

Anecdotes, Situations, Histories -- Varieties and Uses of Cases in Thinking about Ethics and Development Practice¹

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ABSTRACT

Referring to a wide variety of case studies, anecdotes and abstracted choice situations, the paper considers the range and roles of different types of cases presented in trying to understand tensions, conflicts and choices in development. Since various purposes are legitimate and complementary (including sensitization, theorization, and informing decision-making) so too are various styles and uses of cases: some real and some hypothetical, some thick (including a lot) and some thin (omitting a lot). While thick description can provide instructive and even inspiring exemplars, it is not invariably helpful in moral argument. The paper synthesizes these ideas into a picture of distinct stages in work in ethics and practical reasoning.

1. WHAT CAN WE DO WITH CASES IN DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE?

Pim de Graaf, now a Médecins Sans Frontières manager in Amsterdam, earlier worked as a doctor in an area in Southern Tanzania. Most 8-12 year old children in this area had bilharzia and hence sometimes urinated blood. Those who did not pass blood were considered sick and were treated by traditional doctors. At a conference (NVCO, Soesterberg 1997) de Graaf recounted how he decided not to intervene or even seek to dispel the beliefs. He feared he would make the majority of the children feel ill and their parents feel guilty, in circumstances where a sustained supply of anti-bilharzia drugs could not be expected.

Two opposed responses to de Graaf's story emerged. Group A held that he should have supplied medical information, to open a dialogue and permit people to make better-informed choices; not to do so was to treat them as moral infants. Group B held that local practices must be presumed appropriate. They argued that Western medical practices should not be promoted, being often deeply flawed or inconsistent with local resources and culture, which must instead be strengthened and built upon. De Graaf himself in effect formed a Group C, who abstained

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from intervention not because of doubts about Western medical knowledge but because of a perceived dilemma, between giving people more awareness and choice and leaving them more happy. The case served well in surfacing profound disagreements about medicine, ‘communities’ (a favourite category in Group B, suspect in Group A), and ‘development’ (a term discarded by Group B, retained in Group A). It contained no easy route to reducing the disagreements.

Case material is vital, but can be random, casual, bewildering.² I will consider the roles and limits of various types, including case studies proper, anecdotes and abstracted choice situations, in improving understanding of ethical tensions, conflicts and choices, with special reference to development practice and emergency relief.³ The focus on ‘development’ brings characteristic inter-cultural, inter-national, inter-income strata and inter-generational concerns; but most of the paper is relevant for other contexts too. The discussion will centre on types of case and general issues in their use, not on drawing substantive conclusions about the examples presented. Where comments are given, these are either views of the authors cited or are there to add flavour and suggest ingredients and issues in deciding in and from cases, not more than that.

I take as starting point that “‘development’ is...a multi-faceted, multi-vocal process, and a complex site of contestation’, beyond any one agent’s powers to foresee and control (Grillo & Stirrat, 1997:vii). In such contestation and vocalizing, agents seek to define and defend themselves and influence others through language, including ethical statements and systems.

We are regaled with anecdotes of the invincible horrors, hyper-complexity, hypocrisy, and unintended negative effects of development interventions; or--now less frequently than earlier--of the reverse. Anecdotes can serve to give us questions, and to convey some aspects and varieties of experience. But they lack depth, a systematic basis of comparison, and, often, a sense of inquiry.

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² ‘Case’ can mean an instance (a situation/event/person/...) *or* a representation of an instance. In referring to the latter, we reserve the term ‘case study’ for representations with some depth. In literature on qualitative research methods the term can be further restricted, to study of a system ‘bounded in time or place’ (Creswell, 1998:40), such as an organization, project, policy, decision or whatever. The case-study tradition so defined overlaps with but is distinguishable from other qualitative research traditions like biographical study, phenomenology (investigation of the meanings of a phenomenon for participants), and ethnography (a portrait of a broad cultural system). However in this paper all may be called case studies.

³ Not only North-South development cooperation is ‘development intervention’. For background on development ethics, see e.g. Crocker (1991), Gasper (1997).

Analytically inclined philosophers reflect on simplified abstracted situations of moral tension and choice, which can serve to sharpen and organize some concepts and intuitions. When one reads the work on ethics by many (not least Anglo-American) philosophers, and indeed some Northern social scientists, one is liable though to weary of their narrow, and often only implicit, sets of experiential source materials.⁴ When the materials are less narrow they have sometimes been questionably derived. Ernest Gellner complained of ‘scandalously irresponsible, scissors-and-paste, selective use of ethnographic material’ by Northern philosophers seeking self-sufficient moral communities in the South (1974: 145).

Anthropologists provide extended case histories--of policies, projects, organizations or individuals--which sometimes go further than do anecdotes and abstraction and can deepen their legacy of questions and concepts. When one reads these richer case studies--also by some sociologists, political scientists, development practitioners and journalists--one must however ask: How valid is the account? How good is the sample? (the sample of events and aspects from the case; the sample from cases of the type concerned; the sample from differing types of case). What is the question? (so that one can judge ‘valid for what?’ and ‘a good sample for what?’). Can highly varied vignettes give any cumulative and inter-subjective advances or consensuses? How can we make case studies into more than lengthy anecdotes -- into generators and tests of new insights, sources of better theory and better judgements?

One theme in the paper, already apparent, concerns the different predilections, contributions and limitations of various disciplines and professions. Section 2 offers a heuristic taxonomy of cases in ethical and other practice-oriented argumentation. It uses this to present a range of examples from discussions of or for development practice, and then considers possible refinements of the classification.

A second theme concerns the choice between richer cases and more selective ones, between thicker and thinner, and the underlying differences in philosophy or purpose. Section 3 will examine both some weak claims for thickness--that detailed description of a culture will give us the culturally mandated answer to choices faced; or that more detail always helps us

⁴ The terms ‘ethics’/ ‘ethical’ and ‘morals’/ ‘moral’ are sometimes interchangeable -- one represents a Greek root and the other a Latin root. Where distinct, ‘morals’ refers to issues, views and rules concerning what is right/wrong/good/bad, and ‘ethics’ concerns theories and general approaches and principles about morals. Hence one sense of ‘ethics’ is ‘moral philosophy’.

understand a situation better--and stronger ones, including the potential roles of thick cases in suggesting patterns, furthering a holistic grasp, and giving inspiration.

A supportive theme is how considerations distinctive to normative argumentation sometimes justify different use of cases compared to when purposes are descriptive or explanatory. For example, not only is more information sometimes unnecessary, certain types of information can be undesirable as they could bias decision-makers.

A last theme is that use of a wide range of types of case is in large part justifiable, for practical action and associated analysis call for a mix of types of thinking and feeling and willing. Notwithstanding the differences between philosophies, all the styles that we will see can be legitimate when in an appropriate niche or role. Ethics and reflective action involve a set of distinct arenas, marked by distinct purposes and correspondingly different methods and use of cases. For mobilization of attention, concern, sympathy and energy, particular types of case serve well, often somewhat simplified but showing real people. Second, the choices thrown up by cases are tackled using whatever resources of thought and emotion are mobilized and found relevant. Where people find these resources insufficient or in conflict they may turn to explicit theorizing. More drastically simplified, depersonalized, cases may be used to help here. When we try to apply theories to complex real situations, we need further skills in selecting, adapting and combining ideas from theory, in facing and working with real people, and practical idealism; and can strengthen these by reflection on rich, real cases. This picture will be returned to in the final section.

2. VARIETIES OF ‘CASE’ OR EXAMPLE

Let us consider types of case or example under six headings: (1) thick case studies, (2) thin case studies, (3) real life choice situations, (4) real life anecdotes and other illustrations, (5) conceivably true fictions, (6) impossible fictions. We begin with the traditional ideal amongst anthropologists, the thick case study.

Thick case studies: standard research advice and beyond

A *thick* case study is holistic and includes distinctive, even idiosyncratic, situations and details, people and cultures, and treats them in contexts, technical and institutional, local and beyond. Criteria for ‘thickness’ are thus: first, broad scope, provided to ‘situate’ a case, contextualize it, view it holistically; second, degree of detail, notably case-specific, person-specific detail; and third, penumbraally, use of a plurality of methods, perspectives and voices.

Thickness is characteristically but not exclusively anthropological. For Nyamwaya (1997:198) anthropology’s ‘holistic approach’ ‘seeks to explain human thought, organization and behaviour within the broader context of socio-economic conditions’, and, we can add, vice versa. Similarly for Pottier, anthropology seeks to provide ‘holism and reflexivity, the familiar roles that give the anthropologist a distinctive voice’ (Pottier, 1997:223). ‘Actors and opinions...need situating’ (ibid.: 221).

The respective strengths and weaknesses of holistic and analytic approaches in descriptive and explanatory studies are well-known, and their potential complementarity.⁵ Larger samples normally bring narrower scope of the investigation and much greater non-sampling error. Single case studies cannot sustain generalizations, but provide insights and hypotheses as well as some understanding about those specific cases. They are often stronger in ‘bandwidth’, ‘providing answers to a wide array of questions rather than [precise information on a] single question’ (Shadish *et al.*: 310).

These standard research methods discussions have been limited by reference only to descriptive and explanatory purposes. Methodological debates in *ex post* evaluation bring us a fuller set of criteria for assessing use of cases in normative analysis. For evaluation of ongoing

or completed programmes, Stake and others call for priority to 'bandwidth', broad-ranging observation, and hence rich, open-ended case studies.⁶ This allows one to be rough but relevant, rather than stick to a flawed pre-set observational frame, typically given by pre-set programme objectives. Evaluation should be responsive rather than preordinate, in Stake's terms. It should examine actual effects, many of which may be unforeseen, not only intended effects; and allow the focus and criteria for the study to emerge in response to the evidence and discussions with stakeholders. The traditional unhurried anthropological case study can fit this approach; but so might more rapid modern appraisal methods, if teams and participation provide the ability to question and rethink categories, focus and criteria. Stake's critics argue that one can have a prior focus in evaluation that is allowed to evolve. This is true, but in practice pre-ordination tends to exclude flexibility. The critics warn further that responsiveness in value terms should not become relativism, an automatic acceptance of local actors' stated values, which abrogates moral responsibility.

Shadish *et al.*'s authoritative text on evaluation theory concludes that Stake's call for pre-eminent use of case study methods in evaluation only holds good when, in their words:

- (1) The evaluator wants bandwidth rather than fidelity.
- (2) Few if any questions are known ahead of time to be interesting.
- (3) The evaluation is primarily going to be used by readers who cannot experience the program themselves and who want extensive contextual information to help decide how relevant that local site is to their own.
- (4) The evaluator can forgo higher-quality answers to specific questions that might be yielded by other methods.
- (5) A succinct summary of evaluation results is not a high priority.
- (6) Succinct generalizations across sites are also not needed.
- (7) Case studies will be seen as sufficiently credible to the client.
- (8) Discovery is a higher priority than confirmation. (Shadish *et al.*, 1991: 313)

As evaluators, Shadish *et al.* add to the conventional quality criteria for research methods. They emphasize use and users: a good study must be relevant and credible as well as valid and reliable. Arguably, to be relevant in the case's own setting it should cover major parties; e.g. it should study interveners as well as those acted on, even though the strong tend to be camera-shy. To be relevant in wider contexts, case studies must have good luck or work in tandem with theorizing.

However, Stake's position involves use of further criteria still. He remarks that even if case studies are weak on generating law-like explanations they are strong 'When the aims are

⁵ See e.g. Bulmer & Warwick (eds., 1983) or Patton (1997).

understanding, extension of experience, and increase in conviction in that which is known' (1978:7, emphasis added; 'understanding' refers here to grasping participants' interpretations, motives and actions). All three roles are vital in ethics, as we will see.

In a study of 1980s literature relevant to the ethics of development aid, I suggested that 'some readers may well feel, at least on first examination, that the most rewarding pieces....were those -- such as the books by Shawcross [a journalist; *The Quality of Mercy*, on relief to Cambodia in 1979-83] and Harrell-Bond [an anthropologist; *Imposing Aid*, on aid for Ugandan refugees in Sudan in 1980-85] -- not written by philosophers or economists !' (Gasper, 1997: 41). Often far richer experience is drawn on: 'From the urgency of the events it describes, much of the literature from [emergency] cases like Ethiopia, Cambodia and Rwanda has been pointed and holistic; not formal examinations of dense but narrow data, but thought-provoking accounts of decision-making done with poor information and under pressure' (ibid.: 39).

The best thick case studies are not necessarily the most detailed. Those sometimes provide merely the raw materials for a good -- enlightening, connections-revealing -- study. Many historians argue that since selections are inevitable they should be explicit, systematic and purposeful (e.g. Stretton, 1969). There should be a guiding set of questions (though indeed not only or necessarily the ones with which the historian began) which turn an account into a meaningful case, a study, of something, not a doomed effort to recount everything. Lisa Peattie's streamlined 'Planning - Rethinking Ciudad Guyana', about the planning and growth of a new city in Venezuela from the 1960s to the 1980s, is at least as useful as the more congested project histories in Doug Porter *et al.*'s 'Development in Practice' (on an Australian aided resettlement project in Kenya, 1973-89), or Norman Uphoff's 'Learning from Gal Oya' (on a decade of irrigation organizations on a scheme in Sri Lanka). But each is of exceptional quality, drawing insights from its multidisciplinary and greater spread of years than most evaluations.

Thin case studies

Many studies which have sufficient depth and investigative character for the title 'case study' yet use a rather limited and pre-set range of questions and methods, and hence may be called 'thin'. They are not holistic. When well-done they can be extremely incisive and helpful; for

⁶ See e.g.. Stake (1995), Richards (1985), Padaki (1995).

example the studies in Sen's 'Poverty and Famines', of the famines in 1940s Bengal and 1970s Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and the Sahel.

What makes a thin case study 'well-done', productive? Consider three examples.. Nussbaum and Glover's collection 'Women, Culture, and Development' (1995) opens with a case study by Marty Chen that presents obstacles to obtaining paid employment which have been faced by many rural women in northern parts of the Indian subcontinent: disapproval and obstruction by their (extended) families and dominant sections in local 'communities'. A digest of other work, including her own, this thin case study has only one consistently heard voice, Chen's, and focuses only on simpler situations, where women actively seek external employment and yet are obstructed. But these situations remain real and the study informs and enriches several subsequent chapters which refer to it when assessing Sen's or Nussbaum's capabilities approach.

Many of Robert Chambers's cases in his 'Whose Reality Counts?' (1997) appear rather as anecdotes, brief illustrations of a pre-formed conclusion. But some are quite extensive and analytical, draw on work by many others, and can be placed here: notably his cases of 'massive error' and failure to learn from experience, which concern three myths of the 1980s: huge post-harvest losses, catastrophic deforestation by local populations, and successes (somewhere) with animal-drawn tool-carriers.

Using a text based approach, Keith Tester's 'Moral Culture' (1997) looks at reactions to, and subjective involvements in, various mid and late 20th century massacres and genocides. His only case study in my sense is of My Lai, where American troops shot dead at least 347 Vietnamese villagers -- virtually all of them old, women, or children -- in a few minutes one morning in 1968. Here Tester mainly applies a theory rather than examines the Americans or the villagers in personal detail. Like Sen, Chambers, and Chen, Tester piggy-backs on previous work on his case, and then usefully connects it to related broader theorizing.

An effective thin case-study could thus be one which builds on previous thicker work on the case, and starts to identify or posit key aspects and relate the case to other instances and relevant theory. The intention can be to illuminate and/or draw conclusions about the case, or to identify principles relevant to a range of cases. Clarifying and assessing posited principles might require a move to a more abstracted mode, as we discuss later.

Real-life choice situations - with or without advice

Some discussion cases are presented in more or less neutral fashion, giving a situation and a choice arising, followed by a request for the reader to make an argued choice, and/or by presentation of the author's view. Such choice situations can be written thickly or thinly. Usually they are towards the thin side, as in many public and business administration exercises, since the intention may be to ensure space for interpretation, arguments, and mobilization of readers' own experience and insights. Scenarios used for instruction in other professional fields--or in religion--often share this format.

In his lucid and helpful 'Doing the Right Thing - Relief Agencies, Moral Dilemmas and Moral Responsibility in Political Emergencies and War' (1997), Hugo Slim presents four 'scenarios'. They have this concern: what ethical compromises are acceptable when trying to do good? The cases while real are very schematic. Each is stated in about 200-300 words, to describe a choice that has faced relief agencies. Slim then expounds his recommended responses in about 500-800 words per case.

Let us look at the first scenario. It asks whether relief agencies should have supplied the Rwandese refugee camps in Zaire in 1994-96, despite knowing that the camps were dominated by Hutu forces who had been involved in the preceding genocide of Tutsis (and of Hutus willing to work with Tutsis to implement the 1993 Arusha peace agreement), and who were continuing in armed conflict in Rwanda and preparing for a re-invasion to complete the genocide. (Not mentioned by Slim but known amongst some agencies, the Hutu forces also continued with killings in the camps and environs.) Slim advises that any future mis-deeds by Hutu forces coming from the camps would be their responsibility, not those of agencies who had supplied them with non-military material; the responsibility of relief agencies is instead to supply food and other necessities to people in distress.

Slim presents difficult choices, different responses, and his own argued recommendations. He does not discuss the cases with a depth or tone intended to further other interpretations. The relief community and some of its agencies and their members were torn apart by the stress of choices faced in Rwanda, Zaire, Sudan, Bosnia and elsewhere. One role of his scenarios seems to be to strengthen morale, provide simple workable guidelines, help staff

sleep at night. He uses the format of the sermon, and subordinates case detail to moral theory. However, he gives sufficient materials to provoke reflection and possible alternative responses.⁷

De Graaf's Tanzania bilharzia story at the start of this paper is another case of a real choice, with a more anecdotal personal element. Its very lack of detail makes it a Rohrsach test for drawing out people's presumptions. Before taking a stance should one not know something about the nature of bilharzia and its effects in the locality concerned, the effects of the treatment given by traditional doctors to those children who in reality do not have bilharzia, and the range of other possible treatments?⁸ Yet battle lines are often drawn in advance and lead to a re-run of old conflict scripts, as at the conference where de Graaf spoke.

Real-life anecdotes

Cooper and Packard note that: 'Template mechanisms are preconstructed frameworks which are used to simplify and control complex environments. One such mechanism is the "case", reducing a complex instance to a single useful message' (1997:24). Within organizations, many cases are reduced to simple warning plaques: 'Remember the case of Munich 1938 / Rwanda 1994 / ...'. Given that there are richer types of case, this reduced notion of a 'case' matches what we will call anecdotes.

Anecdotes are typically superficial and relatively short stories that serve to illustrate a point. They lack the more exploratory investigative character and usually also the depth of the case-study proper. Frequently the point is pre-selected. Robert Nozick's example of the riches accruing to a famous sportsman through gladly made payments by myriad fans asserts the unquestionable rightness of the idol's immense wealth and his unfringeable claim to it all. He did not probe real cases further.⁹ Closed rather than open use of a case is common; for example,

⁷ Gasper (1999a) critically discusses Slim's cases and the idea of narrow zones of responsibility and accountability for aid and relief agencies.

⁸ Bilharzia particularly affects children of a certain age since it is contracted by bathing and drinking in infected rivers. Younger children are less exposed; older children in general acquire resistance and hence stop passing blood. Treatments can include -- when funds and supplies permit -- drugs, or elimination of the freshwater snails that carry the larvae of the bilharzia worms, or elimination of carriers outside water like rats; or change in patterns of bathing and drinking if alternatives are possible and acceptable.

⁹ Nozick referred to a real person but without examination of societal and historical context. While a fictional example could have been used, reference to a historically unique, sympathetic figure -- Wilt Chamberlain, perhaps the first black American basketball super-star -- added a special pitch to his attempt to mobilise assent to an absolute right to retain all of whatever one receives by legal means in the market (see Gasper, 1986).

most of the cases in Caufield's disturbing history of the World Bank or in Chambers's 'Whose Reality Counts?'. This is not necessarily a criticism: Caufield's and Chambers's illustrations seem powerful and convincing. Sometimes anecdotes serve as vectors of insights. However, many cases Chambers describes involve the use by others of anecdotes and illustrations to re-endorse a misguided pre-fixed position. Fairhead and Leach (1997) give a fuller exposition of one example, the 'evidence' claimed for progressive deforestation in Guinea even when masses of villagers and photographs indicated the opposite.

Anecdotes frequently function as put-downs, illustrations of the absurdity, sub-humanity and otherness of 'them'. Such anecdotes flourish in everyday talk, lowgrade journalism, and the travelogue. Talented exponents have included Evelyn Waugh, Paul Theroux and the Naipauls.¹⁰ The anecdote is a natural partner too of international aid and the quick visits and existential distances common in 'technical assistance'. Leonard Frank's 'The Development Game', a short story about an anomic multi-national UN project identification mission in the frontier province of Pakistan, is itself an extended, depressing, anecdote. Though fictional it apparently derives closely from experience.

Conceivably true fictions

Anecdotes dispense with information about situations when it is incidental or inconvenient for their message. Armchair philosophy, like neoclassical economics, has tended to dispense with real situations altogether, finding them inconvenient for analysis, clumsy, too complicated. It prefers fictions -- some conceivably true, others conceivable but impossible -- so that it can focus precisely on one or two issues at a time. This artificial style has thrived in analytic philosophy with a predominant contemporary Anglo-American middle-class range of references and cast of characters. Its limitation lies not in the attempt to hone concepts and formulate issues, but rather when such work seeks to draw conclusions in advance of exposing its constructs to real and more varied experiences.

¹⁰ In 'The Not So Gentle Art of the Development Anecdote', in Gasper (1986), I disputed not 'whether the Naipauls offer particular insights but the quality of their involvement and hence of their overall understanding and impact... [and how their] Anecdotes--inevitably fragmentary--about individuals lead into judgements about nations plus preferred development prescriptions' (pp.180-1). V.S. Naipaul has however later appeared also as a practitioner of thick-ish life-story social history (Naipaul, 1990).

It is worth remembering that fiction, hopefully in realist mode, enters all appraisal and evaluation: the specification of a counter-factual case to represent what would (have) happen(ed) without the intervention that is under assessment. However well we try to simulate, comparison cases in social science always differ from the intervention case in ways other than not having had the intervention, so we require supportive arguments to justify them as good enough representatives of the fictional, counter-factual case (Deming, 1975).¹¹

Hypothetical, but possible, cases of other types figure importantly in ethics. Their force typically rests on being possible, for they are to make people consider their own and others' feelings in or about cases which they can vividly envisage, 'feel themselves into'. Much of Martha Nussbaum's work tries for this reason to enrich ethics and social philosophy by examination of fiction (e.g. Nussbaum, 1997). We can look at some more schematic examples.

The American philosopher Thomas Nagel (1987) contends that *ethical* arguments cannot be *based* on only self-interest (though self-interest can often be *concluded* to be ethically valid), nor on appeal to authority (e.g. religious). Those are different types of argument. A distinctively ethical approach is seen if one reviews one's opinions, arguments and feelings about fairness in respect to oneself, and draws out the implications for one's relations with others. If your umbrella has been stolen at a restaurant, you might well feel resentment not just annoyance, and that *nobody should* do that to anyone else. Therefore, says Nagel, you can (if not a very small child or psychologically damaged) be led to see that *you* should not do the same to anyone else. This is the line of reflection: 'How would *I* feel if you/they did that to me?'. A partner line involves thinking about how others would feel in the situation that you would resent: 'How would they *feel* if you/I did that to them?'. This may alter one's own feelings about the action; one then tries to make one's whole set of beliefs consistent. Nagel's examples remain from restricted milieux but are legitimate and effective for his main audience (another example is: should one steal a library book, for one's 'important' work?); and the lines of argument can readily fit development intervention cases.

In discussing the (in)justice of women's positions, I found it helpful to construct hypothetical cases of consent where women accept subordinate roles (Gasper, 1996: 654-5). In

¹¹ Fictions in fantasy mode -- impossible or implausible visions of project performance -- also play a role, as inspirational and legitimating 'myths' in planning and implementation, to call forth effort and support for enterprises with uncertain and delayed benefits. Such visions fit our next category, 'impossible fictions'.

Case 1 the women have no real alternative. So their acceptance will not satisfy Onora O'Neill's conditions for a choice which should be acceptable to others: that it was under conditions of no deceit, no fear of victimization, adequate awareness, and ability by all to reject or renegotiate (O'Neill, 1991). In Case 2 they have real alternatives, but without adequate education or sufficient awareness and information about the alternatives; this too fails to meet the requirements. In Case 3 they have real alternatives, thorough awareness, and no cultural and psychic moulding into accepting subordinate roles. Their acceptance is then fully valid according to O'Neill's criteria, even if unexpected. In one variant (3i) the women have never been moulded into any roles -- but that takes us into the realm of impossible fictions. In another variant (3ii), they have been de-moulded, by education and reflection, but accept one or more argument for their subordinate role. This is possible, but certainly not true for all cases of consent. More prevalent may be Case 4: the women have real alternatives and reasonable awareness of them, but are culturally and psychically moulded into accepting, and perhaps relishing, (mainly) subordinate roles. O'Neill's criteria do not query this acceptance, only require that women continually have the alternatives and (access to) a good awareness of them - - even if these two conditions go against local culture. If such an awareness generates dissatisfaction by women with their culturally given roles, then we are no longer in Case 4, and O'Neill's criteria imply that the roles are not just.

The cases are presented in hypothetical form ('imagine a case in which...'), though real counterparts are posited for Cases 2 and 4;¹² and real examples can be found for Cases 1 and 3(ii). Case 3(i) is dismissed as inconsistent with firm knowledge (that those not moulded within a society remain sub-human, like 'wolf-children'). This type of argumentation in hypothetical mode thus relies on empirical knowledge from other contexts. Some other hypothetical argumentation draws insights from cases which we believe to be impossible.

Impossible fictions

O'Neill was led to consider which hypothetical cases are relevant, from reflection on the approach of John Rawls. Rawls's 'original position' and its 'veil of ignorance' provide the

¹² For Case 2, I referred to e.g. Li (1995) on women in pre-1990s China, and for case 4 to studies of contemporary Kerala.

classic modern examples of influential, impossible fictions in philosophical ethics. In the 'original position' all protagonists know the range of possible outcome positions for individuals that corresponds to each possible set of rules for their society, but not which positions they personally would occupy. They are then required to agree a set of rules. Protagonists are expected to be risk-averse, personal-utility maximizers, and hence to adopt a maximin strategy and agree on rules that will do best for the bottom group in the society. Amongst numerous objections raised against Rawls, some queried this notional situation, arguing that it did not and cannot exist, people cannot shed their identities and it is farcical to premise that they should.

One cannot merely object that Rawls considers a case that cannot exist: philosophers have always used this method. Nussbaum presents classical Greek analyses of human-ness, which compare humans with notional beings who lack some of our attributes (e.g. lack mortality, as a god), in order to clarify our attributes and their implications. Any objection would have to concern Rawls's particular assumptions relative to the purpose of his analysis. O'Neill agrees with the necessity and desirability of abstraction--ignoring some features of a situation--but stresses that it can be done unacceptably, ignoring vital relevant features about the agents involved and/or making excessive presumptions about them (e.g., perhaps, that they are only risk-averse, selfish maximizers). Jamieson (1991) adds warnings about science-fiction/fantasy cases in moral philosophy. Reactions we give to any particular proposed implications of the posited differences (of technology, laws of nature or whatever) will not be reliable, because we will not know enough about their other implications for a way of life. In contrast, in imagined but possible cases we can know by experience enough about the context to provide worthwhile reactions.

In discussing impossible fictions have we gone beyond the domain of ethically puzzling cases in or about development *practice* where people ask: which other cases are relevant to compare with, and which principles should we use to help us think about our *choices*? Have we entered the domain of cases used in philosophical *theorizing* to try to construct and choose between moral *principles*? It would not be a problem, for this paper aims to clarify the range of types of case we encounter; rather it provides instructive contrast. Further, there is no tidy gap between examination of real cases and ethical theorizing. Argument about disputed real cases rapidly takes us into theorizing, and not only when the argumentation is by philosophers. 'In real

life it is common for people to apply role reversal tests, to appeal to possible outcomes of actions or policies, or to point to special responsibilities and obligations... When we ask why we should be moved by such considerations, or we test them in order to see whether they hang together with other beliefs and commitments that we have, we are engaging in moral theorizing. Generally we are pushed into theorizing by pragmatic considerations... [The] distinction between moral theorizing and moral practice is an untenable dualism. Moral theorizing is part of moral practice.' (Jamieson, 1991: 479). Anyone familiar with current debate on the ethics of humanitarian relief, for example, will recognise this. In disputes about burning current or recent cases, practitioners and policy-makers (not only philosophers) bring forth general principles and offer arguments for them, including reference back to earlier cases and to hypothetical situations.

Refinement of the classification?

The classification used above -- six types of 'case', real or imagined -- is imperfect, yet gives some feel for the relevant range of types.¹³ It concentrates on two dimensions of variation: (i) thickness-thinness, and (ii) real-imagined. The table below summarizes the six types of treatment of cases that we examined, with a little elaboration especially for the imaginary cases, where it employs the further dimension: (iii) possible versus impossible.

¹³ The classification is already more refined than that in Jamieson's survey article on method in moral philosophy (1991), which modified O'Neill (1986). Jamieson has only one category ('ostensive', i.e. taken from real life) to cover my first four.

	THICK	INTERMEDIATE	THIN
REAL	1 - The anthropological case study 4b - Thick anecdotal accounts	2 - The thinner real case study 3 - The thinner real choice situation, with choices highlighted and kept separate from advice	4a - Thin anecdotes from real life
IMAGINED	5a - Conceivably true thick fictions 6a - Impossible imagined thick stories & situations	5b – Conceivably true thinner stories or situations 6b – Impossible imagined thinner tales & situations	5c – Conceivably true but fabricated thin anecdotes 6c – Impossible imagined fragmentary aspects

A number of other dimensions emerged: (iv) open-minded/inquiring versus closed / concerned only to convey a set conclusion; (v) evaluative criteria and judgements in-built or as far as possible separate and explicit; (vi) evaluative conclusions/advice provided or not. We used criterion (iv) to distinguish ‘case studies’ from anecdotes, the latter being short of openness and inquiry, not only of words. Anecdotes were taken to be typically thinner, but not necessarily so; we can have long thick anecdotes or series of anecdotes, as in much travel writing. Similarly, one can have thick, but closed, case studies, as in some autobiography and historiography.

Highlighting these dimensions, and no doubt there are more, helps us to see additional possibilities. In the ‘thin’ column we could add: real, thin, statistics; real, solitary, visual images; and fabricated images. De Waal (1997) makes a fierce assault on the abuse of images and statistics by Northern media and NGOs with respect to famines in Africa, real or feared.

If we add a time dimension we can distinguish ‘snapshot’ cases from those with a story-line. Stories are the characteristic mode for understanding interrelations of specific people who think, feel and choose in complex ways. Emery Roe warns us of the disturbingly simple story structures that underlie much development planning (e.g. Roe, 1989).

Thick-thin, open-closed, and possible-impossible constitute dimensions of contrast, not binary pairs; likewise the divisions between descriptive cases and ‘choice situations’ and between explicit and immanent values. Further, a plurality of criteria which can move

independently of each other, as mentioned for ‘thickness’, means there exist many ‘grey’ intermediate possibilities. We might be led to seek a more complex set of categories.

Such extensions are unnecessary for the present purpose: to show that there is a range of types of reference to cases, each with strengths, limitations and a distinct role or roles in normative argumentation and practice. Having established the presence of a range, the second half of the paper more closely examines strengths, limitations and roles.

3. ‘THICK’ VERSUS ‘THIN’: WHAT MAKES CASES RELEVANT, AND FOR WHAT?

In Section 3 we consider the complementary virtues of including a lot (being thick) if it really is relevant, and of leaving out a lot (being thin) if it really is irrelevant, in discourse oriented to making or assisting ethically charged choices. We will see how different philosophies can lead to the choice of thicker or thinner cases, but will also note scope for coexistence. Different purposes and occasions will justify different styles.

We look first at the functions of concrete examples: to convey patterns in a flexible and vivid way, and to offer vicarious experience. While thick description can do this, there are misunderstandings about its power and priority in moral argument. Out of presumptions of harmony and consensus comes a questionable communitarian claim that moral choices within societies can and should be settled by detailed description of ‘the culture’. This approach will be contrasted with ideas about the role of well-selected exclusions in ethical argumentation: vital features must not be left out, but nor must irrelevant ones be included. And since ethics have to be more than an intellectual exercise alone, we consider the further role of moral exemplar cases in strengthening motivation. Section 4 will integrate these ideas into a picture of linked stages in work in ethics.

The importance of being concrete and thick ? - I: exemplars and vicarious experience

This exemplar is and remains a particular that in its very particularity reveals the generality that otherwise could not be defined. Courage is like Achilles.... The example is the particular that contains in itself, or is supposed to contain, a concept or a general rule. (Arendt, 1982: 77, 84; cited by Tester, 1997:55.)

What do cases do and examples exemplify, and how? They convey patterns; thick cases can also provide vicarious experience.

As Thomas Kuhn emphasized (1977), an *exemplar* is a specific instance which embodies and illustrates ideas that are not easily or satisfactorily formalizable. For Kuhn this was the prime meaning of ‘paradigm’: a concrete model of practice which conveys how to ‘see’ situations and decide which method or formalization should be applied and how, and helps one to anticipate and avoid various pitfalls. Although ‘paradigm’ originally means exemplar, a second sense used by Kuhn crowded out the original and more profound sense, to his regret. This was ‘paradigm’ as disciplinary matrix: the set of basic commitments, notably the set of approved exemplars, shared by a group of scientists. Why is the exemplar sense more profound? Because exemplary instances are many and multi-faceted, and the definitions and rules and advice which we impute from them are more subtle and fluid - yet exist. The advice on patterns is absorbed sub-consciously so we can apply it without delaying for conscious reflection; and it comes embodied in a vivid real example that aids recall.

We learn our first language in this manner. Similarly, training in ‘disciplines’ and professions includes absorbing skills and values from tales of good/bad/typical practice. Benner identifies types of ‘learning narrative’ in the caring professions, based on her interviews with nurses: 1. Stories that show the importance of remaining open to experience and not prejudging cases; 2. Stories that convey how to better judge appropriate degrees of involvement with patients and families; 3. Stories that reveal the limits to our understanding and control: ‘narratives of disillusionment’; 4. Stories about coping with suffering and death; 5. Stories about dealing with colleagues, systems and cultures (such as arrogant doctors, male chauvinists, biases against showing concern, etc.).¹⁴ The stories may bring associated emotions that enter the memory too and help to motivate action later. Each area of practice has its own sorts of stories. Far from all such exemplars are strongly culturally relative. The same applies for exemplars that promote ethical motivation rather than skills for acting once we are motivated.

Practice stories and inspirational exemplars are typically not just concrete but thickly textured too, and work by providing vicarious experience.

Direct personal experience is an efficient, comprehensive and satisfying way of creating understanding, but a way not usually available to our evaluation-report audiences. The best substitute for direct experience

¹⁴ See also Forester (1993) on ‘practice stories’ in urban planning.

probably is vicarious experience--increasingly better when the evaluator uses "attending" and "conceptualizing" styles similar to those which members of the *audience* use. (Stake, 1980:83; emphasis added).

Vicariousness helps through 'adding to one's experience and re-examining problems and possible solutions intuitively.... [We recommend that] program evaluation studies should be planned and carried out in such a way as to provide a maximum of vicarious experience to the readers who may then intuitively combine this with their previous experiences' (Stake & Trumbull, 1982:2). Intuitive re-examination and revision works because so much of our thinking is in terms of tacit and evolving patterns, not explicit rules.

A rare example of a case-study by a social scientist which is rich enough to convey in addition to 'thickness' -- a sense of a whole context and real lives -- a vicarious feeling of having met particular individuals, been in specific locales, observed actual meetings, is -- surprisingly -- by a development economist cum policy analyst, Robert Klitgaard's 'Tropical Gangsters'. Klitgaard's account of his work in the late 1980s as an advisor in Equatorial Guinea is partly autobiographical: so it describes real people and places, not only themes.¹⁵ Further, his style is novelistic, even if a thinned-down man-abroad Hemingwayesque style: he relies on directly reported speech not only on paraphrases, and he treats aspects of individuals, occasions and routines that do not enter even many anthropologists' reports. The style conveys a sense of engagement with people as people, rather than as imperfect embodiments of social science categories or as (un)friendly aliens. And it is integral not incidental to his argument, that an effective economic programme can stem only from locally based (not Washington based) analysis, commitment and 'ownership'; that to externally facilitate and strengthen these requires a collegial interaction, which in turn requires from facilitators a combination of courtesy, curiosity, openness, and vivacity -- in each case both intellectual and interpersonal -- and thus a capacity and desire to deal with others as people, not just as counterparts or clients or other.¹⁶

¹⁵ The names in *Tropical Gangsters* are usually amended, but in general the persons will be recognizable to others who have worked in the same organizations. They are not composite characters, unlike the 'devil's advocate' entitled The Reasonable Social Scientist in Howard Richards's *The Evaluation of Cultural Action*, another study concerned to provide vicarious experience. Richards describes a community development program in Chile and his experience in evaluating it. Seeking to change a specific methodology not only a mind-set, Richards aims to persuade primarily through general arguments which are given extensive illustration, rather than primarily through Klitgaard's approach of conveying lessons by a story.

¹⁶ Not only may one doubt how widely these requirements for effective facilitation can be attained and sustained, facilitation is not a substitute for structural changes in institutions, capacities, and so on. Klitgaard would agree, yet

De Waal's 'Famine Crimes' recounts a comparable example: the contrast in style between Mohamed Sahnoun, the UN special representative in Somalia in 1992, and his successor Ismat Kittani. Sahnoun argued against and was building alternatives to the disastrous US-led UN-mandated military intervention which Kittani then helped to precipitate and administer. While unusually pointed in giving attention to individual officials and their styles, de Waal's brief treatment remains anecdotal and more forgettable, without the 'bite' that the details and intimacy of vicarious experience can give.

Klitgaard's case study matches an expectation that vicarious experience is usually best obtained through an intermediate level of thickness. The precise level depends on the audience, but great thickness (in using the style of those being described) may well be impenetrable to the audience, while thinness can fail to establish credibility and empathy.

Vicarious experience is important within as well as across cultures, as suggested earlier by Thomas Nagel's examples. For cultures are not well-defined, clearly separate, unities that exist fully programmed into 'their' members' minds. Vicarious experience across cultures tends to be thinner; but some examples seem to transcend boundaries. Let us take a longer case.

Øyhus on the ethics of transfer of ox-cultivation to the Toposa

The Toposa are a small group of semi-nomadic pastoralists in Eastern Equatoria, Southern Sudan. The men herd cattle, either their own or if they are poor someone else's, and live in camps a few days walk from more central settlements, where women, children and the elderly spent most of their time. The women cultivated sorghums around these settlements, but most moved to the camps in the dry season, when cattle products become the main food. Cattle have belonged in men's world, farming in women's. Farming technology was at the level of hoe cultivation, so yields were low despite use of fertile (but heavy - mostly Black Cotton) soils. Enormous disparities in wealth are present: some own huge herds, some little or none. From around the mid-1960s rainfall became more erratic and on average lower. Together with the introduction of automatic guns, this brought escalation of the traditional cattle-raiding between the Toposa and groups such as the Turkana and Dinka, such that it is now 'quite similar to

stress the potential--and duty--for well-directed facilitation to contribute towards such changes. See Gasper (1999b) for further discussion.

regular warfare' (Øyhus, 1998:10). By the late 1970s substantial numbers of Toposa had lost their animals due to drought, disease or raiding, and serious malnutrition was widespread.

In the early 1970s, at the end of one civil war in Sudan, a Norwegian NGO started relief operations in Eastern Equatoria. In the early 1980s it began work with the Toposa, in response to the famine situation in their area, and decided to promote quick maturing grains, root crops, and ploughing with oxen. However it was aware that 'oxen were "sacred" for the Toposa men' (p.13). Therefore the proposed innovation was presented to the local councils of (male) elders, who led series of lengthy discussions. Was ox-cultivation compatible with *nyepite kang'i Toposa*, the Toposa's system of norms, values and beliefs -- especially given that it would be a novelty whereas *nyepite* is, in Toposa eyes, eternal and unchangeable? After 2-3 months, the answer was yes. Within the treasures of *nyepite*, suggests Øyhus, the elders could feel that they had identified ox-cultivation as a dormant practice, approved but not yet used because not previously needed.

Crop-production in this semi-desert savannah was a response to crisis but brought new hazards. Not only do crops fail totally in some years, intensified settlement and grazing around the centres risk erosion and offer a greater target for raiders. In Øyhus's view, 'the elders ... in reality, did not know what they were doing. ...it was far beyond their capacity to perceive the consequences of applying the technology. It was therefore, in reality, the outside expert who made the decision.' (p.15). This may seem strange to the elders, who were capable of saying no, as we will see, and unlikely to agree that an outsider was any more able to predict the consequences.

The NGO knew that oxen were part of the male economy and arable farming part of the female economy. It decided initially that ox-cultivation would be more easily accepted via increasing entry of men to cropping rather than by entry of women to animal husbandry. However as the ox-cultivation programme expanded, the NGO became concerned at the unintended effect of exclusion of women, whom they feared would lose their status in farming and their autonomous place. A proposal to let women plough was brought to the councils of elders -- and clearly rejected, as against *nyepite*. However, amongst the Toposa the elders can condemn, shun and shame, but have no power to forbid or prevent people in other families. The NGO decided to offer ploughing training to women. Some came forward from the start, from a

mission station, mostly socially marginal widows and orphans. Later, many other Toposa women applied for and received training.

The whole experiment was terminated in 1985 when rebel forces in the new civil war entered the area. The Toposa dispersed to their cattle camps. For the elders, suggests Øyhus, this disaster could be interpreted as the consequence of a break from *nyepite* inherent in women working with cattle. Others though, one could posit, could equally claim it as the heavens' reply to introduction of ox-cultivation, or to doing so first without women.

Øyhus's case study does the following, hopefully evident even from a summary at a fraction of its length.

- It shows profound value conflicts and corresponding areas for examination and choice.
- It suggests the pervasiveness and centrality of unintended and indirect effects (such as a possible clash between elders and women over who 'owns' 'the culture', who defines what it will include). They reflect the interconnection of multiple arenas, beyond the powers of foresight of those present.
- It brings these issues to life, to an extent and with a richness likely to be absent from generalized reference: its review of conditions and events is holistic, contextualizes and provides culture-specific details, though it lacks individual persons and voices.
- It sows some seeds for an answer to 'why should we be concerned?'. The exposition of the Toposa's complex adaptation to a difficult environment, new hardships arising from external forces, the threat of an undeserved decline in women's position, the careful deliberations of the elders (and the NGO), the decision of some women to ignore the elders' ruling, may establish a basis of sympathy and for external response of some sort.
- Like de Graaf's bilharzia case, the case study does not provide an answer for what such a response should be.

The importance of being thick ? II: A communitarian claim

In situations marked by ethical challenges, how far will thick descriptions help? How could one pursue this Sudan case on oxen ploughing, or the bilharzia case from Tanzania? Intuitions manifestly differ between people. One can try to identify local traditions in more detail, but these can be interpreted and valued differently by different local residents. Dominant groups

might for example downgrade the concerns of women and children. Who represents the children whose lives could be in jeopardy in the bilharzia case?

Clifford Geertz used the adjective 'thick' for a type of *description*. We need thick descriptions of cultures and actions within cultures because they are subtle, complex, contextual. Michael Walzer's 'Thick and Thin' has taken the term 'thick' instead for a style of *moral argumentation* which is 'richly referential, culturally resonant, *locked into* a locally established symbolic system or network of meanings' (1994:xi; my emphasis). A link between the two usages is provided by the idea (though it is not necessarily Walzer's) that moral argument largely or even solely reduces to finding the culturally authentic description of an action, which will itself contain or imply an evaluation.

Walzer holds that moral argument within a society is and should be 'thick', whereas moral argument between societies is 'thin' ('simply the contrasting term', loc.cit.), derived from the thick domestic discourses by reduction and simplification to find common denominators, and thus relatively weak and limited. But we can put this more favourably: if thin argumentation fits one context and thick another, then being thin is not automatically inferior.

The view that intra-societal moral thinking works through thick, culturally specific, descriptions has several limitations. Much intra-societal moral argumentation is thinner: 'intelligibility and abstraction are in fact close and necessary allies rather than antagonists' (O'Neill, 1996:69). Thickness is not always necessary. Nor is it always sufficient: while sometimes finding an agreed thick description of an action suffices to produce a moral judgement, since the action appears 'so unambiguously desirable or deplorable... different examples would show that even the finest-grained agreement on the appropriate articulation and description of cases may leave us uncertain how to act' (ibid.:87). This might well apply for Slim's emergency relief cases or the bilharzia case. Thickness is not necessarily more meaningful, even for insiders.

In a case like Toposa ox-cultivation we seek a moral description of a *new* behaviour. There is no existing description. Toposa elders (and whoever else is involved) can argue in terms of pattern and principles. The elders find attractions in, and no reasons to reject, the innovation. For women's involvement in such cultivation there is again no existing description, and existing principles conflict: arable farming is women's sphere and cattle are men's sphere.

Discussion may bring no agreed description: many Toposa women--not merely NGO outsiders--reject the elders' conclusion that they cannot be involved.

Even agreed descriptions can come to be seen as wrong. While some matters are morally relative, in that there is no best way (sometimes even no better ways), cultural relativism remains 'locked in' and understates the role of analysis. In the bilharzia case and the ox-ploughing case, relativism will defer to local tradition and/or the views of the traditional guardians of the 'locally established symbolic system'.

We do not lack recourse in ethical cases where we (whether within or across groups) cannot yet agree on classifications and descriptions, since we can also try to think in terms of principles. The principles used may need some basis of acceptability in the culture and indeed are likely to be there already. 'It is only because so many practical principles are embedded in characters and institutions, so have become received views, that it can sometimes seem that fixing on a description is all that is required' (O'Neill, 1996:88). The principles may be in conflict with some other features in the culture; we then appeal to those components with a claim to rank higher. Ethical particularists are so opposed to moral thinking in terms of abstract principles that they conclude too rapidly that moral disagreement (the presence of differing act descriptions from a normative point of view) equals value incommensurability and helplessness.

To sum up, thick (sub-)culturally specific description is not always helpful: both for discussion between cultures, as Walzer recognises, and even within a supposedly singular culture. Cultures are more internally plural, underdefined, and internally contradictory and contested than suggested in communitarian discourse. In addition, much thinking and communication, including cross-culturally, proceeds with considerable effectiveness in terms of concrete, non-written examples. Their openness of texture and meaning, and ability thus to evolve in significance, further weaken claims that 'here', 'in Rome', 'our' given and determinate moral language settles the ethical assessment of cases. Ironically, the 'thick' communitarian position itself rests on what Sherry Ortner (1995) calls 'ethnographic thinness', a failure to closely observe.

The virtues of slimming - O'Neill on excluding irrelevant details when assessing justice

As in law so in other ethical argumentation, a great share of attention goes into deciding what type of case one is dealing with, and correspondingly which criteria should be adopted. Is ox-cultivation primarily a livestock use issue or a cropping issue? Does Toposa men's exclusive world end at the cattle camp or extend wherever cattle go? O'Neill argues that classification of cases must be by justifiable rules. Rather than rely on intuitions or traditions, the rule we advocate should be one that others could after thorough unforced consideration accept and adopt. This is a sterner requirement than that our rule for others be one we would accept for ourselves, for such a rule could be specially advantageous to us. Even that alternative requirement would often be demanding. In the Tanzania bilharzia case would Group B, who advocated not querying local practices, accept that say a Chinese doctor with superior knowledge who visited Europe during the centuries when bleeding the sick was common practice there should have stayed quiet to avoid disturbing the locals? Would they agree that they themselves should not be informed if, say, a Tanzanian doctor visiting the Netherlands observed that Dutch alternative pharmacists appeared to have misclassified and misprescribed Tanzanian remedies? (Here we use Type 5 cases, imaginary but not impossible.)

Let us consider O'Neill's own principle: a Kantian 'requirement of acting only on principles that can be acted on by all' (O'Neill, 1995:147). Rules of justice for a particular context have to be acceptable to all involved, in conditions of no deceit, no fear of victimization, and ability by all to reject or renegotiate. Agreement given in conditions of unjust domination is not sufficient. O'Neill argues that building such agreements requires abstraction without idealization, and context-sensitivity without pure relativism (1991; 1996). We must not omit essential features from our analysis, nor must we include incidentals or biasing premises.

Since each case has some unique features, abstraction is essential in any practical (i.e. choice oriented) reasoning which has to apply to more than a single case - for example to a varied range of agents (O'Neill, 1996:61). 'Justice will be blind to irrelevant differences: it should abstract from many features of particular cases. What is irrelevant depends on the case, but would nearly always include e.g. skin colour or race.... But justice should not be blind to relevant differences ([; what these are will] again depend on the case): it must avoid idealization

of the actors concerned, implicit reference or bias towards certain types of individuals, e.g. men, the well-placed or the economically independent, the healthy, or the super-intelligent. Idealization means that certain individuals are implicitly privileged in the analysis; their position is taken as normal' (Gasper, 1996:651). For example, sometimes gender is a relevant distinguishing feature: we should know genders if we want to judge medical needs; in some other cases knowing genders is not relevant and might only bias choice.

We saw earlier how part of Rawls's theory of justice involves trying to abstract away from information that will allow selfish interests to bias social choices about rules applicable to all. Some feminist theorists have argued that the specific abstraction involved is biased to men, since the units whose interaction is to be governed appear to be households and intra-household division is not considered, yet household heads are predominantly male and do not almost invariably act equitably. Gender, they contend, is here relevant information which should not be abstracted from.

So abstraction, thinning-out of case details, is required for understanding and judgement, but can go too far: exclusion of (morally) important differences is a danger. Conversely, context-sensitivity is required to include those relevant differences; but reference to the thick particularity of cases can degenerate into 'communitarian relativism, where too many particular local features, conventions and traditions, including prejudices and unjustified discriminations [e.g. that widows, or women in general, have no right to employment outside the home], are treated as defining relevant differences' (Gasper, 1996:652). In assessing whether women should be excluded from employment, or ox-ploughing or whatever, relativism merely asks -- in defining what sort of case this is and hence what type of information is relevant -- in which community/society are we arguing, and what are its criteria. It eliminates the possibility of criticism of the criteria, even if those are defined mainly by the locally dominant powers; it avoids questions of justice.

Both O'Neill and Rawls suggest the importance in ethical argumentation of enforcing ignorance about some matters. Abstraction should be by reflection and exclusion from rich materials; thin should follow thick, rather than be an undernourished forerunner. It can be more meaningful, not less.

The importance of being concrete and thick ? - III: moral exemplars and moral motivation

The basis for morality is a willingness to consider other people's costs and benefits. 'How would they *feel*?' arguments fail if some people lack that willingness to empathize. The 'How would *I* feel?' argument might sometimes still have effect: reasoning from and tidying up one's own feelings. It leads us to see a likely inconsistency (when I resent the theft of my umbrella as *unfair*, and not only because it has been done to *me*, yet want to do the same to someone else). But it does not tell us how such an inconsistency should be altered (whether by no longer feeling resentment at the theft, or by no longer wishing to take someone else's umbrella); nor does it ensure the motivational basis for doing anything about the inconsistency. Thus we require attention both to feelings and reasoning.

While feelings alone may be inconsistent and unreasonable, reasoning alone gives us insufficient direction or motivation. Possibly the feeling-reasoning dichotomy is overdrawn (Nussbaum, 1995). Could one ever think of aesthetic judgement as something divorced from feelings? So why should one for ethical judgement? We could think rather of training moral intelligence, in which cultured feelings are inherently a part; and we can link to virtue ethics, which focus on character. Given that, as parents know, 'morality requires the development of the moral emotions' (Held, 1990:169), how does one foster them?

Benner describes, besides 'learning narratives', another type of story-telling by professionals. Constitutive or sustaining narratives 'exemplify positive notions about what is good' (1991:2), as the necessary complement to skills about how to promote it. They convey core values about why one is a professional (a nurse/ relief worker/ policy adviser/ teacher/...), including 'essential embodied human distinctions of worth, such as honor, courage and dignity' (p.4); and sustain one in difficult times.¹⁷

To promote fellow-feeling and motivation, moral exemplars--inspirational cases and persons--can help, besides more general study, exposure and reflection on stressful choices. Singer (1997) and Tester (1997) discuss heroic individuals from the Holocaust, to show the

¹⁷ From nursing, Benner cites narratives of 1. the joy of healing and transcendence (especially if unexpected), 2. heroic rapid skilled intervention, 3. the growth of caring feelings, e.g. between patient and family, 4. endurance and communication in the face of extreme suffering.

reality of alternatives to participating in genocide. But these cases set such demanding standards that their impact might well be slight.¹⁸ Slim cites therefore a variety of exemplars in relief and development work: not only epic, faraway figures -- 19th century Europeans like Henri Dunant; 20th century Southern leaders like Chico Mendes and Steve Biko -- but especially from within the suffering groups themselves.

While the moral imagination of most international relief workers is still primarily conditioned by the traditional western humanitarian role model of the heroic intervenor, the great majority do also speak of encounters with impressive moral role models from inside the emergency... Many individual aid workers do indeed carry with them the memory of the suffering and moral courage of a particular person or incident which sustains their own personal conviction as a relief worker. (Slim, 1997: 11)

Away from the field, fiction and biography can give vicarious experience of others' joys and tragedies, and their responses, strength, skills and commitment. The literature of the struggle against apartheid is one rich school. At a lesser pitch, the sorts of biographies in Johnson & Bernstein (1983; on a range of Southern poor), Naipaul (1990; on varied Indian individuals and families) Leonard (1991; on notable Kenyan civil servants), and George (1997; on around a hundred Southern professionals) offer something valuable. The lives need not be dramatic nor the cases long. They do their 'thick' work by being holistic, contextualizing, adding personal flavour and extra perspectives.

4. VARIETIES OF TASK AND ARENA

Cases have become central in recent ethics. Ethical theory does not give a master mechanism for making decisions; its role is more supplementary. Theories here give categories and tests for examining cases, not laws for settling them. Nor is 'culture' an all-purpose problem solvent, as we saw. Existing moral languages within communities (a category equally imprecise) are not sufficiently comprehensive, clear, cogent and consistent to do more than provide resources for facing cases. Thus philosophers increasingly speak of 'practical ethics' not 'applied ethics'. This

¹⁸ In a famous attack on the desirability of 'Moral Saints', Susan Wolf (1982) goes further; but rather than studying real exemplars she stays with hypothetical cases of individuals who devote themselves overwhelmingly (and, she presumes, directly) to the good of others (the less important variant she emphasises) or to the overall good of society (which also includes their own good). In contrast, Lawrence Blum (1988) studies a series of real figures, to identify a variety of styles of morally exemplary figure, not a single 'saint' model. O'Neill (1996) notes many relevant virtues, certainly not only the superogatory (beyond duty) virtues of moral heroism. See also Gasper (1986) on 'Degrees of Obligation' and 'Ethics and the Art of the Possible'.

final section presents a tentative framework that indicates distinctive places in practical ethics for different styles of case-use and argumentation.

The table summarises our findings about the range of types of case-example and about different moments in thought, marked by different purposes. One might distinguish more or fewer moments or stages, depending on context; they do not form a fixed sequence - many starting points, paths and feedbacks are possible; and sometimes a case will be helpful at more than one stage.

Stage/focus of ethical/practical discourse	Roles of cases/examples	Typical cases/examples
<i>Exposure</i>	Cases can <i>sensitize and motivate</i> : Sensitize to situations, issues, ethical claims; Build fellow-feeling; Convey notions about what is good.	Vivid, engrossing. About real people. Some thin, some thick, but especially intermediate. Including anecdotes, choice situations, 'constitutive narratives', personal exemplars.
<i>Everyday analysis of a real problem case</i>	Reference to other cases/examples <i>exemplifies patterns and possibilities</i> (and so aids analysis of real cases faced)	Striking paradigm cases. Anecdotes and 'learning narratives', including about stances, options, limits.
<i>More formal theorization (when required)</i>	Cases here should <i>deepen and systematize analysis</i> : Help to clarify and discipline ideas; and test the coherence of candidate theories.	Clear, sharply focused. Not about real people. Thin. Including choice situations and impossible scenarios.
<i>More theorized analysis of a real problem case (when required)</i>	Reference to other case-situations is to <i>support choice-making</i> (and future observation and theorizing). To help show which theories are relevant to a problem context. To test relevance and realism of candidate theories.	1) In training: rich real practice cases; and well-theorized (often thinned) cases. 2) In practice: comparison with well-theorized (often thinned) real cases.
<i>Negotiation, decision, compromise Action</i>	<i>To support practice</i> Including: to help to build and maintain attitudes, character.	'Learning narratives', including about relationships, stresses, tactics. Thick or intermediate. Personal exemplars.

Sensitization involves drawing and giving attention to situations, cases, issues, claimed ethical principles and formats. Its roles include to broaden the range of concerns, to counter selfishness and myopia, mobilize emotions and motivation, raise doubts; to see, compare and feel. Its case examples should be vivid and involving, and preferably concern real people. They can be simple or rich, but not too rich for absorption. Simple cases without much information have a special role in drawing out commentators' presumptions. Anecdotal and thicker

practice stories fit here too, for providing vicarious experience is vital. This sensitization stage thus matches the role Goulet (1995) emphasizes for development ethics: to offer grounded existential witness. He stresses phenomenological study to reveal and clarify values and value-choices encountered in a situation. As this work becomes more analytical it merges into the following stages.

Analysis of a problem case seeks to build on prior awareness and concerns, and to discipline emotions and argumentation. It may lead into theorization, to clarify and also add and revise concepts and frameworks, strengthen and extend logic and consistency, compare systems of values. Cases here must be clear and purposeful: giving a sustained focus, identifying which are relevant differences, which irrelevant, and so on. They should probably not concern real people, for that can bring distraction by extraneous and opportunistic considerations.

Practice must draw on other stages as required, while recognizing the inevitable limits and simplifications of one's claimed experiential base and theoretical equipment. One is particularly interested to see where different metaphysical starting points and theoretical routes lead to the same recommendations. Case-thinking helps to inform and complement proposed policies, principles, guidelines and codes. The cases referred to must (again) be rich and real. They can help give a feel for contexts and thus some ability to judge when particular conceptualizations and models fit. The cases should include 'practice stories', and convey something about the attitudes, character(s) and skills helpful in dealing with complexity, uncertainty, limits of theory and plurality of viewpoints, stress, and the need for choices, negotiation, compromises and creativity. The experience from practice must feed back into the scanning for evidence and into re-conceptualization and theorizing.

Overall, we have seen a variety of modes of recourse to cases and illustrations in practical ethics and development practice, each with pros and cons; that distinctive considerations arise in normative argumentation, justifying this separate discussion; and that to a significant extent different stages of work involve different types of use of cases. My pictures of each aspect can be improved. I hope though to have given a usable introduction.

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