages quoted above from Hare. The idea that **Exceptionless Generalism** is associated with a traditional deductive model of reasoning is itself a descriptive and normative idea.

Although this account has been historically prominent and perhaps, at least implicitly, widely-held, it is fair to say that an exceptionless understanding of generalism and its associated theory of reasoning receives less support today. The main problem for this view is that it does not account for the idea that there are reasonable and acceptable exceptions to moral principles. The above example would make too many acts come out as wrong: there are, very easily, some plausible cases where there are acts of stealing which are not wrong.

The need to accommodate tolerable exceptions to moral principles motivates further refinements. We can imagine a weakening of Exceptionless Generalism on which the relevant moral principle is interpreted as a conditional, but one which tolerates exceptions in some way. These views are under the heading of Proviso Generalism. One version of Proviso Generalism comes with some open positions for specific exception clauses. Then, for instance, we can think of this view as suggesting something like the following:

(126) Stealing is wrong except when you need to feed your family, when you are being coerced...

Alternatively, and more pertinently, we might have:

(127) For all x : If x is an act of stealing (and it's not the case you need to feed your family and it's not the case you are being coerced...), then x is wrong.

Call this view **Naive Proviso Generalism**. Its associated conception of moral reasoning is a special case of the deductive model which accommodates exceptions by appropriately restricting the antecedent of the moral principle:

(128) **Naive Proviso Generalism: Deductive inference with exceptions**

- For any action x : If x is an act of stealing (and it's not the case you need to feed your family and it's not the case you are being coerced...), then x is wrong.
- This is an act of stealing. (And it's not the case you need to feed your family and it's not the case you are being coerced...)
- Therefore, this act is wrong.

There are at least two immediate worries for such an account. First, the account of moral principles itself faces problems because it does not seem likely that we can have a finite list of all the exceptions. For this reason, it is unlikely that we can properly justify the minor premise. The second point is that if this view were correct, then it would appear to reduce substantive principles to principles that appear non-substantive because it captures the essence of 'Stealing is wrong' as 'Stealing is wrong except when it's not wrong'.

In order to avoid such problems, it is advisable to consider a version of Proviso Generalism which captures the main spirit of Naive Proviso Generalism in that we take

moral principles to involve some form of a proviso but retain the putative substantiveness of moral principles. Views of this kind are versions of Substantive Proviso Generalism. These proviso-involving accounts of moral principles end up abandoning the deductive conception of reasoning.

One approach to Substantive Proviso Generalism is to enforce the substantiveness of moral principles by appealing to the notion of a *ceteris paribus* law as used in the special sciences. On this kind of proposal, we can take ordinary statements of the general laws of the special sciences and interpret them with a special *ceteris paribus* proviso. To illustrate, consider an example from [Morreau \(1999\)](#):

(129) An increase in the supply of an article will cause its price to fall.

Morreau notes that strictly speaking, the example, as put forward, is wrong: if there is an increase in demand, then it need not be the case that prices of items fall as a consequence of an increase of supply. In order to appropriately express the relationship between prices and supply, we would have to hedge so as to exclude cases of an increase in demand. That is, we ought to add a *ceteris paribus* clause:

(130) *Ceteris paribus*, an increase in the supply of an article will cause its price to fall.

This gives us **Ceteris Paribus Proviso Generalism**.⁵¹ However, there is good reason to believe that such an account will face difficulties absent a substantial account of the *ceteris paribus* clause as applied to the moral case. The associated conception of moral reasoning would look like as follows:

⁵¹For a defense of interpreting moral principles in terms of *ceteris paribus* restrictions, see [Pietroski \(1993\)](#). Also see [Holton \(2002\)](#) and [Robinson \(2008\)](#) for discussion.

(131) **Ceteris Paribus Proviso Generalism: Ceteris paribus inference**

- Ceteris paribus, stealing is wrong.
- This is an act of stealing.
- Therefore, this act is wrong.

Suppose that one moral principle says that stealing is ceteris paribus wrong and that another moral principle says that failing to feed one's dependents is ceteris paribus wrong. There is a serious question here as to how it is appealing to a ceteris paribus clause will play any role in helping one decide what one ought to do. This is because we are missing an account of how we know when the cetera are paria. If an account of what one ought to do in such situations is given by something other than the meaning of the ceteris paribus clause, then it would seem that moral principles themselves do not serve the role a generalist would wish for them to serve.

Finally, one of the prominent approaches under the heading of **Substantive Proviso Generalism** which aims to overcome these problems relies on the notion of a default. The default approach to moral principles is defended by [Horty\(2007, 2012\)](#), and is based on the version of nonmonotonic logic due to [Reiter \(1980\)](#). The core idea is that a moral principle, such as 'Stealing is wrong', allows us to establish, by default, that an act of stealing is wrong. On this view, moral principles '[identify] the defaults that underlie our reasoning'.⁵² Horty continues:

On this view, the general principle that lying is wrong should be taken to mean simply that there is a default according to which actions that involve

⁵²[Horty \(2012, 154\)](#).

lying are wrong—or that, to a first approximation, once we learn that an action involves lying, we ought to judge that it is wrong, unless certain complicating factors interfere. [Horty \(2012, 154\)](#)

A crucial feature of defaults is that they are defeasible; establishing that an act of stealing is wrong can be overridden, provided that there is information present which can take priority.⁵³ The conception of moral principles as defaults gives us **Default Proviso Generalism**. This account is intended to overcome problems for **Ceteris Paribus Proviso Generalism** and related accounts by giving a more complete account of defeasible inference by giving an account of how defaults are overridden. For instance, suppose it is accepted that the need to feed one's dependents makes stealing morally justifiable. Then this information acts as an additional default which takes priority over the default that an act of stealing is wrong.

In Section [3.4.2](#), I discuss some challenges for **Default Proviso Generalism** which are based on the arguments for the treatment of moral principles as generic generalizations. The main issue discussed is whether the treatment of moral principles in terms of defaults can not only serve as a descriptive model of moral reasoning, but also a normative one. The remainder of this section discusses moral particularism in relation to the question of moral reasoning.

3.2.2 PARTICULARISM

Moral particularism denies the centrality of principles in moral philosophy. The aspect of this view under consideration in this chapter is the denial of an epistemological

⁵³For recent discussion and criticism, see [Bonevac \(2016\)](#).

route from moral generalities to particular cases. In order to challenge this epistemological route, particularists need to work with an account of moral reasoning which does not require moral principles. This is because one important aim for the particularist research program is to give an account of how it is that moral principles appear to feature in our everyday thinking and reasoning while, at the same time, denying the substantiveness of moral principles. In line with this, [Dancy \(1993\)](#) has previously stated that:

It seems wise for particularism to allow some role to moral principles, somehow conceived, rather than simply announce that everyone is completely mistaken about them and their importance in ethical thought and education. So particularism needs to provide some account, within the constraints which it accepts, of what is a very common practice of somehow appealing to general truths and previous cases in the course of reaching a moral judgment, and in the justification of one when reached. ([Dancy, 1993](#), 67)

There is, however, a big question as to how exactly the particularist can achieve such an aim. In order to offer some account or perspective of the role of moral principles in our lives, especially our thinking and reasoning, the particularist needs to offer work with a notion of moral generalization that is acceptable by the particularist's lights.

But it is far from obvious what notion the moral particularist should be working with. Different theorists, whether their sympathies are aligned with generalism or particularism, will work with different conceptions of moral principles. What appears to be common ground is that the less plausible notion of moral principle is one on which specifies absolute, exceptionless reason in favor or against the rightness or wrongness

of an action. Beyond this, matters get controversial quickly.

It is worth considering various aspects of the particularist's attack on moral principles to see whether there are any insights to be gained regarding what the particularist can say about moral reasoning. Importantly, however the notion of reasoning is spelled out, it must not be principle-dependent.

The prominent version of moral particularism, associated with Dancy, denies the following thesis:

Invariable Relevance: Moral principles specify properties that always count in favor or against either the rightness or wrongness of the action in question.⁵⁴

The idea behind **Invariable Relevance** is that if, for example, there is a case of stealing, that very fact, in every situation, counts against an action. At the same time, although the fact that someone stole something counts against that action, it may not always succeed in making the action wrong overall. This describes Dancy's target conception of moral principles, which he sees as yielding such 'general' reasons:⁵⁵

Moral principles, however we conceive of them, seem all to be in the business of specifying features as general reasons. The principle that it is wrong to lie, for instance, presumably claims that mendacity is always a wrong-making feature wherever it occurs (that is, it always makes the same neg-

⁵⁴cf. Dancy (2004, 74). The idea behind this thesis is known as 'Atomism in the theory of reasons.'

⁵⁵This is meant to be understood roughly in terms of *prima facie* duties, in the sense of Ross (1930).

ative contribution, though it often does not succeed in making the action wrong overall. (Dancy, 2004, 76)

If moral principles specify reasons which provide such an invariable contribution, they support a conception of moral reasoning on which there is, at the very least, perhaps something like a default route from the epistemology of moral principles to the epistemology of particular cases. One of the core ways in which particularists deny the role of principles in moral reasoning is to argue for the following thesis:

Variable Relevance: Features which count in favor or against the rightness or wrongness of an action need not always count in favor or against either the rightness or wrongness of an action.⁵⁶

There is a plurality of features that can contribute in favor or against the rightness or wrongness of an action, especially those not specified by moral principles. One of the well-known arguments for particularism as articulated by Dancy (1993, 2004) is that the truth of **Variable Relevance** leads to a wholesale rejection of moral principles.

Recently, however, it has been argued that the commitment of Variable Relevance is consistent with generalism, and that disagreement about what account of moral principle we should work with is at issue.⁵⁷

Horty (2012) has argued in this vein, and also emphasizes that differences about the meaning of moral principles are at stake here. Regarding his disagreement with the version of particularism due to Dancy, he writes:

⁵⁶cf. Dancy (2004, 73). The idea behind this thesis is known as 'Holism in the theory of reasons.'

⁵⁷For instance, see McKeever and Ridge (2006) and Väyrynen (2006).

The disagreement has its roots, I believe, in our different views concerning the meaning of general principles—it is a semantic disagreement. We both acknowledge, by and large, the principles guiding practical reasoning cannot usefully be taken to express universally generalized material conditionals: the practical principle that lying is wrong cannot mean that every action that involves lying is wrong. Instead, as we have seen, what Dancy suggests as the most attractive generalist option is that these principles should be taken to identify considerations that play an invariant role as reasons. The principle that lying is wrong should thus be taken to mean that lying always provides some reason for evaluating an action less favorably, even in those cases in which our overall evaluation is favorable.⁵⁸

Horty's own position rejects the idea that a feature plays an invariant role as a reason and is able to do so in a way which is consistent with generalism. Provided that the commitment to Variable Relevance will not be uniquely particularist, the search, in order to give an account of moral reasoning from the particularist perspective, should be for a non-substantive view of principles. And in this case, what will count as non-substantive will have to be a view on which there is no good epistemological route from a moral generalization to a particular case.

Such an account, from the perspective of the particularist, is still forthcoming.⁵⁹ The particularist needs a conception of moral principles which is suitably non-substantive

⁵⁸Horty (2012, 153-4).

⁵⁹One complaint from Schroeder (2009) still feels relevant in certain respects. In a review of Dancy (2004), he remarks: "though his book outlines several models for how principles might work, it is disappointing to discover that nowhere in 215 pages of what is supposed to be the definitive statement of his anti-principle views, does Dancy tell us in so many words exactly what a principle is actually supposed to be" (2009, 568-569).

and makes sense of everyday moral reasoning. The next section hopes to provide something helpful to moral particularists. It offers a conception of moral generalities that is particularist-friendly in that it is weaker than all the proposals that generalists have worked with, and is thereby not strong enough to support the traditional aims of generalists.⁶⁰

3.3 GENERICITY IN THE MORAL DOMAIN

As has been noted before, the project of providing truth conditions for generics is challenging as our intuitions vary widely between different generics. Matters are not especially straightforward since whether or not a generic is true, for instance, need not correspond with any statistical regularity.

To start with a very familiar example:

(132) Ducks lay eggs.

Despite the fact that only female ducks of reproductive age actually lay eggs, (132) is true. Hence, it need not be the case that the majority of ducks lay eggs in order for the generic to be true.

Moreover, we can even have weaker cases of generics:

(133) Ticks carry Lyme disease.

⁶⁰See [Stangl \(2006\)](#) for a discussion of some attempts by particularists to characterize moral principles in a non-substantive way as well as arguments for why these approaches face difficulties.

Only around 1% of ticks carry the disease, yet the generic claim in (133) is true.

Finally, for some further complications, consider:

(134) Books are paperbacks.

Although the majority of books are paperbacks, the corresponding generic in (134) is false.

Examples of these various kinds abound. The amount of variation in the data is wide, and the inability of being able to account for generics in terms of a correlation to statistical regularity is only one example of how complex matters can be.

The claim defended in this section is that moral generalizations are generalizations in the sense that generics are generalizations: they exhibit the kind of variability and quasi-generality that we associate with generics. In order to pursue this claim, it is important to have some minimal yet central distinguishing characteristics or features of genericity in the background. For our purposes, we will take the following two characteristics to serve as hallmarks of genericity:

Resistance: Generics can remain true even if there are counterinstances.

Non-Numerity: Generics do not carry any information about how many instances are required in order to be considered true.

The features of **Resistance** and **Non-Numerity** help distinguish generic generalizations from generalizations involving overt quantifiers, as the latter lack these two features. **Resistance** and **Non-Numerity** are closely related—in the sense that **Resistance**

says that generics can tolerate exceptions while **Non-Numerity** says that generics do not tell us how far this toleration extends. There are two remarks on these features.

- First, regarding **Resistance**: generics tolerate exceptions, yet we cannot express their truth conditions the way we can with generalizations involving overt quantifiers. In the case of such quantified generalizations, we know that, for instance, a universally quantified generalization would be false if there is a single counterinstance; a most-quantified generalization would be false if most of the instances are actually counterinstances; and, finally, we know that a some-quantified generalization would be false if there is no instance acting as a witness to the generalization. With generics, however, there is no way of similarly specifying how it is that a generic can be false.
- Second, regarding **Non-Numerity**: generics do not provide us with any information about how many instances of a generalization are required in order for it to be considered a true generalization (Carlson, 1977). Suppose one is asked ‘How many tigers are striped?’ It is possible to reply by suggesting that all/most/some tigers are striped, but it would appear problematic if one were to reply by suggesting that tigers are striped.

This second point is important. It not only cleanly distinguishes generics from ordinary quantified sentences, this point, more significantly, highlights one of the very remarkable features of generics which make them so intractable. The idea that generics are non-numerous reveals that they are independent of prevalence in the sense that the truth of a generic is consistent with varying levels of prevalence of cases which conform to the property specified by a generic.

The argument put forward in this section, then, is that there are firm grounds for thinking that moral principles are generic generalizations because they, too, possess the features of **Resistance** and **Non-Numerity**. I will consider both features in turn.

First, moral principles exhibit the property of **Resistance** because it is well-accepted that paradigmatic moral generalizations tolerate exceptions. At the same time, however, it is also understood that there are general difficulties in positing a proviso to handle the exceptions because there is no straightforward way to specify the content of such a proviso which can account for the various possible permissible exceptions. It is important to note that this reveals that a moral generic such as 'Stealing is wrong' is one that resists statistical explanation: stealing is still wrong even if it were to turn out that overwhelmingly many cases of stealing turned out to be somehow exceptional or perhaps blameless cases of stealing.

Second, moral principles pass the criterion for **Non-Numerity**: these principles do not wear any information on their sleeves concerning how many instances of a given moral generalization hold true. Suppose one is asked 'How many instances of stealing are wrong?' Depending on what the present state of affairs is like, it may be appropriate to answer by suggesting that *all/most/some* acts of stealing are wrong; it would, however, be infelicitous to reply by putting forward the generic claim that stealing is wrong.

In addition, it is also worth noting that canonical examples of moral principles appear to pass some standard tests associated with generics. This should count as further, albeit defeasible, evidence in favor of the idea that such generalizations are generic generalizations. Moral principles do well with the standard adverbial quantifier insertion test of [Krifka et al. \(1995\)](#). According to this test, we have good reason to hold that

a given sentence is a generic if the insertion of an adverb of quantification renders only the slightest change in meaning. For instance, inserting *usually* into the generic 'Birds fly' gives us 'Birds *usually* fly' which only results in a slight change in meaning.⁶¹

To apply this test in the case of a moral principle, consider the following:

(135) Stealing is wrong.

Then combine with an adverb of quantification:

- (136) a. Stealing is *usually* wrong.
b. Stealing is *normally* wrong.
c. Stealing is *typically* wrong.
d. Stealing is *generally* wrong.

These paraphrases sound appropriate, and also help bring out the *prima facie* exception-granting character of the moral principle in (135). Overall, it seems reasonable to say here that adding in these adverbs only result in a slight change in meaning. Then, by the test, we have good reason to consider (135) and other such related principles to be generics.⁶²

⁶¹In this case, the insertion of an adverb of quantification only slightly changes meaning especially when compared to the insertion of such a quantifier into a sentence which receives what is called an 'existential interpretation'. Intuitively, such sentences are focused on talking about particular individuals and not individuals in general. Such sentences change very little when the quantifier *some* is added to them. An example of a sentence receiving an existential interpretation is 'Birds are on the roof'. Adding *some* hardly alters the meaning, however the insertion of an adverb of quantification drastically changes the meaning. See Cohen (2004) for data and discussion.

⁶²Admittedly, it would be hard for everyone to hear paradigmatic moral sentences as generics. If, for

An important result of the feature of **Non-Numerity** is that this reveals that moral principles are consistent with a potentially incredible amount of variation in prevalence of cases which appropriately conform to the generalization. Provided that the truth of a generic does not imply prevalence, this will have some important implications for how to account for reasoning with generics. This issue, along with its implications, is pursued in more detail in the next section.

3.4 FROM THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF GENERICS TO THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF MORALS

In this section, I present an argument for **Role Particularism**. I argue that our knowledge concerning whether a particular act is right or wrong does not derive, in any important sense, from our knowledge of moral generalities. The argument here is based on the thesis that moral principles are generic generalizations; the core idea behind the line of argument is that investigating the epistemology of generics provides a framework for understanding the epistemology of morality.

The position developed in this section is that if we understand the epistemology of moral reasoning in terms of the epistemology of generic reasoning, we end up with a form of moral particularism. The very nature of moral reasoning, in particular, how to interpret and represent such patterns of reasoning, is a central issue in the episte-

instance, one has some very firm, prior metaethical commitments, they might find it hard to hear moral principles as having a generic reading. For example, suppose one has some strong Kantian commitments. Then such a person would strongly disagree that moral principles are generics.

If the aim is to give the best account of the semantic nature of moral principles, we will not be able to convince those with such strong prior commitments. This is because the present project is different: our focus is on the ordinary appeal to moral practices, and the question of whether the moral principles we use in ordinary cases of moral reasoning serve some substantial role in our moral lives.

mology of morality and is especially important with respect to the issue of whether moral generalities can support, in the appropriate ways, our judgments about moral situations. The relevant notion of support in question here is an epistemic one, and, in order to arrive at some understanding of moral reasoning which addresses such concerns, it is important to first carefully examine the structure of reasoning with generics.

3.4.1 GENERIC REASONING

There is an important clarification and observation to start with. We need to distinguish between our knowledge of generic generalizations and whether our knowledge of generic generalizations supports inferences about whether particular entities or individuals possess the property specified by a generic. Questions about these issues are some of the core questions at the basis of the epistemology of generics. Our concern here will be with the latter question of the inferential support provided by generics and whether or not the truth of generics provide support for justifying our beliefs about whether or not some individual under the scope of a generic generalization possesses the property in question. In this section, I approach this issue by considering some of the issues in the literature on the relationship between generics and defeasible reasoning.

Several researchers have connected their approaches to the semantics of generics with the literature on defeasible validity because it has been claimed that generics support defeasibly valid inferences. [Asher and Morreau \(1995\)](#) and [Pelletier and Asher \(1997\)](#), for example, have regarded the ability to account for how it is that generics support and license nonmonotonic inferences as an important desideratum. Such inferences

may take the following or related forms:

(137) **Generic Modus Ponens**

- Frogs jump.
- Kermit is a frog.
- So, Kermit jumps.

The conclusion that Kermit jumps is said to be defeasibly supported by the generic claim that frogs jump. Here, the premises support the claim that Kermit jumps yet we might also find that the inference is defeated because we learn, for example, that Kermit does not jump due to some genetic defect. The truth of the premises provides some support or tentative reason to favor the conclusion.

This inference is regarded as defeasibly acceptable because, in general, inferences of this sort appear reasonable, so it would seem likely that a semantic approach to generics should also be accompanied with investment in the ability to account for the defeasible acceptability of these inferences. Several semantic accounts of generics do just this: these accounts may either represent the meaning of a generic in terms of defeasible rules or as conditionals with the right kinds of inferential properties.

There is, however, an important problem for this idea. [Leslie \(2007\)](#) poses a challenge against the notion that accounting for nonmonotonic inferences supported by generics should be a desideratum when theorizing about generics.⁶³ This is because there are

⁶³For a discussion of relevant experiments about reasoning with low prevalence generics, see [Prasada, Khemlani, Leslie, and Glucksberg \(2013\)](#).

several generics from which it appears as though we are unable to derive any reasonable consequences. Her two examples are as follows:

Example 1

- Mosquitos carry West Nile Virus.
- Buzzy is a mosquito.
- So, Buzzy carries the West Nile Virus.

Example 2

- Ducks lay eggs.
- Beaky is a duck.
- So, Beaky lays eggs.

The point which can be extracted from these examples is an argument based on the variability of generics. The very fact that generics resist a statistical explanation reveals several kinds of examples where defeasible reasoning based on generics does not appear reasonable. So, there is a problem for the idea that accounting for patterns of defeasible validity should be central in giving an account of generics.⁶⁴

There is a more general argument to be made here regarding the issue that there is a high degree of variability in the acceptability of nonmonotonic inferences involving

⁶⁴I have previously noted in Chapter 2 that there are different ways of looking at Leslie's example, and that we should make sure we examine them by making overt various elements of the background context. See Section 2.4.2 for discussion.

generics. That is, there is more to say even about the paradigmatic cases of generic reasoning. The inference to the claim that Kermit jumps seems almost uncontroversially reasonable, however, I claim that even this judgment is not as robust as it appears: closer examination reveals that we should find the inference questionable or at least marginally acceptable.

Consider the following. It is known that frogs jump and that Kermit is a frog. No other facts about Kermit are known. Although we know the generic information that frogs jump, by **Non-Numerity**, it follows that we are not in a position to know any facts pertaining to the prevalence of jumping frogs or anything about the prevalence of jumping amongst various subsets of frogs. Such information about prevalence is not given by, nor follows from, the meaning of the generic.

Suppose it is known that Kermit belongs to a group of frogs which have a high prevalence of jumpers. If this is the case, the inference that Kermit jumps would appear well-supported. However, in the case where information regarding the prevalence of a generic in a given situation is known, it would appear likely that we should attribute any resulting sense of inferential goodness to the facts about prevalence themselves and not the generic in question.

Furthermore, absent any information about prevalence, the inferences we draw from generics would not then appear well-supported. Knowing the generic generalization that frogs jump should not make us feel entitled to infer anything about particular frogs on the basis of the generic alone. And this point easily generalizes across the whole range of generics, regardless of whether there is witness to sufficient prevalence.⁶⁵

⁶⁵It might be argued that the point made here relies only on a very particular understanding of generics and that there is perhaps a plausible understanding of generics on which the meaning of a generic is

The property of **Non-Numerity** reveals an important lesson regarding the relationship between generics and defeasible reasoning. Without sufficient prevalence as a given, it is hard to get a handle on what the notion of defeasible validity involving generics is meant to capture; it is also not clear whether the various proposed formal principles would turn out to be helpful if our judgments can vary so easily across a range of situations. One lesson we can extract from the foregoing is that knowledge of generic generalizations do not themselves support our beliefs about particular cases under the scope of such generalizations. The stronger version of this lesson says that generic generalizations provide no support whatsoever in this sense; the weaker version says that generic generalizations provide very little support.

Hence, at the very least, what we get is an important point of caution in the epistemology of generics: we should accept a position of caution when relying on generic generalizations in reasoning because they are unable to confer the appropriate kind of justificatory support required when reasoning about particular cases. Even very little support provided by knowledge of a generic generalization is not enough to provide robust justificatory support for our beliefs about particular cases. The two core reasons for the lack of justificatory support are as follows:

- First, accepting the truth of a generic does not entail that there is a sufficient prevalence, in the current circumstances, of whatever property is specified by the generic. This point is best supported by the Leslie cases. These are cases where

somehow tied to facts about prevalence. In presenting my arguments, I am not presupposing any one particular understanding of generics. But I would argue that an account of generics which involves and depends upon prevalence is not on the right track: it would not be able to account for 'weak' generics and, in general, would have trouble accounting for the range of variability that is said to be associated with generics. It is important to note that the point about the relationship between generics and prevalence is intended to hopefully be generally acceptable common ground, although there is some dissent.

we know that, as a matter of actual fact, we are reasoning with generics which are associated with low prevalence.

- Second, the point generalizes and goes beyond the phenomenon pointed out by the Leslie cases. Suppose we consider a supposedly high prevalence generic such as ‘Tigers are striped’. We know that it is true that, in the actual world, a vast majority of tigers are striped. However, even if there is a felt presumption in favor of cases of generic reasoning, this presumption is itself unstable and potentially influenced one way or the other by extraneous factors—perhaps our beliefs about prevalence or some other information. In other words, it would be a mistake to think that any apparent epistemic goodness of generic reasoning comes directly from generics themselves. So, any felt presumption could not serve the relevant justificatory role.

It is helpful and important to distinguish the descriptive and the normative here. Recent work in psychology has shown that once subjects accept a generic, they are disposed to treat the generic as inferentially powerful in the sense that they will believe that an arbitrary member of a kind possesses the property in question regardless of prevalence-related beliefs (Khemlani, Leslie, and Glucksberg, 2009). However, in characterizing the nature of reasoning with generics it is important to note that an account of reasoning we are interested in is deliberately not fully descriptive. The concern is not only with capturing how it is that we, as a matter of actual practice, reason, but also importantly with how we *should* reason. The epistemic question of whether there is justificatory support for beliefs about particular cases on the basis of generics is itself an inherently and thoroughly normative question: it is a question either about how we are permitted to reason, or how we should reason, or something along these lines.

3.4.2 GENERIC MORAL REASONING

The core lesson from considering the epistemology of generics carries over to the case of moral principles. This is so not only because of the plausibility of the idea that moral principles express generic generalizations, but also because a closer examination of moral reasoning itself reveals similar features to generic reasoning. Understanding moral reasoning in terms of generic reasoning reveals an alternative perspective, one on which moral reasoning does not depend on moral principles. Accordingly, this section presents the argument for **Role Particularism**: I will argue that when we reason about distinct moral cases or situations, our judgments are not, in the right kind of way, supported by moral generalities.

The argument for **Role Particularism** relies on two claims:

- That moral principles are generic generalizations.
- That generic generalizations do not provide the appropriate inferential support in reasoning.

Together, these claims naturally lead to the conclusion that moral principles do not provide the appropriate inferential support and point to a conception of moral reasoning on which our judgments about the moral features of particular acts do not depend upon moral principles. Establishing an argument for this claim establishes an argument for **Role Particularism**.

The core of this point is based on the idea that the principle of **Non-Numerity** is true of moral principles. This can be stated as follows:

Moral Non-Numerity: Moral principles do not carry any information about prevalence, that is, they do not carry any information about how many cases need to appropriately conform to the principle.

The generic conception of moral principles delivers an account which respects **Moral Non-Numerity**. If this is the case, moral principles cannot be depended upon in moral reasoning. We will verify this claim in the following way. In order to confirm that we have reached the desired conclusion that moral principles cannot be depended on in moral reasoning, it suffices to argue that even the stronger, default notion of principles cannot confer the appropriate epistemic support in reasoning. We can consider the default perspective because it is consistent with the idea that moral principles are non-numerous.

Recall that on Horty's view, moral principles specify the 'defaults that underlie our reasoning'.⁶⁶ Defaults can be overridden by other defaults, provided there is some factor in force that prioritizes other defaults. These defaults can be overridden according to a number of different factors. The important thing to note is that the default perspective on moral principles is consistent with Non-Numerity. That there is a default which says that we should conclude that an action is wrong if it involves stealing does not provide us with any information about the prevalence of cases of stealing that ultimately turn out to be wrong. Hence, the proponent of the default account of moral principles should accept **Moral Non-Numerity**.

However, **Moral Non-Numerity** presents some problems for a generalist account of the epistemology of moral properties on the basis of general principles. This places the

⁶⁶Horty (2012, 154).

pressure against the default theory: the proponent of the default theory of reasoning has the burden of justifying why it is that moral principles are associated with the default entitlement or presumption that arbitrary instances conform to the principle. There are two overall points to make against the default theory on this matter.

First, suppose the proponent of the default theory argued that the entitlement or presumption to infer according to moral principles attempts to argue for the idea that somehow our place in the moral landscape sufficiently meets certain background expectations of normality in the sense that it should be considered a safe bet, so to speak, at least in our world, that an act of stealing counts as wrong.

My response is two-fold. The first point is that if the notion of default entitlement or presumption had its basis in some metaphysical account of the world that 'backs-up' the default entitlement or presumption on the default view, this would seem to have to be a strange coincidence if anything. [Dancy \(2004\)](#) elaborates on the idea that such an arrangement would end up being a sort of 'cosmic accident':

The principle that it is wrong to lie cannot be merely a generalization, a claim that lies are mostly the worse for being lies, for if all moral principles were of this sort, the argument that moral thought and judgment depend on the possibility of moral principles would simply be the argument that such thought is impossible unless there is a considerable preponderance of normal cases over abnormal ones. I have never seen this argument made, and I doubt, what is more, whether it would be persuasive if restricted to ethics. ([2004](#), 76)

Furthermore, even if one were to grant a certain configuration of normal cases over abnormal cases as a basis for default entitlement or presumption, this still would not be enough to justify a generalist moral epistemology of our beliefs about the moral features of particular cases. This would not show that moral principles which specify defaults are sufficient enough to justify beliefs about particular cases: it still does not show that a conception of moral principles consistent with **Moral Non-Numerity** would provide, on its own, the positive epistemic appraisal we are after because there is no reason to think that such positive support follows from the metaphysical story.

The second point that can be registered against the default theory is that there is reason to think that the default entitlement or presumption to infer according to moral principles is more a result of a strong felt tendency to infer on the basis of moral generalizations. It might be said that a reason in favor of supporting the default model of moral reasoning is that it does well at adequately characterizing the descriptive features of our psychologies by making good on the idea that we are prone to make such strong inferences on the basis of moral principles.

However, there is an empirical point that can be made in response. Recent work by [Leslie, Khemlani, and Glucksberg \(2011\)](#) gives support for the idea that we are prone to a psychological effect whereby there is a tendency to generalize from the truth of a generic to the truth of the corresponding universal statement.⁶⁷ [Lerner and Leslie \(2013\)](#) build on this and argue that it might appear that people accept rather strong moral generalizations, however the source of this is actually an overgeneralization based on the acceptance of moral generics. They observe that it is generally agreeable that universally quantified moral generalizations are false, because of familiar prob-

⁶⁷See [Lazaridou-Chatzigoga et al. \(2017\)](#) for discussion and criticism.

lems having to do with moral dilemmas.⁶⁸ However, at the same time, many subjects report an intuitive attraction to such universally quantified generalizations. Lerner and Leslie (2013) argue for the existence of what they call a ‘moral overgeneralization effect’: there is a psychological tendency whereby people end up endorsing the universally quantified moral generalizations because they mistake them for the true generic moral generalizations. It seems likely that the same point should apply in the case of accepting default principles: a likely explanation of the tendency to reason with default principles could be that it is due to a similar sort of overgeneralization effect.

While the default theorist might argue that a virtue of their account is that it is able to capture the idea that we have a tendency to accept rather strong generalizations, I would argue that an account of moral reasoning should be more concerned with the question of how we should reason as opposed to modelling how we in fact reason. Hence, the justification for default entitlement or presumption should not rest upon purely descriptive foundations.

These arguments perform a double-duty: they serve to illustrate the main claim of this section but also generate arguments against a competing version of generalism. We considered whether the proponent of the default view of moral principles could give metaphysical or descriptive arguments that provide the basis for why we should infer by default on the basis of moral principles, however in both cases, we find that **Moral Non-Numerity** undermines both justifications. The broader point is that the principle of **Moral Non-Numerity** implies a claim with a distinctively normative flavor: because moral principles are independent of information about prevalence, they cannot generate sufficiently positive epistemic support in moral reasoning.

⁶⁸Indeed, it is fair to say that thinking that universally quantified moral generalizations are false is common ground between generalists and particularists.

3.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Moral particularists want to say something enlightening about the role of moral principles in various domains such as moral reasoning and moral education. It would seem difficult to say anything about such topics while denying that moral principles have a prominent standing in moral philosophy. It is also hard to say anything enlightening about any of these other areas of moral inquiry if we affirm a wholesale denial of moral principles.

However, with a weak, generic notion of moral principles, this opens further avenues for particularists to consider. And because the generic perspective on moral principles has plausibility independently of commitments regarding views such as particularism and generalism, it is a proposal that has wider interest, and there is very likely much more further work to be done with respect to the role of generics in other dimensions of moral philosophy. Additionally, having a generic conception of moral principles would assist other arguments and strategies for particularism, such as the one defended by [Thomas \(2011\)](#), who argues for particularism on the basis of the non-monotonicity of moral reasoning. Hence, for these reasons, I conclude that there is something interesting and important to be gained by introducing the generic notion of moral principles as a competing theoretical option.

The view itself that moral principles are best understood as generic generalizations raises further questions regarding how exactly we should be interpret moral principles, especially their logical form and meaning. This perspective involves interaction between modality and genericity, since the view implies that many moral statements which feature overt modals should also involve underlying genericity. For instance,

[Saint-Croix and Thomason \(2016\)](#) have recently discussed the idea that some ought sentences are also generic. On their proposal, the underlying logical form of some ought claims involves two modals: a generic modal and a deontic modal. The defeasibility of moral principles is captured by representing the generic modal as having wider scope. The precise details of such an account is definitely an important matter for further research.

4

Supererogation & the Structure of the Normative Domain

4.1 INTRODUCTION

We would generally regard it as supererogatory if one were to donate 12% of their income to charity. Hence, the following ought-claim seems intuitively true:

(138) You ought to give 12% of your income to charity.⁶⁹

At the same time, it is also true that you should do better; therefore, the following ought-claim also seems intuitively true:

(139) You ought to give 12% of your income to charity, but you really ought to do better.

If the notion of supererogation is tied to the concept of what we ought to do, and if what we ought to do is whatever is best, then it would seem as though (138) should be false because this is not the best you can do.

Perhaps a reasonable intuition is the following: so long as you are donating a non-zero amount of your income to charity, your action counts as supererogatory. But, from this, it would not follow that you ought to perform just any action that is supererogatory. At least part of the issue seems to be that the concept of supererogation, as it is ordinarily used, seems to come with a kind of scalar flavor: when you act beyond the call of duty, you are doing something *better* than what is required. But then if you are not doing what is best, then you ought not supererogate.

⁶⁹If you happen to find yourself not sharing this intuition, perhaps it might help to assume, among other things, that the donating is going toward a worthy cause through an effective organization, and that 12% of your income is more or less a negligible amount for you.

Supererogation is a prominent notion in our commonsense understanding of morality. But it raises a number of conceptual difficulties, especially when it comes to suboptimal supererogation. The focus of this chapter is on how to interpret the notion of supererogation in the setting of an account for deontic modality in order to discern the relationship between supererogation and the notion of ought. The next section introduces a conceptual problem about suboptimal supererogation, and sets up the remainder of the chapter from there.

4.2 THE ALL OR NOTHING PROBLEM

I will now introduce another problem about supererogation, one which highlights some difficulties with accounting for supererogation within the standard account for deontic modality. I want to start off by motivating the thought that there are at least some cases where we ought to do good, even if we are not doing the best. But then there are other cases where not doing are best is clearly morally wrong.

Suppose that one has the option to donate to charity and opts to donate to the cause of animal welfare. Assume that one is also willing to appropriate a large sum of money, say, a million dollars. If one selects a very efficient charity, then this money could have a significant impact in the reduction of animal suffering. At the same time, it is also true that the money could have instead gone toward a supply of protective nets to shield human beings against malaria. A million dollars would be enough to protect around half a million people who are at risk of contracting malaria. There is a controversial question of which option yields the more optimal outcome. This question is partly empirical because it depends on, amongst other things, the effectiveness of the

charities in question, but the question is also deeply philosophical because we need to have an account of how to weigh the values of the lives of different animals.

These questions aside, however, suppose that a million dollars towards animal welfare, in some set of circumstances, somehow does less good than a million dollars towards malaria nets. Perhaps this is because it might be that there is no animal welfare charity on the market which operates as efficiently as a malaria charity, or because a million dollars does not benefit enough animals in order to outweigh the good produced by protecting half a million individuals from malaria.

In such a situation, I hold that there is the reasonable judgment that one has done nothing morally wrong in giving a substantial sum toward the benefit of non-human animals. After all, the causes we are comparing are both worthy and very much in need of attention in our world. Hence, even if one is acting suboptimally, it appears that one could still be doing something good, and, importantly, not morally wrong.

While we have noted that there are some cases where it seems reasonably acceptable to not do what is best when acting in a supererogatory way, there are cases where acting beyond the call of duty in a suboptimal manner is clearly morally wrong. [Horton \(2017\)](#) discusses the following case to build a conceptual problem concerning the central normative notions of permissibility, obligation, rightness, and wrongness:

Collapsing Building: Suppose that there is a collapsing building and that there are two children about to be crushed. There are three options available to you:

Option 1: Do nothing.

Option 2: Save one child by allowing both of your arms to be crushed.

Option 3: Save both children by allowing both of your arms to be crushed.

Provided that a great sacrifice is involved here, it is not required to save any children. In other words, **Option 1** is permissible: it is permissible to not save any children. There is a further and more interesting verdict here which is that **Option 2** is morally wrong: even though there is a great sacrifice involved in saving one of the children, it is wrong to save only one child because an equivalent sacrifice would have saved both children. **Option 3** is also permissible and involves the same great sacrifice, but both children end up being saved, and is not morally wrong.

Given these intuitive verdicts, [Horton \(2017\)](#) argues that there is a deep challenge here. Here are two reasonable judgments which follow from the case:

Claim 1: It is morally permissible for you to not save both children.

Claim 2: It is morally wrong for you to only save one child.

However, **Claim 1** and **Claim 2** seem to imply **Claim 3**:

Claim 3: You ought to save neither child rather than only save one.

Claim 3 seems contentious at the very least. It is strange to think that what you ought to do is nothing, especially given that the alternative would arguably produce more

good. As [Horton \(2017, 94\)](#) puts it: ‘Surely the best moral view would not discourage you from saving the one child’. At the same time, there is something reasonable about **Claim 3**, namely the thought that it is a consequence of the reasonable and broader idea that you should avoid doing wrong. Nevertheless, the salient understanding of this claim seems to imply that doing something good—and beyond the call of duty—should be avoided. And this seems counterintuitive because saving one child, although it is not the best option, is better than saving no one, even if this is, in some sense, wrong.

Horton argues that **Claim 3** is due to the following principle:

Principle: If φ is morally permissible and ψ is morally wrong, then we ought to do φ rather than ψ .

And **Principle** looks very plausible. Indeed, [Horton \(2017, 96\)](#) says:

This principle is intuitively correct. And there are countless cases that seem to verify it. Suppose, for example, that it is permissible to say something nice, permissible to say nothing, and wrong to say something nasty. [**Principle**] implies that you ought to say nothing rather than say something nasty. And that seems the right result.

I am sympathetic to the plausibility of **Principle**. Although, at the same time, there does seem to be something fairly counterintuitive here, especially given that it implies **Claim 3**. It seems as though the only acceptable options are to do nothing or to do the

best. And what you ought to do if you are not going to do the best is to do nothing. The problem here is known as the *All or Nothing Problem*.⁷⁰

While **Principle** appears intuitively plausible, my contention is that we need to carefully examine the normative notions involved to properly make sense of this principle. If **Principle** is true, then we need a good account of how it is that an act which is better can also be wrong.

Recent authors responding to the All or Nothing Problem have sought to reject at least one of the claims or **Principle** in order to approach the problem. My own approach will be different. I will be understanding the problem here as having to do with a challenge about whether the notion of supererogation can be captured on the standard interpretation of the deontic modal notions. The notion of a supererogatory act is generally understood as an act which is better than what is morally required. But the All or Nothing Problem seriously undercuts this way of thinking about supererogation.

As it stands, it does not seem that there is a satisfactory answer—from the perspective of the standard account of the structure of the normative domain—to the question of how it can be better to act than to not act, yet also be doing something wrong. At least part of the issue is that the standard account appears to involve the idea that between two options, you ought to do what is higher-ranked of the two.

I argue that the standard account requires some further distinctions and refinements, and that these clarifications not only help provide an answer to the All or Nothing Problem, they are important for the sake of understanding the main normative no-

⁷⁰This name of the problem is given by Horton (2017). Antecedent discussion of this kind of problem can be found in Parfit (1982, 2011) and Tadros (2011). See McMahan (2018), Muñoz (fc), Portmore (2019), Pummer (2016, 2019), and Sinclair (2018) for recent discussion.

tions and how they relate to each other. They are also important for approaching the more general problem of suboptimal supererogation, which is the problem of explaining why some cases of suboptimal supererogation are acceptable while others are not acceptable.

The core of my approach develops an argument to the effect that there are good grounds to distinguish between two notions of supererogation: one is a scalar notion that is defined in terms of optimality and the other is a binary notion that is defined in terms of whether an act is good, permissible, and not what is required by morality. Put differently, there is one conception of supererogation that is sensitive to the question of optimality in actual circumstances and another conception of supererogation that is independent of optimality in this sense and counts any action which, in the appropriate sense, 'exceeds' the requirements of morality as supererogatory.

The sketch of the overall argument in this chapter is as follows. Supererogation naturally fits with the notion of *ought*. Normative modals can generally be distinguished in two categories: **realistic** and **idealistic**. We will say that realistic deontic modals are sensitive to actual circumstances whereas idealistic deontic modals are less sensitive to actual circumstances and are more general. This delivers two ways of thinking about *ought*: one that tracks the actual facts and another that is not particularly sensitive to the actual facts. These two ways of thinking about *ought* deliver two notions of supererogation.

I argue that these two notions give us the resources we need to approach the general problem of suboptimal supererogation. A suboptimal supererogatory act can be wrong because such an act is not permissible from the perspective of a realistic *ought*. An act

which is not permissible is forbidden, and if an act is forbidden, it helps deliver the judgment that an act is wrong. However, suboptimal supererogatory acts are permissible in a broader sense because they are not forbidden by the invariant demands of morality. This delivers the sense in which an act can go beyond the demands of morality and not be the very best act but still be regarded as acceptable. Hence, our judgments of rightness and wrongness regarding suboptimality vary because sometimes they are tracking different senses in which an act is permissible or impermissible.

The rest of the chapter develops this line of argument. I discuss the standard conception of how supererogation might figure into the standard account of the normative modal notions of permission, recommendation, and requirement. Following this, I then discuss how it is that this account has issues with accommodating the phenomenon of suboptimal supererogation (Section 4.3).

My next task will be to further investigate the diversity of the deontic domain. I will introduce two ways of thinking about supererogation based on an underappreciated distinction we can draw between two kinds of deontic modals: ones that are sensitive to actual circumstances and ones that are not. I discuss how this relates to the difference between deontic modals which appear to relate to binary standards and those which appear to relate to scalar standards (Section 4.4). Once these distinctions and refinements are in place, I then discuss how the tools we have at our disposal can provide a further perspective on the phenomenon of suboptimal supererogation as well as the All or Nothing Problem (Section 4.5). Finally, I close with some concluding remarks (Section 4.6).

4.3 LOCATING SUPEREROGATION

At a minimum, the standard conception of a supererogatory act involves the idea that such acts are not themselves required but are better than what is required. In order to make sense of this idea, we need to locate this notion in a broader framework for the logic and semantics of deontic modality.

The central deontic modal notions are **permission**, **recommendation**, and **requirement**. The notion of permission is expressed by modals such as *may* and *can*; the notion of recommendation is expressed by modals such as *ought* and *should*; the notion of requirement is expressed by modals such as *must* and *have to*.⁷¹

The standard account of these core deontic notions is given by what is sometimes called the Optimality Interpretation. It is generally assumed that this account makes room for supererogation provided an elucidation of what it means to be both not required and better than required, as well as by the following features: that *ought* does not entail *must*, and that *ought* is associated with the most optimal actions, or involves quantification over the most optimal worlds.

I will briefly explain the Optimality Interpretation in order to discuss how it is that accommodating the notion of supererogation leads to some potential difficulties.

Modals such as *ought*, *should*, *must*, and *have to* are necessity modals. The central datum to be accounted for concerns the significant diversity amongst the necessity modals.

⁷¹See [Ridge \(2014\)](#) for discussion of the idea, from the perspective of speech-act theory, that *should* and *ought* express recommendations while *must* and *have to* express requirements. Also see [Björnson and Shanklin \(2014\)](#).

There are weak deontic necessity modals such as *should* and *ought* and strong deontic necessity modals such as *must* and *have to*. There is a difference in strength between these classes of modals which can be witnessed by observing examples where it is possible to assert that one ought or should perform some action φ while denying that they have to perform φ . Here are some slightly modified examples from [Snedegar \(2016\)](#):

(140) You ought to donate 10% of your income to charity, but you don't have to.

(141) You should keep your promise; in fact, you must!

(142) # It's not as if you ought to donate 10% of your income, but you must.

(143) # You must keep your promise; in fact, you ought to!

The straightforward diagnosis of why (140) and (141) are coherent while (142) and (143) are not is that *must* entails *ought*, but not the other way around. As [Snedegar \(2016, 159\)](#) notes, (140) is coherent since it does not follow that you must do something if it is true that you ought to do it. The second conjunct of (141) would sound redundant if *should* were to entail *must*, however (141) sounds completely fine. If it is true that you must donate 10% of your income, then it follows that you should. Hence, (142) sounds contradictory: this is because it is effectively denying the entailment from *must* to *ought*. Finally, there is a redundancy involving the second conjunct of (143): the bit of information that you ought to keep your promise does not add any new information, provided that it has been asserted that you must keep your promise.

Hence, we get the following general lessons. If one is required to perform some action, it follows that one also ought to perform that action. If one ought to perform some

action, then it does not generally follow that one is also required to perform that action. In addition, it is simple to tie in the concept of permission. If you are permitted to do something, it follows neither that you are recommended or required to do it. Conversely, if you are required to do something, then it follows that you are permitted to do it. Similar remarks apply for the notion of recommendation. Figure 4.1 summarizes the relevant entailment relations, represented by the arrows.⁷²

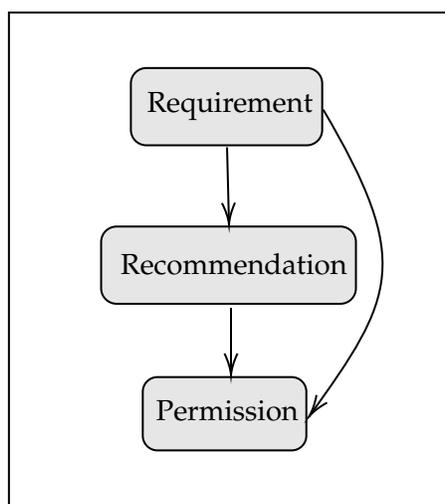


Figure 4.1: *Entailment patterns*

Snedegar (2016) proposes to explain the Optimality Interpretation in the following way. Suppose we have a ranking of actions from worst to best. What one ought to do is at the top of the ranking, these actions would have to exceed a certain threshold.⁷³ And the impermissible actions are below a different threshold. This is explained using Figure 4.2 below.⁷⁴

⁷²The claims about entailment here come with an important proviso: it is important that we read the modals in question as having the same flavor. Without this proviso, we would get cases where it appears as though *must* does not entail *ought*. See Björnson and Shanklin (2014) for further discussion.

⁷³Here it is reasonable to assume a reflexive and transitive ranking.

⁷⁴This diagram is based on Snedegar (2016), and here it is made explicit that this conception involves a ranking of actions.

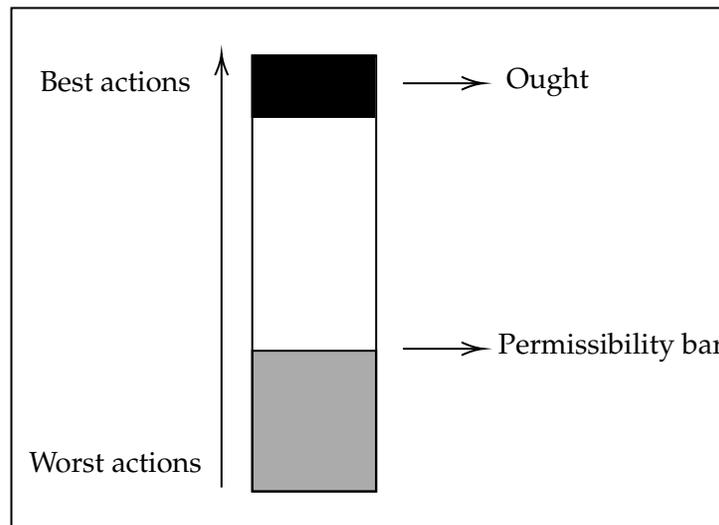


Figure 4.2: *Optimality interpretation with ranking of actions.*

A different articulation of the Optimality Interpretation can be given in terms of possible worlds semantics, in particular, from the perspective of the unified semantics for modality in natural language due to Kratzer (1977, 1981, 1991, 2012). Working within this framework, von Stechow and Iatridou (2008) propose the following: weak and strong necessity deontic modals are both operators which universally quantify over a best set of worlds determined by special contextual parameters—a modal base and a normative ordering source—but they quantify over the best set of worlds in different ways.⁷⁵ Strong necessity modals quantify over the acceptable worlds of the modal base whereas weak necessity modals quantify over the most optimal worlds of the modal base.

Consider the optimality interpretation with a ranking of actions. It is easy to see how we can account for the entailments presented in Figure 4.1. Suppose there are a set of

⁷⁵See Portner (2009) for further explanation and discussion.

available actions, with one action above the permissibility bar, and at least one action below the permissibility bar. In this case, there is only one permissible option, so it is easy to see that such an option would be required. At the same time, because this is the highest-ranked option, it follows that this is the action which ought to be performed. Suppose there are multiple actions above the permissibility bar. In such a case, we would have a highest ranked action permissible action, this would be what one ought to do.⁷⁶ From this, it would not follow that what one ought to do is also required: there are multiple permissible options which differ in optimality.

Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4 illustrate how the semantics based on von Fintel and Iatridou (2008) captures the entailments in question.⁷⁷ In Figure 4.3, we see that whenever $Must(\varphi)$ is true, so is $Ought(\varphi)$. On this account, $Must(\varphi)$ is true iff φ is true in every deontically acceptable world. Since $Ought(\varphi)$ quantifies over a subset of the acceptable worlds, we get that $Must(\varphi)$ entails $Ought(\varphi)$. In Figure 4.4, we see that not every acceptable world is a φ -world; hence, $Must(\varphi)$ is false. $Ought(\varphi)$ is satisfied because every optimal world is a φ -world.

Securing the result that $Must(\varphi)$ entails $Ought(\varphi)$ but not the other way around is important in order to account for the concept of supererogation.⁷⁸ On the Optimality Interpretation, we can see how it is that supererogatory acts are understood as those acts which are not required but are better than those that are required. Work with the assumption that if supererogatory actions are better than what is required, then it is reasonable to associated such actions with the notion of what you ought to do. Then

⁷⁶It is important to note that the area denoting the ought bar is not meant to be gradable: this space is reserved for only the best action. Thanks to Justin Snedegar for clarifying this aspect of the diagram.

⁷⁷These diagrams are based on those of Beddor (2017).

⁷⁸Indeed, note that Snedegar (2016) uses the concept of supererogation to help motivate the distinction between *ought* and *must*.

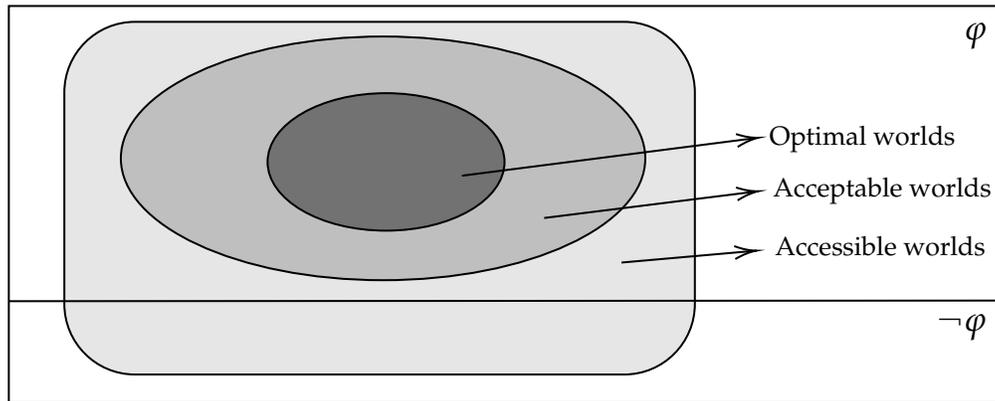


Figure 4.3: *Optimality interpretation verifying $Must(\varphi)$ and $Ought(\varphi)$.*

speaking in terms of a ranking of actions, a supererogatory act would then have to exceed the bar for ought and would thus be considered the best action out of a set of available actions. There would, at least, have to be one other available action.⁷⁹ From the perspective of possible worlds semantics, we might say that an action φ is supererogatory whenever it is the case that φ is verified by every optimal world. Then we can have that if it is supererogatory that φ , then this means that φ is true in every optimal world but there are also acceptable worlds where $\neg\varphi$ is true. At the very least, this understanding secures the idea that supererogation involves the idea that supererogatory acts are associated with the notion of what we ought to do.

As it stands, however, the All or Nothing Problem poses problems for the account of supererogation associated with the Optimality Interpretation. There are three issues to note in particular.

The first issue is that the Optimality Interpretation does not help make sense of how

⁷⁹The situation is obviously more complicated than this because of phenomena such as suboptimal supererogation: there are supererogatory actions which do not exceed the bar for ought. However, if supererogation is associated with ought, then this understanding is more or less what we would get.

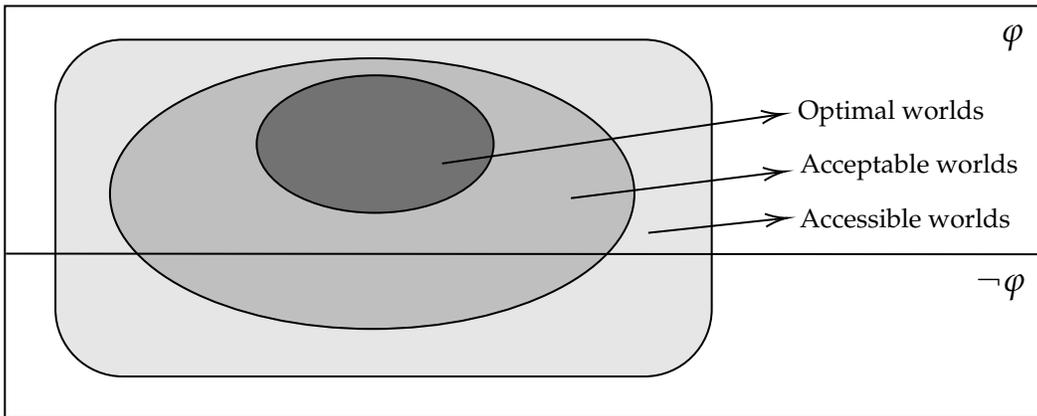


Figure 4.4: *Optimality interpretation verifying Ought(φ) but not Must(φ).*

it is possible for a supererogatory act could be wrong or impermissible. The All or Nothing Problem pushes us to try to account for the following:

(Wrong) That there is a sense in which suboptimal supererogatory acts can be wrong even though they are supererogatory.

It would then seem that supererogatory acts can have a variety of deontic statuses and not necessarily associated with ought. More generally, the problem is that the Optimality Interpretation does not seem to help make sense of the idea that there can be multiple supererogatory options differing in optimality. The general thought is that a principle of supererogation says something about what we ought to do. In **Collapsing Building**, for instance, the option to save only one child is supererogatory in that it is better than what is required: it goes beyond the call of duty and involves a significant sacrifice. Although the act of saving only one child has these paradigmatic features, this does not mean that saving only one child is something that we ought to do. Hence, supererogation would appear to have a more complicated relationship with the notion

of what we ought to do.

The second issue is that, on the Optimality Interpretation, it seems to follow that if an act φ is better or higher-ranked than an act ψ , then one ought to do φ rather than ψ . This is a straightforward consequence of the standard semantics for *ought* we have sketched here. One of the core elements behind the All or Nothing Problem is that it forces us to reconsider the idea that what we ought to do is to be understood in terms of what is better relative to other options. The Optimality Interpretation, then, does not deliver on the sense in which one ought to supererogate suboptimally in **Collapsing Building** even though such an option is a better option than not acting at all. The phenomenon we need to be able to account for is:

(**Better**) That there is a sense in which suboptimal supererogatory acts are better than doing nothing.

The third issue is that it is contentious whether the Optimality Interpretation can help account for the acceptability of some acts of suboptimal supererogation. What is needed, more generally, is the flexibility to be able to model the fact that some suboptimal acts are acceptable while others are not. If supererogation is associated with ought, then we would have trouble vindicating the judgment that it is not morally wrong to donate to the cause of animal welfare if doing so would be less good than donating toward a more effective cause.⁸⁰ I hold that it is a highly reasonable judgment that we ought to

⁸⁰Justin Snedegar (personal communication) raises the point that perhaps the Optimality Interpretation can do this, so long as the relevant act is above the permissibility threshold. But then what would be needed is some explanation of why some suboptimal acts are above the permissibility threshold and why some suboptimal acts are not. A ranking of better to worse does not seem to settle the question because, in both kinds of cases, there is the thought that in doing something good but not best, we are still doing better than doing nothing.

donate toward the cause of animal welfare, even if doing so means doing less good. This would have to be in some sense of ought that is not directly related to the notion of optimality. If supererogation is understood in terms of optimality, then we cannot deliver on such judgments.

These problems reveal the need for a closer examination of the treatment of the modal notions at issue here. We need a way of working with the Optimality Interpretation which acknowledges important distinctions amongst the relevant modal notions and can help lead to more precise ways of thinking about supererogation in order to approach the general problem of suboptimal supererogation.

4.4 MODAL VARIATION

The Optimality Interpretation, given its associated account of supererogation, has difficulty in accounting for our judgment of the moral status of at least some acts of suboptimal supererogation. In this section, I show that there are some important refinements that we need to consider in order to support the Optimality Interpretation in dealing with the aforementioned problems.

The core of what we need to explain is the puzzling fact that there are cases where we reasonably judge that suboptimal supererogation is acceptable while there are also other cases where we reasonably judge that acts of suboptimal supererogation is unacceptable.

- When we judge an act of suboptimal supererogation to be morally unacceptable, the idea is that it is because the action in question fails to be at the top of some scale.
- When we judge an act of suboptimal supererogation to be morally acceptable, this cannot be because this action sits at the top of some scale, since, by definition, it is suboptimal.

Instead, there has to be some other sense in which it is true that you ought to act suboptimally, one that does not define *ought* in terms of optimality.

When we understand *ought* in terms of optimality, then it follows that the concept of supererogation we are working with is one that is implicitly scalar. This is because the notion of supererogation is understood in terms of *ought*. When we say that it is supererogatory for you to donate that money, we are ultimately saying that you ought to donate that money, and, after all, it would be the best you could do in the circumstances.

Another way of putting the challenge against the standard account of deontic modality from the perspective of the general problem of suboptimal supererogation is that an act cannot even count as properly supererogatory if it is not optimal. This is because it follows that it is not true that you should do anything which is suboptimal, at least according to how we have set up the Optimality Interpretation.

But there is an important question here regarding whether we should, after all, be understanding supererogation in such scalar terms. This is because the Optimality Interpretation has the limitation that actions such as saving only one child (when there

are two to be saved) or donating to animal welfare (when there are also malaria nets in demand) are technically not regarded as supererogatory even though these actions go beyond the call of duty. Perhaps this could be because we have left out notions such as praiseworthiness and blameworthiness out of our description of the notion of supererogation. Such notions arguably track the commonsense idea of supererogation that we are familiar with. However, even if we tie in notions such as praise, blame, or something related into our notion of supererogation, this would not remove the need to ask the question of whether we should be understanding supererogation in scalar terms.

The remainder of this section pursues a closer examination of the diversity of the normative domain to uncover the further clarifications we need. The first point we will consider is the difference between binary and scalar standards. This will set us up to discuss the underappreciated difference between realistic and idealistic deontic modals. I will then argue, in the following section, that this distinction allows us to see the difference between two notions of supererogation, and it is distinguishing between these notions which helps put us in a position to approach to the more general questions surrounding suboptimal supererogation.

4.4.1 BINARY AND SCALAR STANDARDS

It is useful to distinguish between binary and scalar standards, especially in the context of normativity. One of the recent insights on this matter comes from [Björnsson and Shanklin \(2014\)](#) who propose that the core difference between weak and strong necessity modals lies in different grounds or standards for selecting alternatives at the

exclusion of others. On their proposal, the contribution of *Must*(φ) is that φ satisfies a **binary** standard among the relevant alternatives and that *Ought*(φ) suggests that φ is selected by a **scalar** standard among the relevant alternatives.

This characterization of the difference between weak and strong necessity is general in that it applies to different kinds of modal flavors. For example, an epistemic *must* might be interpreted as putting forth a standard on which there is only one alternative which is compatible with the available evidence whereas with deontic *must*, there is the only alternative which satisfies the relevant normative requirement.

The central idea here is very related to the older and influential proposal of [Sloman \(1970\)](#) on which we can capture weak necessity by emphasizing its connection to the notion of comparison. We are to interpret what it means for *Ought*(φ) to be the case in terms of the idea that φ is the best of the available alternatives. This proposal gives us a scalar way of thinking about modality.⁸¹

Distinguishing between binary and scalar standards has a number of advantages. It builds upon existing proposals in interesting ways and opens up further possibilities for analyzing the central normative modal notions. Consider one potential application. The difference between binary and scalar standards allows us to distinguish between various more detailed notions which characterize the concept of obligation. For a brief illustration, we might consider what is obligatory to be captured by a binary standard or a scalar standard. Those who hold that moral obligation is a matter of increasing expected moral value might wish to characterize the morally obligatory in terms of a scalar standard. In this case, the resources for giving a theory would have to involve

⁸¹In general, the idea that modality involves scales is now becoming more familiar. For example, in recent work, [Lassiter \(2011, 2014, 2017\)](#) has developed a scalar account of modality. This is also applied to deontic modality in particular.

considering the semantic contribution of normative weak necessity modals. A more traditional conception of moral obligation would presumably be given by a binary standard. Whether or not an action counts as obligatory would be due to its fitting some standard or not, whether or not it fulfills some optimality requirement. In this case, an account of obligation would have to involve considering the semantic contribution of strong deontic necessity modals. An alternative option might be to embrace a conception of moral obligation which is itself binary, but also makes room for an associated scalar standard. For instance, the demands of morality could be given by a binary standard, but there could also be an operative scalar standard which provides a ranking of actions from worst to best, relative to the circumstances.

The proposal to distinguish between different kinds of standards in accounting for the difference between weak and strong necessity captures something very important which is missing in the standard formulation of the Optimality Interpretation. However, the issue I would like to raise at this point is that it is not entirely obvious that weak necessity is to be associated with a scalar standard. It is very natural to ask whether there is a sense of weak necessity which involves a binary standard, and, relatedly, whether there is a sense of strong necessity which involves a scalar standard.

In what follows, I argue that there is further diversity to be accounted for here, and that weak and strong deontic necessity have a somewhat different and more complicated relationship with binary and scalar standards.

4.4.2 REALISTIC AND IDEALISTIC NORMS

An implicit idea underlying the Optimality Interpretation involves the thought that whether one ought to φ is a matter about whether φ is optimal with respect to a particular set of circumstances. If you are deciding which road to take in order to get to the airport on time, you might have three available options and the one that would get you there with the most time to spare, amongst other things, would be the route you ought to take. The question of whether or not a particular route will get you there in a good amount of time needs to be considered against a set of facts, for example, what the current traffic conditions are like.

There are cases, however, in which we also ask whether one ought to act upon some option φ where, in doing so, we make no judgement about optimality with respect to a particular set of facts. Suppose one were to consider whether, in general, giving to charity is the sort of thing one ought to do. One can reasonably take this question to be a question of what might count as good simpliciter. There is a difference between asking about whether one ought to, in the most general terms, give to worthy causes and asking about whether one ought to give to some particular cause or some particular charitable organization. Questions of the latter sort are considered against sets of facts. It is possible to judge that one ought to give to charity but disagree that one ought to give to some particular charity, perhaps because it is not well-managed or is ineffective. The former *ought* is idealistic because actual facts do not influence its interpretation; the latter *ought* is realistic because actual facts do influence its interpretation.

As a preliminary characterization, we might say that the core of the distinction between realistic and idealistic norms is that the former are sensitive to empirical circumstances

in ways that idealistic norms are not. We can make this more precise by drawing this distinction within the standard framework for deontic modals. In terms of the semantics based on Kratzer (1977, 1981, 1991, 2012), recall that modals are sensitive to two contextual parameters: the modal base $f(w)$ and the ordering source $g(w)$. The modal base determines a set of worlds relevant for the domain of quantification giving us $\cap f(w)$; the ordering source imposes a reflexive and transitive ranking $\leq_{g(w)}$ on $\cap f(w)$ according to how well they satisfy the relevant ideals.

In order to represent certain norms, we need to include restrictions into the modal base. For example, in order to model the legal regulation that every citizen must pay their taxes, we need to consider the set of worlds $\cap f(w)$ which include the proposition that the relevant regulation has been enforced. In order to represent norms which are not sensitive to circumstantial information, such as necessary moral laws, we do not restrict $f(w)$ in this manner. Instead, in the idealistic case, the meaning of the modal is captured by a constant function. We then have the following:

- **Realistic norms:** for such norms, $f(w)$ includes whatever circumstantial information is needed in order to determine a restricted set of worlds $\cap f(w)$ which is then ordered by $\leq_{g(w)}$.
- **Idealistic norms:** for such norms, $f(w) = W$, therefore the modal base is the set of all worlds, and the ordering source $\leq_{g(w)}$ then ranks every world.

At this juncture, there are three remarks to motivate and elaborate upon this distinction.

First, one of the distinctive features of realistic norms is that they vary considerably.

Idealistic norms are broadly characterized by their stability. In terms of possible worlds, we can say that the same idealistic norms hold at every world while this is not the case for realistic norms. The former are defined by a constant function while the latter are defined by a variable function. This captures the idea that idealistic norms are necessary, either in a metaphysical, or somewhat more restricted sense and that realistic norms are contingent.

Second, it might be useful to compare the distinction between realistic and idealistic norms by considering a distinction made in the common law tradition between acts that are *mala prohibita* (wrong because prohibited) and those that are *mala in se* (wrong in itself). For example, criminal acts such as murder or robbery are universally regarded as wrong and are thus violations of morality itself prior to being offenses of against the law, so are such acts *mala in se*; criminal offenses such as traffic offenses are wrong in the *mala prohibita* sense insofar as they are violations of statute. That any act is *mala in se* is not due to some contingent feature of the actual world (for instance, wrong on in virtue of a prohibition). The intended idea is that such acts are wrong in a more robust sense. Acts that are *mala prohibita* can be said to be wrong in a realistic sense whereas acts that are *mala in se* can be said to be wrong in an idealistic sense.

Third, the distinction between realistic and idealistic norms cross-cuts the distinction between requirements and recommendations. Building on this latter distinction, the resulting picture we get of the core normative notions is that requirements and recommendations can be categorized as either realistic or idealistic.

The remainder of this section explores, in more detail, the idea that we can enhance our understanding of the normative domain using the proposal that realistic modals

generally relate to scalar standards whereas idealistic modals generally relate to binary standards. To reiterate, the aim is not only build on the proposal that deontic modality involves binary and scalar standards, but also to enhance our understanding of supererogation by drawing a difference between binary and scalar notions of supererogation.

4.4.2.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

There is good reason to hold that recommendations involve scalar standards. Whether an agent ought to φ is largely a matter of whether φ is the best in actual circumstances. However, after considering the difference between realistic and idealistic recommendations, we will see that there is further variation to account for as idealistic recommendations do not seem to involve scalar standards. I will argue that the notion of optimality involving such recommendations is a binary one: whether one ought to φ in the idealistic sense is not considered against a set of facts and therefore does not involve optimality in the usual, scalar sense.

The paradigmatic cases of recommendations tend to involve considering what is best from the perspective of actual circumstances. Consider some examples:

- (144) a. Everyone should file their taxes early. [Guidelines from TurboTax]
b. Every student ought to take a logic class. [Advice of philosophy professors]
c. Everyone should wash their hands. [Advice of company management]
d. Everyone should eat a variety of foods. [Government guidelines on nutrition]

In general, each of these examples involves considering what is the best option at the exclusion of others. The standards involved here vary depending on their source. The guideline that one ought to file their taxes early is for the general benefit of taxpayers because many issues can be avoided by not leaving it to the last minute. While a logic class may not be required by all students, philosophy professors might recommend this because they believe it is in the best interests of every student. Anyone who uses the bathroom should wash their hands because this would help stop the spread of disease, and company management might explicitly make this requirement of their employees. Finally, eating a variety of foods might be encouraged by a government body because this helps ensure good general health.

The understanding of these normative recommendations as involving scalar standards provides us with a useful way of interpreting these cases. If we understand the underlying scale as involving a notion of expected utility, then the examples in (144) can be interpreted roughly as saying that acting in accordance with the relevant recommendations in the appropriate context maximizes expected utility compared to competing options.

However, there are other cases of recommendations which do not get interpreted in a scalar manner. Idealistic recommendations involve standards which are not interpreted with respect to actual facts but instead are principles which pertain to the alternatives that exceed the expectations of the general normative requirements which govern and guide our actions. General supererogatory principles are the paradigm examples of such recommendations: supererogatory principles of the moral domain make for examples as well as supererogatory principles of other normative domains.⁸²

⁸²See [McElwee \(2017\)](#) for arguments that the notion of supererogation is a more general normative phenomenon and not only limited to the moral domain: there is good reason to believe that there the

The principles of beneficence which state that it is morally good to act beyond our moral obligations for the benefit of others are not to be understood of whether some particular action or other yields the maximization of utility with respect to a particular circumstance; instead, we think of such principles as sufficiently general so as to apply to all circumstances and all agents.

The claim that one ought to engage in supererogatory acts of beneficence is one that is indifferent to the scalar notion of whether are actually optimal. The sort of notion at stake here is a binary one: in order for an act φ to count as supererogatory according to such a general principle is a matter of whether φ meets the standard of exceeding the demands of what is required. Some additional care is of course needed here with respect to what it would mean for an act to 'exceed' or 'go beyond' the requirements of morality when speaking in the idealistic sense. If these notions are understood in terms of something along the lines of expected moral value, then we would not have a truly binary notion of recommendation. Hence, we would need to spell things out in a way that does not use notions related to optimality.⁸³

4.4.2.2 REQUIREMENTS

The distinction between realistic and idealistic norms also affects our understanding of requirements. While it is reasonable to generally understand requirements as relating to binary standards, I argue that it turns out that it is only the idealistic requirements

notion of supererogation can be found in other normative domains. I think that these arguments also gives reason to believe that a careful investigation of supererogation is beneficial for our general understanding of normative modality.

⁸³Perhaps a simple proposal would be that, in the idealistic case, the notion of ought is simply defined as permissible and not required, where these latter notions are interpreted idealistically. This would more or less involve a very standard understanding of the relationship between these deontic categories.

which are straightforwardly and paradigmatically binary. Some option or alternative φ is idealistically required so long as, roughly, φ is selected by a standard which is in force in all circumstances. However, when we restrict ourselves to requirements which are relative to some set of actual circumstances, there is a question about whether there are genuinely binary standards involved in such requirements.

One point which supports this idea is that there is an interesting sense in which realistic requirements involve gradation. Consider the following realistic requirements:

- (145) a. You must pay your library fines.
b. You must pay your taxes by the IRS deadline.

One of the intuitive differences between the requirement to pay your taxes by the deadline and the requirement to pay your library fines is that there is a sense in which the former requirement carries more weight than the latter.⁸⁴ Some precedent for understanding strong necessity in this way comes from [Portner and Rubinstein \(2016\)](#) who propose to understand deontic modality in terms of a scalar structure. They put forth the idea that the degrees involved are ‘the weight of requirements which favor a particular proposition’.⁸⁵

And there is good reason to understand strong necessity in terms of scale structure.

⁸⁴There are indeed big differences in the failure to comply with these requirements: the failure to pay taxes on time results in penalties and accrued interest whereas the failure to pay library fines comes with no such repercussions.

⁸⁵[Portner and Rubinstein \(2016, 272\)](#). The main objective in [Portner and Rubinstein \(2016\)](#) is to argue for the view that strong necessity modals are like extreme adjectives such as *huge* and *brilliant* and that weak necessity modals are like non-extreme adjectives such as *big* and *smart* and use the empirical tests given by [Morzycki \(2012\)](#) which distinguish between these two classes of adjectives. Just as non-extreme adjectives have extreme counterparts, the idea is that we should expect gradable modals to come in extreme and non-extreme pairs.

This is because we want to make sense of examples where degrees of *must* are being compared. For instance, [Portner and Rubinstein \(2016, 271-2\)](#) point out that while strong necessity modals resist the comparative (146), they are able to feature alongside *even* (147):

- (146) a. Susan ?must/should call her mother more than she ?must/should call her father.
b. It is more ?crucial/important for Mary to call her mother than her father.
c. It is more ?certain/likely that Mary will call her mother than her father.
- (147) a. Susan must call her mother even more than she must call her father.
b. It is even more crucial for Mary to call her mother than her father.
c. It is even more certain that Mary will call her mother than her father.

We should read the relevant comparisons here as having to do with degrees of obligation: the examples in (147) express the idea that there is a greater degree of obligation for Susan to call her mother rather than her father.

While the question of whether *must* is gradable has previously been considered in the literature, it is generally noted that it is difficult to find direct examples of gradation and comparison.⁸⁶ However, provided that we can conceive of the diversity of requirements in terms of degrees and comparisons, a likely result is that those requirements which do not vary according to circumstance, such as the requirements of morality

⁸⁶For instance, see [Barker \(2009\)](#), [Klecha \(2014\)](#), and [Lassiter \(2011\)](#). Though *must* does not seem gradable in the traditional sense, the arguments by [Portner and Rubinstein \(2016\)](#) suggest that the limited gradability of *must* can be attributed to the limited gradability of extreme adjectives, since they argue the two categories are empirically analogous.

or the requirements on the psychologies of ideal agents, are associated with a greater weight or degree. If it is reasonable to think of such requirements as requirements which exceed a certain threshold of necessity, then the question of whether or not a requirement is an idealistic one is a binary matter as opposed to a scalar matter. Realistic requirements, such as those in (145), are not governed or defined by a threshold; such requirements instead involve varying degrees of necessity and it makes more sense to understand these as gradable instead of binary. Hence, although the data is not perfect, a potential and very tentative conclusion we might draw here is that realistic requirements involve some internal scalar structure in at least some ways that idealistic requirements do not. At the very least, we can see that there is a legitimate question about whether talk of thresholds of necessity can vary depending on whether a requirement is realistic or idealistic.

4.5 THE STATUS OF SUBOPTIMAL SUPEREROGATION

I have argued that the normative domain has a diversity of notions and that the realistic-idealistic distinction is useful in capturing this diversity, especially the difference between binary and scalar standards. A consequence of mapping out this diversity is that it helps us characterize our core intuitions regarding the notion of supererogation. Provided that we have the distinction between realistic and idealistic interpretations of *ought*, this naturally allows us to characterize two notions of supererogation.

We can describe the resulting notions as follows:

- A **realistic** sense of supererogation which tracks whether or not an act is the most optimal with respect to a given circumstance.
- An **idealistic** sense of supererogation which tracks whether or not an action counts as being beyond what is required.

This is a consequence of the idea that supererogatory principles are recommendations and not requirements. Since we can draw a difference between two notions of recommendation, we can distinguish two notions of supererogation, which, I argue, are both at stake in the All or Nothing Problem.

The core of the overall argument in this section is based on the idea that acknowledging the difference between these two notions of supererogation gives us what we need in order to account for how it is that there can be suboptimal supererogatory acts which are better yet also wrong. This allows us to maintain that the phenomenon of suboptimal supererogation can be modelled using the Optimality Interpretation.

In what follows, I will argue for the following two claims in turn:

(**Wrong**) That there is a sense in which suboptimal supererogatory acts can be wrong even though they are supererogatory.

(**Better**) That there is a sense in which suboptimal supererogatory acts are better than doing nothing.

4.5.1 ARGUMENT FOR **WRONG**

The first point is that the realistic notion of supererogation helps deliver the sense in which saving only one child is wrong. According to the preliminary gloss of supererogation in the setting of the Optimality Interpretation, an act φ is supererogatory just in case φ is better than what is required. The implicit idea associated with this preliminary gloss is that saving only one child should be a permissible option since it is a better option than what is required.

However, there is an important argument to the effect that saving only one child is impermissible—at least in a more restricted and refined sense of permission. Then the general line of reasoning is that if there is a significant sense in which an act is impermissible, then this helps explain why such an act could be regarded as wrong.

The standard interpretation of $May(\varphi)$ is that it is the dual of $Must(\varphi)$. But we can consider a more restricted notion of permission which can be defined as the dual of $Ought(\varphi)$. This idea has been recently explored by [Beddor \(2017\)](#). There is an interesting question about whether weak necessity modals have duals, especially since it does not seem like there are any natural language expressions (at least in English) which have a word that would naturally correspond to whatever the dual of the weak necessity modal would be.

The notion of permissibility which is the dual of $Ought(\varphi)$ would correspond to the idea that an option is optimally permitted. We can define this notion as follows:

$$(148) \textit{ Optimally-Permissible } \varphi := \neg Ought \neg \varphi$$

Hence, an action φ is optimally permissible iff φ is the case in some optimal world. Figure 4.5 depicts a situation where it is permitted that φ but not optimally permitted that φ . Figure 4.6 depicts a situation where φ is optimally permitted but $Ought(\varphi)$ is false. Hence, it is easy to see that $Ought(\varphi)$ entails that φ is optimally permissible, but not the other way around.

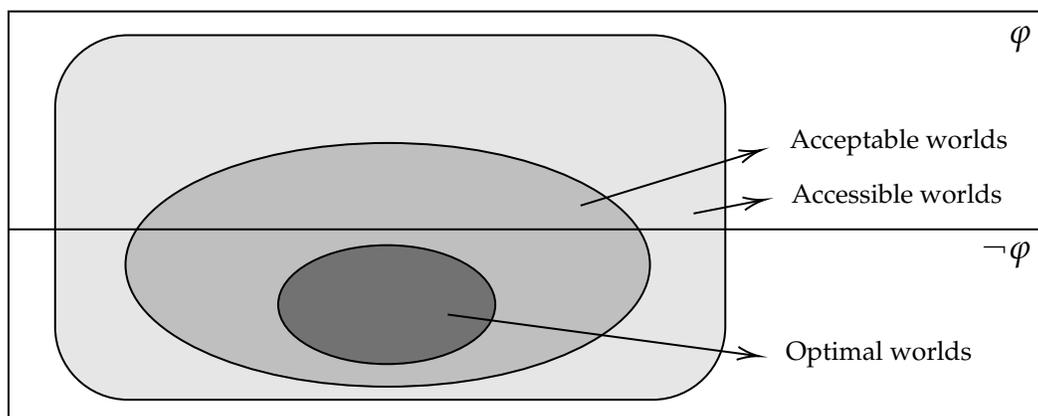


Figure 4.5: Optimality interpretation where φ is permissible but not optimally permissible

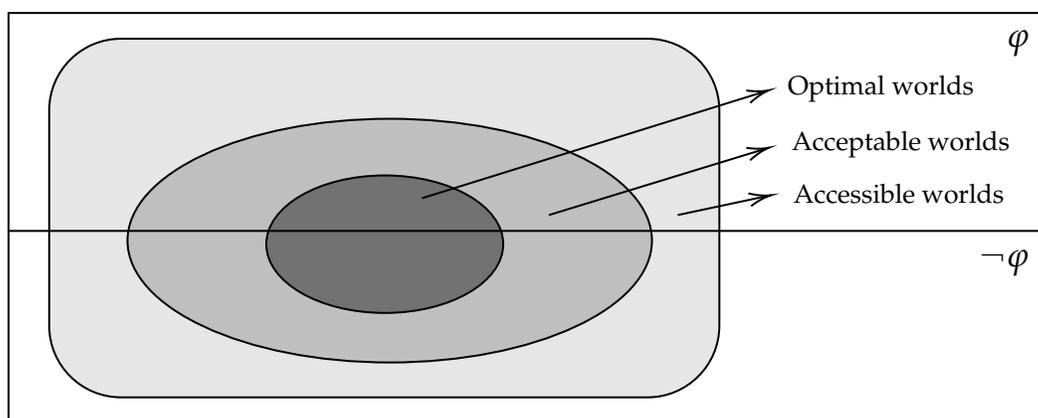


Figure 4.6: Optimality interpretation verifying optimal permissibility

If there are multiple options which are on a par from the perspective of optimality, then each one is optimally permitted. If there is one most optimal option, then it is

the only option which is optimally permitted. There is a big difference in optimality between saving only one child and saving both children. Hence, the only optimally permissible option is saving both children. Saving only one child is not permissible from the perspective of optimal permissibility. If an action is not permissible, then it is forbidden. Therefore, we have an argument that there is a sense in which the option of saving only one child is forbidden, and this is the feature that allows us to model the judgment that this option is morally wrong.⁸⁷

4.5.2 ARGUMENT FOR **BETTER**

The second point is that the idealistic notion of supererogation helps deliver the sense in which saving only one child is a better action. While saving one child is not permissible from the perspective of realistic supererogation, this action is permissible in a broader sense, one that does not concern the particular facts about the circumstances in question. Hence, when we judge that a suboptimal action is, in some sense, better than the alternative of not acting, the binary standard of whether such an action is beyond what duty demands is what is relevant here.

In this way, saving only one child is permissible by the lights of morality, here understood as involving a set of idealistic requirements. Morality does not demand that we sacrifice our arms to save the lives of others. But it is morally permissible to save oth-

⁸⁷There is precedent in the literature for something like this understanding of wrongness in terms of the notion of being forbidden, or something along these lines. For instance, [Scanlon \(1998, 153\)](#), working from the perspective of Contractualism writes that:

an act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behavior that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement.

ers. Therefore, the notion of 'better' at stake here can be interpreted as one that does not involve optimality in the usual sense.

We can also give an explanation by appealing to a realistic notion of supererogation because if we understand our two main options as saving one child or saving no child, then saving one child is clearly the better option. Part of the background information informing the judgment that you ought to save one child rather than save only one involves the fact that you are not going to save both.⁸⁸

4.5.3 DEFENSE OF PRINCIPLE

To summarize both of these arguments, for **Better** and **Wrong**, we have seen that there is a sense in which the option to save only one child is a permissible moral option in a broader sense whereas this option is not optimally permissible. Then, if there is a sense in which an act is not permissible, it follows that there is a sense in which an act is forbidden. And if an action is forbidden, this supports the judgment that it is morally wrong.

The next stage of the overall argument is to develop these claims into an answer to the All or Nothing Problem. There are two points which establish this, namely that we can vindicate the central judgments in **Collapsing Building** as well as provide a defense of **Principle**.

Vindication of judgments. The main judgments concerning **Collapsing Building** are vindicated on this approach. I will outline the reasoning behind each of the core judg-

⁸⁸In this way, we can see that the style of explanation by appealing to conditional obligations or similar would be compatible with this way of thinking about supererogation.

ments in turn.

- **Claim 1** says that it is morally permissible to not save both children. There is nothing in the case which blocks the claim that it is not obligatory that you not save both children.
- **Claim 2** says that it is morally wrong for you to save only one child. This judgment is delivered by the fact that saving only one child is not optimally permissible and hence, in an important sense, forbidden. It is reasonable to conclude that if an action is forbidden, then it is wrong.
- **Claim 3** says that you ought to save neither child rather than only save one. Based on what we have so far, an available strategy is to say the following. If there is a general principle to the effect that one ought to avoid doing what is wrong, then it would seem reasonable to interpret this ought as being idealistic in the sense that what is in question is not which acts are higher-ranked or lower-ranked with respect to a set of circumstances, but rather the moral properties that are under consideration. Here, the idea is that saving one child is wrong in an important sense. So, there is a more general ought which would recommend against this action and in favor of not acting at all. Of course, the salient judgment that there is something wrong with the judgement that you ought to save neither child which is arguably more important to account for. But the claim is that if we interpret this judgment in the way I have suggested, then we do not need to think that **Principle** is forcing an unreasonable judgment.

Defense of Principle. The second point is that from the perspective articulated here, there is no deep fault with **Principle**. We just need to be careful about how we interpret

it. We can accept that there is a sense in which we ought to do φ rather than ψ provided that φ is morally permissible and ψ is wrong. At the same time, the pressing issue is that we need to be careful in keeping track of whether we are working with a realistic *ought* or an idealistic *ought*. My sense is that there is a general tendency to interpret the *oughts* here as exclusively related either to optimality, the notion of what is better, or something contrastive.⁸⁹

If **Principle** is interpreted with respect to a realistic *ought*, it would not seem to make much sense of the judgment we want because we normally understand what we ought to do in terms of what is better or best, and given a choice between two options, we ought to go with the more optimal of the two. Given this, there is reason to conclude that **Principle** is defensible if its associated notion of ought is interpreted as a more general ought, one with a more binary, idealistic flavor.

To briefly sum up, there are a variety of notions at play here and perhaps the overarching point is that in dealing with supererogation and related notions of ought and permissibility, we need to keep track of various different senses of these notions that might be at stake here. Although the All or Nothing Problem seems to show that supererogation cannot be easily understood in terms of ought, we can allow for different notions of supererogation which allow us to make different judgments, sometimes concerning optimality, and sometimes not.

⁸⁹See Cariani (2013, 2016) and Snedegar (2012, 2014, 2015) for background and discussion.

4.5.4 OTHER RECENT SOLUTIONS

I will now briefly discuss some recent proposals by [Horton \(2017\)](#) and [Pummer \(2019\)](#) to deal with the All or Nothing Problem. These alternative solutions involve, *inter alia*, rejecting at least one of the core claims (Horton) or **Principle** (Pummer).

4.5.4.1 CONDITIONAL OBLIGATION AND PERMISSION

[Horton \(2017\)](#) argues for a solution to the All or Nothing Problem which involves a rejection of **Claim 1**, which is that it is morally permissible for you to not save both children. The upshot of this move is that this would allow us to reject **Claim 3** and preserve **Principle**.

The alternative to **Claim 1** is the following:

Claim 1*: If you were not willing to save either child, it would be permissible for you not to save either, but because you are willing to save one, you ought to save both.⁹⁰

The justification for interpreting **Claim 1** in this way is based on the following line of thought. Suppose we are working with the following criterion for an action counting as wrong: 'if our acts are not justifiable to the people whom they affect, then these acts are wrong'.⁹¹ If one is not willing to save both children, a reasonable justification

⁹⁰[Horton \(2017, 97\)](#).

⁹¹[Horton \(2017, 97\)](#). Regarding the justification for this claim, Horton notes that this view is defended by [Scanlon \(1998\)](#) and [Parfit \(2003\)](#).

would involve appealing to the fact that losing one's arms is a major sacrifice; however, if one is only willing to save one child, then such a justification is no longer available.

From this, Horton argues, it follows that we should accept the conditional claim that: 'because you are willing to save one child, you ought to save both.'⁹² This leads us to the core of Horton's solution, which is stated as follows:

Because you are willing to save one child, you ought to save both, but if you are not going to save both, you ought to do the next best thing, which is to save one. That is, you ought to save one child rather than save neither.⁹³

The idea is that we working with **Claim 1*** instead of **Claim 1**, together with **Claim 2**, would not lead us to the consequence that you ought to save neither child rather than save one child (**Claim 3**). In this way, we are able to instead accept that you ought to save one child rather than save neither.

It is important to note that Horton (2017, 97) interprets **Claim 3** as the following conditional ought:

Claim 3*: If you are not willing to save either child, you ought to save neither rather than only save one.⁹⁴

Understood the claim is understood this way, the implication from **Claim 1*** and **Claim**

⁹²Horton (2017, 97).

⁹³Horton (2017, 97).

⁹⁴Stated earlier in the chapter as: 'If you are not going to save both children, you ought to save neither' (Horton, 2017, 94).

2 via **Principle** looks more transparent. Hence, supposing you are only willing to save one child, we would get the following, which needs to be held alongside **Claim 3***:

(149) If you are only willing to save one child, then you ought to save one rather than save neither.

[Pummer \(2019\)](#) notes that one problem with **Claim 3*** is that it discourages you from performing a supererogatory act if you are not going to go all the way: if you are not going to save both children, then the conditional ought claim thereby discourages you from saving one child instead. It should be straightforward to see why this is an undesirable consequence.

Furthermore, in general, it seems strange to allow that what you ought to do in these matters should depend on your willingness. This would make for an odd explanation of why sometimes suboptimal supererogation appears acceptable. Such acts would presumably be acceptable because you were not willing to do what was optimal. But this kind of strategy would not have the resources to help draw a line between the suboptimal acts that are morally acceptable and those that are morally wrong. The conditional obligation strategy only tells us that what we ought to do is dependent on what we are willing to do.

4.5.4.2 REJECTION OF **PRINCIPLE**

[Pummer \(2019\)](#) argues that we should reject **Principle**.⁹⁵ Pummer defends the following conditional permission claim:

⁹⁵Recently, there appears to be some growing opposition to **Principle**. For instance, see [Portmore \(2019\)](#).

(150) If you are not going to save both children, it is permissible to save only one.

Pummer argues that the conditional permission in (150) does not follow from the conjunction of **Claim 1** and **Claim 2**. The conditional obligation claim follows from **Principle**. But **Principle**, Pummer argues, leads to undesirable consequences. To use his example, suppose you are faced with a choice to do nothing, or save one hundred children by pressing a button, or press a different button to save these hundred children and prevent an additional child from losing a foot. Stipulate that the cost of pressing the button is your death. According to Principle, we would get that if you are not going to perform the third option, namely pressing the button to save one hundred children and the foot of some additional child, then you ought to do nothing. But then you would be required not to save the hundred children because you have opted to not go just a bit further and save the foot of some additional child. This case helps makes it more transparent that **Principle** is what is yielding these unintuitive conditional ought claims. If we reject **Principle**, then we do not need to accept the problematic conditional oughts which arise.

Once these claims are rejected, the proposed alternative is based on an appeal to conditional permissions such as (150). The general idea behind the strategy is that if one is not going to do the best option, then it is permissible to do the next best option.⁹⁶

Pummer (2019) writes:

Now suppose your alternatives are (i) do nothing, (ii) save one child by sacrificing your arms, (iii) save this very child and another by sacrificing your

⁹⁶Importantly, as Pummer notes, we should not have the relevant permission claim imply something to the effect of: 'If it is permissible not to save both children, then it is permissible to save only one child'.

arms, or (iv) save both these very same children and a third by sacrificing your arms. On a plausible extension of what I have argued here, you ought to save all three or save none, but if you are not going to save all three, you ought to save two or save none, and so on. It would be implausible to claim that, because you have excluded saving all three, you are conditionally permitted to do any of these non-excluded alternatives. Of these non-excluded alternatives that are wrong, you are conditionally permitted to do only the least wrong one. At the same time, you are permitted to save none.

I agree that this strategy based on conditional permissions is preferable to the previous strategy based on conditional obligation. The notion of permission is something I appeal to as well, especially in explaining the wrongness of at least some cases of suboptimal supererogation. One notable advantage over the approach defended by Horton is that characterizing the relevant judgments in terms of conditional permissions provides us with a notion that does not discourage one from saving a child if they are not going to go all the way and save both.

My main point of contention with the overall strategy defended here mainly lies in the fact that my view is that **Principle** can be defended, but only a specific version of it, one that is understood in an idealistic manner. While I am potentially sympathetic to rejecting **Principle**, I think that there is also reason to believe that it is important to preserve what is good and reasonable about it in the first place. In my view, what should be preferred is an account which helps preserve **Principle** in at least some cases while rejecting it in others, in hopefully some principled way. A virtue of distinguishing between realistic and idealistic senses of ought is that this has the potential to preserve

Principle by reserving it for an idealistic interpretation.

For these reasons, I am inclined against a wholesale rejection of **Principle**. After all, the notions invoked in this principle are each very complicated and subject to further variability. This point applies especially to the notion of ought. If I am right that we can distinguish between scalar and binary senses of ought, then this should have some implications for how we understand **Principle** and its applications.

4.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The general problem of suboptimal supererogation demands that we consider a closer examination of the core normative modal notions of permission, recommendation, and requirement. This reveals the need to carefully distinguish and emphasize the underappreciated distinction between deontic modals which receive a realistic interpretation and deontic modals which receive an idealistic interpretation. This, in turn, leads us to recognize a difference between realistic supererogation and idealistic supererogation.

The judgment that an act of suboptimal supererogation can be wrong is due to a realistic notion of supererogation, one on which what we ought to do are the highest-ranked option or set of options. While such acts are not supererogatory in the realistic sense, they are still supererogatory in the idealistic sense, which does not involve the ought of optimality. These claims raise significant questions about the notions of rightness and wrongness, and more work needs to be done to analyze how it is that these notions are related to or fit into the a framework for understanding the central modal notions in the philosophy of normativity.

In the concluding chapter to this dissertation (Chapter 5), I return to the issue of rightness and wrongness, and elaborate on some of the complexities, along with a discussion of some other issues.

5

Conclusion

CLOSING REMARKS

There are several arguments and proposals in this thesis, and the main theses defended are:

- That because the variability of generics resembles the variability of weak necessity modals, generics therefore involve covert weak necessity modals.
- That moral principles are best understood as generic generalizations and that this supports a particularist model of moral reasoning.
- That the diversity of the central deontic notions reveals further avenues for understanding and interpreting the notion of supererogation.

Because these points raise several significant further questions for research, in this closing chapter, I would like to take the opportunity to highlight and discuss a couple of additional philosophical issues pertaining to the following topics:

- **Issue 1:** RIGHTNESS AND WRONGNESS
- **Issue 2:** MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY

5.1 ISSUE 1: RIGHTNESS AND WRONGNESS

One of the issues left unresolved in Chapter 4 was on characterizing the general relationship between notions such as moral rightness and moral wrongness with respect to the modal notions we have discussed and defined such as permission, recommendation, and requirement. At least one such general problem is the remainder of the issue of suboptimal supererogation which concerns the acceptability of suboptimal acts. When are such acts acceptable, if at all?

If a donation toward the cause of animal welfare is less optimal compared to the option of donating toward the purchase of malaria nets, then it follows that donating toward animal welfare is not optimally permissible and therefore, in one sense, wrong. However, there is the fairly robust judgment that there is nothing wrong in donating to the cause of animal welfare. Hence, what is needed is not only an account of how exactly rightness and wrongness relate to the varied notions of permission, recommendation, and requirement, but also an account which matches up with our intuitive judgments.

For our purposes, the focus will continue to be on cases of suboptimality because these cases are interesting and controversial. One extreme way to resolve the controversial fact that some suboptimal acts seem acceptable whereas others seem unacceptable is to deny that our judgments are tracking the facts and explain away these judgments. Such a view is highly implausible. The defender of such a strategy would be in a highly undesirable argumentative position having to posit, perhaps even for unprincipled reasons, that our judgments are unreliable. The starting position I accept is that there really are situations where acting suboptimally is permissible and perfectly morally acceptable. While I will not be in the business of giving a general account of when

and how suboptimality can be morally acceptable, I will, however, be interested in the different possibilities for modeling suboptimality and its relationship to notions such as rightness or wrongness.

An interesting theoretical possibility is to consider falls out of the idea that we should be careful to understand these core normative modal notions in context. Then rightness and wrongness, too, are subject to similar sorts of variability, perhaps even underappreciated forms of variability.

It is important to note here we should question whether moral features such as rightness and wrongness are to be uniquely understood in terms of optimality.⁹⁷ Giving money to an animal welfare charity is undoubtedly supererogatory, even if only in the idealistic sense. I will discuss two ways we can approach the matter of how it is we can account for the overriding judgments of rightness and wrongness that we appear to have in response to different examples of suboptimal supererogation.

One approach would interpret rightness and wrongness in terms of optimality. We can optimality not in terms of the top-ranked option but rather a set of options which exceed a certain context-sensitive threshold. Then such a threshold could allow that donating to an animal welfare charity is optimally permissible and, hence, not wrong. In a related fashion, the optimality standard can be tweaked using a context-sensitive threshold in the following way. For example, we might suggest that any action which is greater than half as optimal as the top-ranked action counts as optimally permissible. Saving only one child is only half as optimal as saving both children, so this does not pass the bar of optimal permissibility. Donating to an animal welfare charity is close to

⁹⁷It is also worth noting that it is a matter of significant controversy whether notions such as rightness and wrongness are binary or scalar. See [Sinhbabu \(2018\)](#) for recent discussion, as well as arguments for the scalar view.

optimality as a malaria net charity, so this action is reasonably optimally permissible. This approach unfortunately leaves us with big questions about how such thresholds are determined.

Another approach would involve accepting that there are different notions of rightness and wrongness corresponding to the different senses of permissibility we have considered. While donating to the cause of animal welfare is not permissible in the optimal sense associated with the realistic notion of supererogation, it is permissible from the perspective of the idealistic sense of supererogation. The overall judgment cannot be that donating to the cause of animal welfare is both wrong and not wrong. One of these judgments is overriding, and there is a big question about which notions of rightness and wrongness take salience for a given moral judgment. Or perhaps there might be no overriding rightness or wrongness, but rather a plurality of such notions. At the same time, one of the benefits here would be that it is theoretically interesting and perhaps even enlightening to entertain different notions of rightness and wrongness.

My interest here is not to adjudicate between these approaches or to argue for some particular one, but to put them forward because of their more general philosophical interest. There are definitely further questions to consider regarding the kind of variability associated with our notions of rightness and wrongness, and also whether they are at all closely related with the notions at stake in our background framework of the core modal notions.

5.2 ISSUE 2: MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY

I have argued in this thesis that we should understand moral principles as generic generalizations. If this is true, then we have good reason to accept a form of particularism on which moral principles do not appropriately support reasoning about the moral status of particular cases. The arguments which pursue this claim emphasize the centrality of moral philosophy in the dispute over generalism and particularism.

These issues raise several further questions for research in moral epistemology:

- **Question 1: Epistemology of Moral Generalizations** The account of our justification in general moral principles should be sensitive to whatever account of moral principles we are working with. If we should be working with the generic view, then it would be natural to think that some considerations in the epistemology of generics should be relevant in constructing such a theory. What is the relationship between the epistemology of generics and our justification in moral principles?
- **Question 2: Epistemology of Particular Cases** The arguments in Chapter 3 purport to show that our knowledge of whether an action has a given moral property is not supported by general principles. These arguments are supported by the intermediary claim that generic generalizations on their own are not apt to support our knowledge in reasoning about particular instances.
- **Question 3: Questions of Priority** Once we have separated out some differences in the epistemology of the general and the epistemology of the particular, one way to map out the terrain of possible positions in moral epistemology is to think

about whether some particular approach to moral epistemology, perhaps by focus on general principles or particular cases, takes priority in an account of moral knowledge.

Question 1 One question not directly considered in this thesis was on our knowledge of the general principles linking together actions with moral properties. Arguing that generic moral principles are not suited for reasoning about particular cases does not entail that we should reject such principles. Nor does it entail that we cannot have knowledge of such principles. The justification of general moral principles is an entirely different matter, one that should be guided by the overall view we accept about the nature of moral principles.

This means that if we accept the generic view of moral principles, we should expect that there is further work to be done in delivering a positive theory of the role of moral principles in morality. This is something that moral particularists want to be able to do. But in order to take on this task, someone who accepts arguments that are friendly to particularism need to start with a clear conception of moral principles that is suitably non-central with respect to action guidance and moral reasoning.

If we accept the generic view, it is then natural to consider the general workings of a theory of justification related to other more paradigmatic generic generalizations. Such a theory would likely benefit from recent empirical work on the sorts of judgments people are prone to make involving generics. As discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, there are a range of defects associated with generics and their role in reasoning. Such considerations would likely play a role in a general account of justification for moral principles.

Question 2 It is generally to fair to characterize the argument from Non-Numerity in Chapter 3 as a negative argument in the sense that it does not tell us anything about how it is that we do happen to acquire justification in our particular moral judgments. The positive work that needs to be done here takes us well beyond the scope of that chapter. Amongst the possible ways forward, we can separate out at least two of them for now. It is possible to tie an account of the epistemology of particular moral judgments to something to do with generics, or the account can be entirely separate from considerations having to do with generics.

I am skeptical about the possibility of relying on the generic nature of moral principles to inform us about anything about particular cases. And I think that the arguments in Chapter 3 allow us to conclude this, and thus provide direction for a positive way forward. For these reasons, as well as some independent ones, my sympathies are instead with an account which does not appeal to generalities in how we should discern the moral properties of particular actions.

Question 3 The final point I wanted to discuss here concerns questions of priority. I have claimed that it is important to separate questions in the epistemology of morality in the way I have described by distinguishing the epistemology of the general and of the particular. An overall account of moral epistemology ought to account for how it is that we have knowledge of particular moral facts as well as how we have knowledge of general moral principles.

There are two possible directions that I wish to discuss here: one direction consists in giving priority to particular moral facts and the other direction consists in giving priority to general moral principles.

Call the view that particular moral knowledge has priority *Particularist-First Moral Epistemology*. The main task for the Particularist-First moral epistemologist is to give an account of how it is that we come to know or have justified beliefs in particular moral facts. The Particularist-First approach need not endorse any commitment to general moral principles. Without such a commitment, the Particularist-First philosopher can instead be committed to the idea that knowledge of particular moral facts is all there is to moral epistemology.

Call the view which gives priority to general moral principles *Generalist-First Moral Epistemology*. This view is roughly opposed to Particularist-First Moral Epistemology. The main task for a Generalist-First moral epistemologist is to give an account of how it is we come to know or have justified beliefs in general moral principles. One approach such a moral epistemologist could take is that our knowledge of general moral principles determines the moral status of particular actions. In this way, the epistemology of particular moral facts is more or less a matter of knowing the general moral principles.

In distinguishing between these positions and theoretical options, we can see which of these conflict with my arguments about the nature of moral reasoning, and which of these would be open for future consideration if these arguments are accepted.

The well-known debates on the status of moral principles, that is, the debates between generalists and particularists, can also be described as disputes about whether we should endorse a Particularist-First approach or a Generalist-First approach regarding questions of the epistemology of particular moral facts. On the particularist view of moral reasoning I have argued for, we get reason to endorse a Particularist-First approach regarding the epistemology of particular moral facts.

These usual debates on the status of moral principles, however, tend to leave out questions of the epistemology of the general moral principles themselves. On a certain brand of a Particularist-First view, the epistemology of general moral principles is nothing more than just the epistemology of particular moral facts. But this is not the only option for an account of our knowledge of general moral principles.

And although I have argued for the insignificance of moral principles with respect to questions of particular moral knowledge, it is still the case that moral principles are significant in understanding questions pertaining to our beliefs and justification in general moral knowledge. Treating moral principles in terms of generic generalizations could therefore potentially open up theoretical possibilities for accounting for the epistemology of general moral principles.

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