

## The Many Moral Particularisms

What place, if any, moral principles should or do have in moral life has been a longstanding question for moral philosophy. For some, the proposition that moral philosophy should strive to articulate moral principles has been an article of faith. At least since Aristotle, however, there has been a rich counter-tradition that questions the possibility or value of trying to capture morality in principled terms. In recent years, philosophers who question principled approaches to morality have argued under the banner of moral particularism. Particularists can be found in diverse areas of philosophical inquiry, and their positions and arguments are of broad interest.<sup>1</sup> Despite its importance, a proper evaluation of particularism has been hindered both by the diversity of arguments employed to defend it, and, perhaps more significantly, by the diversity of positions that can fairly claim to be particularist.

Our aim is first to explicate particularism by identifying a unified range of particularist theses and explaining both what unites them as versions of particularism as well as what distinguishes them from each other. We then articulate and evaluate the main arguments for particularism and explain how each is especially well-suited to supporting some conceptions of particularism rather than others. We tentatively conclude that the positive arguments for particularism are not convincing. They do, however, reveal particularism to be a surprisingly resilient position, one that is not readily refuted

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<sup>1</sup> Particularism is sometimes associated with virtue theory. (Hursthouse, 1995); (Little, 1997). Other times it is treated as a cousin of anti-theory (Baier, 1985); (Clarke, 1987).

by stock objections. In view of this, we suggest that those who believe that morality is principled should look anew for arguments for their position.

## **I.**

Before turning to the arguments offered in its favor, we must determine what is meant by ‘particularism’. Our approach is inclusive. Rather than culling from the literature *the* doctrine of particularism, we set out a family of views. On our account, all particularist positions can be characterized by a negative attitude towards moral principles. This suggests two dimensions along which particularist positions may vary. First, particularist positions will vary according to their conception of what a principle is. Second, particularists will vary according to their attitude towards principles.

### **A. What is a Moral Principle?**

If particularism is characterized by some negative attitude to moral principles, then any particularist view must presuppose some conception of what a moral principle is. We identify three such conceptions. Principles qua *standards* provide the application conditions for moral predicates. Principles qua *guides* function primarily to guide the deliberation of moral agents quite apart from whether they provide the application conditions for moral predicates. Finally, principles qua *action guiding standards* serve both of these functions – providing both the application conditions for the relevant moral predicates and providing useful guidance for moral agents. Though the literature on particularism rarely distinguishes these very different ideas, the evaluation of any argument for particularism depends critically on what conception of a principle is at issue.

#### ***1. Standards.***

To think of moral principles as standards is, very roughly, to take the criterion of a moral principle to be whether it provides sufficient conditions for the application of a given moral predicate. However, this characterization must be qualified in two important respects. For even particularists typically agree that in some sense the moral supervenes on the non-moral – that there can be no moral difference between two objects of evaluation without some non-moral difference as well. Supervenience entails that there are generalizations providing the application conditions for a moral predicate in purely descriptive terms. For any given possible object of moral evaluation there corresponds a comprehensive characterization of the world in which that possible object exists. Given supervenience, that characterization is guaranteed to provide a sufficient condition for the application of the moral predicate in question to any other possible object in exactly that context. From this it follows that there are moral principles (as standards) if we allow that principles can be infinitely long. For the infinitely long disjunction of all the possible ways the world might be in which a given object of evaluation satisfies the moral predicate will provide application conditions for that predicate in purely descriptive terms.

Particularists rightly argue that these so-called “supervenience functions” are not principles in any interesting sense. (Little, 2000) First, infinitely long generalizations are forever beyond our ken. Second, a standard should do more than provide the application conditions of a moral predicate; it should explain why the predicate applies when it does. Supervenience functions fail this test spectacularly by including far too much information about the object of

evaluation. So we should characterize moral standards as articulating application conditions for moral predicates in descriptive terms that explain why the predicate applies.

This characterization is neutral with regard to what predicates we count as moral. In what follows we will direct much of our attention to obviously moral predicates, such as right, wrong, and duty, but we would also count so called ‘thick’ moral terms, such as courage and moderation as moral predicates. Given a diversity of moral predicates, it is thus possible to be a particularist about some moral predicates but not about others.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. *Guides.*

Standards are good in theory but might still be too complicated to be of any use. Unlike standards, moral principles qua guides need not provide perfectly accurate application conditions for moral predicates. Instead, they only need to provide appropriate guidance to a conscientious moral agent. A given generalization can provide guidance in the relevant sense only if it contributes to a reliable strategy available to the agent for performing the right action for the right reasons. Of course, what is a useful heuristic for one moral agent might well be hopelessly complex for another agent. The principles that should guide a small child are likely very different from the principles that should guide a senator. It would

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<sup>2</sup> Our account of principles as standards might appear to leave out an important generalist, W.D. Ross. This would be especially unfortunate since Ross has been a prime target of particularists. On our account, however, Ross offered a set of principles qua standards. Ross’s principles provided the application conditions for a distinctive moral predicate, ‘prima facie duty.’ (Ross, 1930) While a generalist in this regard, Ross was at least skeptical of whether there were principles determining what an agent’s duty all things considered is – what Ross would say is the agent’s duty *sans phrase* - at least when the agent stands under more than one prima facie duty. In this respect Ross is a kind of particularist about one moral

therefore be unhelpful to debate whether there are principles qua guides *simpliciter*. We should instead consider whether there are guides for particular kinds of agents in particular contexts.

A principle may provide guidance directly by figuring in an agent's deliberations about how she should act. Principles may also provide guidance more indirectly by recommending modes of deliberation. According to many utilitarians, the principle of utility provides guidance indirectly.<sup>3</sup> What is essential to guiding principles is that they contribute non-trivially<sup>4</sup> to a reliable strategy for acting well.

### ***3. Action Guiding Standards.***

So far we have considered principles that purport to provide the application conditions for moral predicates but do not purport to play an important role in guiding action (standards) and principles that purport to play an important role in guiding action but do not aspire to provide comprehensive and fully accurate application conditions for moral predicates (guides). Much of moral philosophy has sought to identify principles that meet both of these aspirations. Call such principles *action guiding standards*.

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predicate ('duty *sans phrase*') while being a generalist about another ('prima facie duty'). We thank an anonymous referee for prompting us to clarify this point.

<sup>3</sup> R.M. Hare's famous account (Hare, 1981), provide a nice illustration of this possibility. The principle of utility on this account does not typically function as a guide, since in most ordinary contexts we should rely on more familiar moral precepts like "don't lie" and "show gratitude to those who do you a favor." Nonetheless the principle of utility is the ultimate standard of right and wrong on this account. Moreover, the virtuous moral agent necessarily will employ the principle of utility at some level of her moral psychology since such an agent must be able to "ascend" to a more critical level and assess her more everyday moral rules' validity in the case at hand. In our terminology, both the principle of utility and everyday moral rules function as guides, while the principle of utility functions as a standard as well.

## **B. Attitudes**

Given an account of what a moral principle is, particularists urge that we take a negative attitude towards them. Since there are numerous such negative attitudes, there are numerous versions of particularism. We identify five mutually compatible positions.

**1. *Principle Eliminativism:*** There are no moral principles.

Of course, nobody would deny that there are general moral propositions which can be expressed as principles. Our assumption is that something does not count as a principle unless it is true. We take Dancy (1993) to defend a form of principle eliminativism since he claims that principles are inconsistent with holism about reasons. We discuss this argument below. McNaughton and Rawling defend a modest version of principle eliminativism, arguing that there are no principles connecting non-moral and moral properties while allowing intra-moral principles. (McNaughton and Rawling, 2000)

**2. *Principle Scepticism:*** There is no reason to think there are any moral principles.

On this view, the supposition that there are moral principles is an unwarranted conceit. Principle sceptics may defend their position with elimination arguments, contending that none of the reasons given for thinking there are moral principles is sound.<sup>5</sup>

**3. *Principled Particularism:*** Any finite set of moral principles will be insufficient to capture all the moral truths there are.

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Pekka Väyrynen for pressing us to specify that a guiding principle must not merely be part of a reliable strategy for acting well but must contribute to the reliability of the strategy.

<sup>5</sup> For example the principle sceptics may wish to show that particularism is not committed to an implausible account of moral epistemology. (Little, 2000)

Richard Holton has developed this view on behalf of particularists. Crucially, principled particularism allows that moral deliberation might always involve principles, but the principles themselves are hedged by a ‘That’s it’ clause. Principles are thus of the form, “Any action that has such-and-such features and *That’s It* is wrong.” (Holton, 2002) For example, I might reason that “Any action that is cruel and *That’s It* is wrong, this action is cruel and *That’s It*, so this action is wrong.” The main idea is that a “*That’s It*” clause indicates that no other morally relevant features are present and that whenever these features are the only relevant ones present the action is wrong. This account of principles is compatible with the claim that no finite set of principles could ever cover all possible cases, and that there will always be more possible cases that will require yet more principles.

**4. *Principle Abstinence:*** We ought not to rely upon principles; they are useless or dangerous.

Proponents of principle abstinence particularism are not primarily concerned to deny that morality is codifiable. Instead, their claim is that moral principles are, “at best useless, and at worst a hindrance.” (McNaughton 1988, p.191) The suggestion is that principles are poorly suited to enabling us to act rightly or develop and exhibit moral virtue, and we therefore should abstain from relying upon them. If correct, this position would have dramatic implications for moral philosophy. McNaughton’s suggestion that this form of particularism “claims, in effect, that there is no such subject as moral theory” goes too far. (McNaughton 1988, 204) After all, moral theory might seek principles that are standards

but not guides. Nevertheless, a sound defense of principle abstinence would force us to significantly revise commonly held views about the point and value of moral theory.

**5. *Anti-Transcendental Particularism*:** The possibility of moral thought and judgment do not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles.

In effect, this sort of particularist simply rejects a Kantian transcendental deduction of moral principles from the necessary presuppositions of moral thought.<sup>6</sup> Anti-Transcendental Particularism is weaker than Principle Eliminativism and Principle Scepticism. Assuming morality is not deeply defective and that some of our actual moral thought is coherent and justifiable, Principle Eliminativism and Principle Scepticism entail Anti-Transcendental Particularism but not vice-versa. Anti-Transcendental Particularism is compatible with the possibility of a complete and finite axiomatization of morality, and so, in a sense is weaker even than Principled Particularism. Indeed, Anti-Transcendental Particularism seems ill-suited to provide the radical challenge to the possibility of moral theory some particularists envisage, for even a hardy act utilitarian might agree that the principle of utility is not presupposed by the possibility of moral thought. Anti-Transcendental Particularism poses a challenge not to principled morality as such, but to a kind of argument for it.

## **II. Arguments for Particularism.**

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Dancy's most recent defenses of particularism embrace this conception. "[My view] claims that morality has no need for principles at all. Moral thought, moral judgment, and the possibility of moral distinctions – none of these depend in any way on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles. This claim is what I call particularism." (Dancy, *forthcoming*) Previously (Dancy, 1993) Dancy seemed closer to defending principle eliminativism, since Dancy there claims that a principle-based moral theory is *inconsistent* with holism about reasons. Anti-transcendental particularism also seems to best fit McDowell's views (McDowell, 1979, 1985), though he resists the particularist label.



With this survey of different conceptions of particularism in hand, we turn to some of the most important arguments for particularist positions.

### *1. The Argument From Cases*

Although particularists do not stake their whole case on it, the most straightforward way to motivate particularism is to offer counter-examples to all plausible proffered principles. The history of moral theory is replete with such counter-examples. The strategy of counterexample looks suited to establishing a defeasible case for the strongest form of particularism – Principle Eliminativism. By implication the argument from cases would also support Anti-Transcendental Particularism.<sup>7</sup> Although the argument is most commonly deployed against principles qua standards, it seems possible to deploy an analogous argument against principles qua guides. Here though, a different sort of counterexample is needed. Instead of an example that shows a principle to have a false implication about the moral status of some action (guides may do this), one needs examples showing that an agents' deploying such a principle is incompatible with virtue.<sup>8</sup>

There is an asymmetry between the particularist and the generalist though.

Once the particularist makes it clear what feature(s) of the proposed counter-example make it a counter-example, the generalist can modify her principle

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<sup>7</sup>Dancy offers a version of the argument from cases, though he blends the argument with an appeal to holism. (Dancy, 1993, 60-62) Shafer-Landau's "argument from moral horror" (Shafer-Landau, 1997) also seems to be a version of the argument from cases, but may not be vulnerable to the objection we discuss in the text because Shafer-Landau's target seems not to be any variety of generalism, but only what he characterizes as absolutism (though we are unclear in this case as to how exactly absolutism is to be distinguished from other forms of generalism).

<sup>8</sup> Whether utilitarianism involves 'one thought too many' is germane here. This is also one way to think of Williams' famous example of Jim and Pedro, since Williams' point is not that utilitarianism here would lead Jim to act wrongly, but rather that utilitarianism has Jim thinking about things in the wrong way. (Williams,

accordingly. Of course, the generalist also has the option of arguing the proposed counter-example is not *really* a counter-example, but this option need not always be taken. Insofar as the particularist can articulate what feature makes her case a counter-example, the generalist is guaranteed the possibility of exchanging her original principle for a more complex one sensitive to that feature.<sup>9</sup> The particularist has no such dialectical guarantee. At each stage the particularist must simply find another counter-example. So it is not obvious why the appeal to cases should shake any initial confidence that there are principles, even principles presupposed by moral thought.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the argument is best understood as playing the more modest role of showing that generalism does not fall directly out of our first-order moral practice. Assigning the argument this modest role fits with the tendency of particularists explicitly to claim they do not want to rely heavily on it.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. *The Argument from Holism*

Holism about reasons is the thesis that what counts as a reason in one case need not count as a reason in another case.<sup>12</sup> Atomism is the opposite supposition that

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1973b) Of course, in Williams' hand, the example is also part of a larger case against utilitarianism as a standard.

<sup>9</sup> As Little insightfully remarks, "those attuned to the richness of morality but loyal to the existence of principles will see counterexamples as evidence of complexity, not of irreducible complexity." (Little, 2000, 279)

<sup>10</sup> For related discussion of the counterexample strategy, see Sinnott-Armstrong (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1999). Perhaps in light of this asymmetry, most particularists do not hang their argument on the appeal to cases. (Little 2000, 279)

<sup>11</sup>As Little puts it, "Obviously, to defend particularism it is not enough to keep offering counterexamples to proposed principles." (Little, 2000, 279)

<sup>12</sup>The appeal to holism is widespread amongst particularists. (Dancy, 1993, 60-62); (Little, 2000, 278-285); (McNaughton, 1988, 193) It is crucial to the argument that the thesis is that a feature counting as a reason in one case *never* establishes that it counts as a reason in another case. For sophisticated generalists can allow that a feature might genuinely serve as a reason in one case without that providing the slightest grounds for

if a consideration really counts as a reason here then it must count as a reason everywhere. Holists and atomists are thus divided over whether a consideration's standing as a reason is context-dependent. Particularists rely extensively on holism in arguing for their views. Jonathan Dancy goes so far as to claim that holism is "the leading thought behind particularism" (Dancy, 1993, 60) and suggests that it supports the strongest form of particularism, principle eliminativism. As Dancy puts it, "A principle-based approach to ethics is inconsistent with the holism of reasons." (Dancy, 2000, 135) Margaret Little maintains that holism supports at least principle scepticism when she claims that, "if reason-giving considerations function holistically in the moral realm then we simply shouldn't expect to find rules that mark out in non-moral terms the sufficiency conditions for applying moral concepts." (Little, 2000, 284)<sup>13</sup> However, despite the wide currency of this argument amongst particularists, holism actually provides no positive support for any form of particularism.<sup>14</sup>

Upon examination, holism is a view about reasons available to generalists and particularists alike. Indeed many possible principles seem not merely to be compatible with holism but to presuppose it. Consider the following view,

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supposing that it would count as a reason in other cases. What they are committed to supposing is that for *some* considerations - those that are picked out by sound moral principles - this phenomenon "washes out." (Pettit, Jackson, and Smith, 1998)

<sup>13</sup> Importantly, Little's scepticism is directed at principles conceived as exceptionless generalizations. Little allows that there may be genuinely explanatory moral generalizations (Little, 2000) and more recently she has argued with Mark Lance that there may be generalizations that tell us the defeasible moral import of certain features. (Little, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> In what follows we simply assume, along with particularists, that moral principles (if there are any) must be 'reason-giving.' If this assumption is false, then any appeal to holism in support of particularism would be a non-sequitur.

(U) The fact that an action would promote pleasure is a reason to perform the action if and only if the pleasure is non-sadistic. The fact that an action would promote pain is a reason not to perform the action. An action is morally right just in case it promotes at least as great a balance of reason-giving pleasures over pain as any of the available alternatives; otherwise it is wrong.

(U) is a version of utilitarianism that attaches no moral significance to sadistic pleasures. It represents a fairly straightforward codification of morality of just the sort that particularists mean to be set against. It is equally clear, however, that (U) presupposes holism since (U) insists that a feature, pleasure, can be a reason in some contexts (when non-sadistic) but not in others (when sadistic).<sup>15</sup> Some may be tempted to claim that if we are unwilling to count the promotion of sadistic pleasure as a reason, we should revise our view of just what the reason is in the non-sadistic case. It might be claimed that the reason in the non-sadistic case is not that it would promote pleasure, but that it would promote non-sadistic pleasure. The thought behind holism, however, is that a particular consideration (e.g. that doing A will promote pleasure) might be the reason even though its status as a reason is context dependent.<sup>16</sup> This debate between atomists and holists, however, is orthogonal to the issues dividing particularists and generalists, namely whether morality is codifiable in principles. As principles such as (U) show, the fact that reasons are context-dependent (if it is a fact) simply leaves as a further open question whether this context-dependence is codifiable. Furthermore, even if reasons do not behave in a context dependent way, they might be so complex and various that it is

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<sup>15</sup> For the similar reasons, Jonathan Dancy's discussion of "switching arguments" (Dancy, 1993) provides no argument against generalism. While the unreliability of switching arguments might be used to motivate holism, holism, in turn, does not provide support for particularism.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Stratton-Lake provides some interesting arguments defending this conception of reasons (Stratton-Lake, 2000)

impossible to codify them. (McKeever and Ridge, 2005) Holism is compatible with generalism; atomism is compatible with particularism.

It might be replied that holism casts doubt on principles in a more indirect way. Just as holism holds that the concept of a reason does not guarantee that a consideration that is a reason in one case will be so in another, so too, it may hold that the concept of a reason does not guarantee that the context dependency of reasons will be codifiable. If this version of holism were true, then it would follow that we could not argue a priori from the concept of a reason to the conclusion that there are true substantive moral principles. If such an argument proves unavailable, we might conclude that any substantive moral principles could be only contingently, and so in one sense accidentally true.<sup>17</sup> It is sometimes suggested that given holism, the existence of any principles would be a kind of “cosmic accident.”<sup>18</sup> Call this the “cosmic accident thesis.” Given this thesis, even if we came to believe that some substantive principles were true, their truth would not follow from the very concept of a reason. In this case, holism would provide an argument for Anti-Transcendental Particularism.

However, whether there are cosmic accidents afoot here depends on one’s conception of moral properties and not at all on holism. Here we can leave aside those who deny that there are moral properties (e.g., nihilists and some non-cognitivists). For those who agree that there are moral properties there are two main views one might hold about their relation to natural properties. Either moral properties are reducible to natural properties (naturalism), or moral properties are irreducible to natural properties (non-

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<sup>17</sup> The success of this step in the argument is at least open to question by those who argue that there can be necessary a posteriori truths. If this is right the failure of an a priori argument from the concept of a reason does not rule out the possibility that moral principles would be necessary truths. As our main line of reply does not depend upon these questions, we leave these further issues to the side.

<sup>18</sup> This version of the argument from holism is now advanced by Dancy (Dancy *forthcoming*, Chapter 5). This marks a retreat of sorts from his earlier claim that holism is inconsistent with a principled approach to ethics (Dancy, 1993, 135). Even opponents of particularism sometimes suggest that holism would render principles cosmic accidents. (Stratton-Lake 2000, p. 129)

naturalism).<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the thought is that holism and naturalism together support the cosmic accident thesis, but this inference is invalid. Certainly naturalism itself provides no support for the cosmic accident thesis. If moral properties are identical to certain natural properties, the codifiability of the moral in terms of the natural is no mystery.<sup>20</sup> Further, naturalism is compatible with holism. A naturalist might maintain that for a fact to be a reason for a given action just *is* its being a natural fact of a certain kind *in a certain (naturalistically specified) kind of context*. For example, so-called response-dependent forms of naturalism can be interpreted in a way that presupposes holism. Consider, a naturalist ideal advisor theory according to which F's being a reason for an agent A to  $\phi$  in circumstances C just is F's being a fact in virtue of which A's fully informed (of all natural facts) self would want A to  $\phi$  in C.<sup>21</sup> On this theory it is always some particular fact F that is an agent's reason to  $\phi$ , but F itself is a reason only in virtue of facts about A's idealized self which are not themselves reasons for A to  $\phi$ . My idealized self might want me to have wine because I would enjoy it, in which case the fact that I would enjoy it is a reason for me to have wine. However, the fact that I would enjoy it is a reason only because of certain features of the context – in particular that my idealized self would prefer that I have wine in these circumstances. In other circumstances the fact that I would enjoy something might well not move my idealized self at all. So this form of naturalism presupposes holism. This example is purely illustrative. Our aim here is not to defend naturalism let alone any particular variety of it. The point is rather that given naturalism, moral properties just are certain natural

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<sup>19</sup> There are of course many ways of drawing the natural/non-natural distinction but this is not the place for a discussion of those nuances. Any of a number of plausible ways of drawing the distinction will be compatible with the points made here. Nor do particularists in general seem opposed to the distinction, as they typically deploy it or something very much like it to state their view.

<sup>20</sup> Morality might still be uncodifiable in finite terms given naturalism if the relevant natural properties are sufficiently complex but holism does not itself entail or even indirectly support the supposition that the moral terrain is complex in this way.

<sup>21</sup> This sort of account has a long history. Recently, Michael Smith has defended of a view along these lines (Smith, 1994)

properties, so there need be no mystery about codifiability. Since naturalism is compatible with holism, holism gives us no reason to accept the cosmic accident thesis.

It might be replied that, if holism is true then it would be a mystery if naturalism were true, and that therefore naturalism cannot dispel the mysteriousness of codifiability. So far as we can tell, though, the inference from holism to “naturalism’s truth is mysterious” is a non-sequitur. There are interesting and powerful objections to naturalism but holism does not figure in any of them. Furthermore, those who accept such an argument presumably must turn to naturalism’s alternative and combine holism with a non-naturalist conception of moral properties.<sup>22</sup> In this case, there will indeed be a mystery as to why moral properties track natural properties, but here the mystery stems entirely from non-naturalism. A familiar and important objection to non-naturalism is that it is unable to explain why the moral even supervenes on the natural - very roughly, why there can be no moral difference without some natural difference. (Blackburn 1971); Mackie, 1977) For given the non-naturalist thesis that moral properties are in Hume’s terms “distinct existences,” and in no way reducible to natural properties, it does seem like it would be a “cosmic accident” if the moral supervened on the natural. Since the codification of morality in useful and finite terms presupposes supervenience,<sup>23</sup> non-naturalism also suggests that the codifiability of morality in finite terms would be a cosmic accident. Non-naturalism is responsible for any cosmic accidents on this account, not holism or the alliance of non-naturalism with holism. Indeed, it is ironic that particularists charge their opponents with believing in cosmic accidents or metaphysical

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<sup>22</sup> They might instead opt for sophisticated form of non-cognitivism like Simon Blackburn’s so-called “quasi-realism” (Blackburn 1993, 1998) but this would fit very poorly with the particularist’s more general dialectical aims. Dancy, for example, argues that one of particularism’s major advantages is its ability to combine realism with internalism in the theory of reasons (Dancy 1993). Furthermore, non-cognitivism is in any event equally available to the opponent of particularism, so the advocate of codifiability can avoid metaphysical mysteries in this way just as easily as the particularist can.

<sup>23</sup> If morality is codifiable in finite naturalistic terms then that codification will express a set of necessary truths about the co-variation of the moral with the natural that will itself entail the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral.

mysteries. For the meta-ethical commitment most amenable to particularism is non-naturalism, which itself makes the supervenience of the moral on the natural into a cosmic accident.

Our objections to the argument from holism depend on a particular characterization of holism. Holism is the thesis that what counts as a reason in one case need not count as a reason in another. This is how holism is typically characterized, and, as a thesis about the context dependence of reasons, it is simply orthogonal to debates about codifiability. Or so we have argued. It is worth noting, however, that particularists sometimes characterize holism to include a thesis about codifiability. Here is Little,

It isn't just that we haven't bothered to fill in the background considerations because they are so complex – holism is not complicated atomism. The claim, rather, is that there is no cashing out in finite or helpful propositional form the context on which the moral meaning depends. (Little, 2000, 280)

As should be clear, the sort of holism to which Little here appeals leads all too quickly to particularism for the simple reason that it assumes that morality cannot be codified. If such an appeal to holism is meant as an argument for particularism, then it gratuitously begs the question.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Whether Little intends the appeal as an argument is left ambiguous in her paper. At times Little suggests her ambition is to characterize particularism in a favorable light, but at other points she claims to address those who object that there is no argument for particularism. In any case, to avoid the charge of question begging it is not enough to point out that the stronger variety of holism is "a familiar -- indeed a downright homey -- notion in post-positivist philosophy." (Little 2000, 281) While it is true that something like unrestricted holism is the lesson that many have drawn from philosophers such as Quine and Duhem, it is controversial whether this is the right lesson to draw. For *prima facie*, Quine, et. al., aim to demonstrate only that justification is *always* context-dependent, and do not aim to show that it is *irreducibly* context-dependent, in the sense that justification could never be backed by sound generalizations. The question of how best to interpret Quine and others is one we set aside. The main point is that, unless there is some argument for this sort of holism, appealing to it in defense of particularism is, at best, an argument by appeal to authority. For some evidence that Quine did not accept unrestricted holism about justification see Quine himself. (Quine, 1966, 255-258) For further discussion of the true lessons of Quine and Duhem (and the relevant differences between them) see, (Krips,1982).



### ***3. Contributory Reasons, Moral Conflict, and Regret***

One of the abiding features of moral life is the pressing force of conflicting reasons. Even good and well-informed agents often face a multitude of reasons pointing in diverse and incompatible directions. Given a range of conflicting “contributory reasons” good and well-informed agents typically ask what they have reason to do “overall” or “all-things-considered.” Allowing that there is a rational method for deciding how to act in such circumstances, it will be one that leaves agents acting against genuine reasons. Following Jonathan Dancy, we may call such reasons “defeated reasons.” Often, in such cases, we expect that a good moral agent will emerge from such a practical conflict with characteristic attitudes we might generically class as regret and reasons to “make up” for ones failure to act on defeated reasons. Particularists suggest that their account is better suited to explaining these facts than generalism.<sup>25</sup>

At first blush, it is difficult to see how particularism could hold an advantage here, whether we understand moral principles as standards or as guides or both. At issue is whether reasons behave in a principled way, not whether they have force when defeated. Consider, for example, a manager charged with reducing the company’s workforce. Such a manager may recognize that many or even all of the employees he lays off are ones that there are many reasons to retain. Even the manager who fully recognizes the necessity of layoffs may feel tremendous regret when laying off employees he recognizes to be

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<sup>25</sup> It is possible, of course, to deny the apparent facts and claim that defeated reasons are not genuine reasons. On this view, when, in deliberation, we find that, overall, we must act upon consideration *a* rather than consideration *b*, what we find is that *b* is not really a reason after all, though we might have thought it was. Without assuming such a view is mistaken, our strategy here will be to show that generalism is just as well placed as particularism to account for the phenomena.

experienced, skillful, and loyal. The manager sees these qualities in the employees as real reasons to retain them, and this shapes his attitudes about the present situation and his future reasons to engage in “follow-up” behavior. For example, the manager may feel he has special reason to support the efforts of the laid-off employees to find new jobs or offer any future positions first to the laid-off employees. It would be odd to suggest that making sense of the manager’s reasons and attitudes requires us to say that these reasons are not codifiable. Imagine that one manager has been given an algorithmic procedure for determining which employees to let go. Another is told that there is no such algorithm; he must decide which employees to let go by exercising judgment. Neither the presence nor absence of the algorithm undermines the thought that there could be reasons against which the manager must regrettably act.

Perhaps things will look differently upon further examination. One way to understand the dispute between particularists and generalists is as a dispute about the relationship between contributory reasons and what we have all-things-considered reason to do. (Dancy, forthcoming, chapter 2) If we understand the dispute this way, then both particularists and generalists share a common burden to explain what it is to be a contributory reason. One might also claim that the account of contributory reasons must shoulder an explanatory burden.

**Explanatory Burden:** Any account of what it is to be a contributory reason should make clear why a contributory reason has important effects (prompting regret and follow-up action) even when it is defeated.

Some generalist accounts of contributory reasons seem not to meet this burden.

Apparently this is Dancy's complaint against Ross's account of prima facie duties.

Dancy interprets Ross as claiming that to be a prima facie duty is to be a consideration which, if it were the only consideration in a given situation, would provide an actual duty.

Dancy replies,

A theory which focuses on the case where there is only one relevant property prevents itself from giving a genuine account of the relation between contributory reasons and overall decision except in that special case. And there is no room for an account of the suitable attitude towards a defeated reason. The theory only tells us about successful reasons, and those only when they are alone. Nothing is said about how two contributing reasons might combine to be together sufficient, when neither is sufficient on its own. (Dancy 1993, p. 98)

Admittedly, Dancy's argument here does not explicitly rely on Explanatory Burden.

Unless it is functioning as a suppressed premise, however, it is unclear that the argument can succeed. The contention that Ross's account leaves 'no room' for an account of regret makes sense if the only possible source of such an explanation is the account of what it is to be a contributory reason itself. If, however, there are other ways of explaining the rationality of regret, i.e. if Explanatory Burden is false, then it is unclear why Ross's account leaves no room for these. Against the view he identifies as Ross's, Dancy's point has real force. Leaving aside possible differences between prima facie duties and reasons, the view Dancy considers represents a *subjunctive conditional* account of contributory reasons.

(SC): C is a contributory reason to A if, and only if, C would be a decisive reason to A if it were the only relevant consideration.

(SC) does indeed make it mysterious why we should care about such considerations when defeated. As an objection to generalism, however, Dancy's complaint misfires for two reasons. First, generalism is not committed to (SC) providing an account of what it is to be a contributory reason. Even if (SC) is a conceptual truth about contributory reasons, it would be a mistake to take it as a full account of what it is to be a contributory reason. Consequently, even if (SC) fails the explanatory burden when taken as an account of what it is to be a contributory reason, this is no objection to generalism. Second, generalism is not committed to even the truth of (SC). Perhaps there are some considerations that are so weak that even if they are the only reason they do not provide decisive reason. In any case, generalists need not deny this.

Of course, if generalists do not adopt (SC) as their account of what it is to be a contributory reason, then it may fairly be asked what they put in its place. It is not our intent to speak for all generalists. One possibility is to take over a notion from scientific theory, the notion of a tendency spelled out in terms propensity.<sup>26</sup> It is this sort of tendency we speak of when we say that an object traveling due East has a tendency to continue traveling due East. The claim is not a statistical one since the object in question might be of a sort that regularly gets knocked off course. The suggestion would then be that if we have a contributory reason (or a prima facie duty) not to A, then A has a

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<sup>26</sup>According to some, this, or something like it, is Ross's own view. (Brink 1994; Gay 1985) For an attempt to spell out the idea, see Pietroski (1993).

tendency to be wrong. David Brink proposes such an account and claims it can meet the explanatory burden.

If we... view the function from prima facie obligations into all-things-considered obligation as moral factor addition, we can explain regret for failing to perform prima facie obligations. If prima facie obligations are moral forces that are at work even when they are overridden by competing forces, then the fact that an agent does not act on her prima facie obligation to do B explains the appropriateness of regret or compunction. (Brink 1994, p. 223)<sup>27</sup>

Another possibility is to treat being a reason as a primitive notion within normative theory. This might still meet the explanatory burden since one can still say that reasons that we (rightly) fail to act on are still genuine reasons. Moreover, this seems to be the particularist's own view in most cases, but the particularist has no monopoly on anti-reductionist understandings of normative properties. Even an extreme form of Moorean non-naturalism about reasons is compatible with a robust generalism. The most important point, however, is that for Dancy's argument to have force against generalism, he would need to identify an account of what it is to be a contributory reason which both (i) met the Explanatory Burden and (ii) was unavailable to generalism. To our knowledge, no particularist has advanced such an account.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, should we accept the Explanatory Burden? Even if we agree that we often have reason for regret when we do not act on a defeated reason, we may doubt that an

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<sup>27</sup> Stratton-Lake makes a similar point. (Stratton-Lake, 2000, 123)

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Williams claims that traditional accounts of morality must, "eliminate from the scene the ought not acted upon." (Williams, 1973, 122-5) Even if this is true of traditional accounts (which we doubt), the

account of what it is to be a contributory reason must shoulder the whole burden of explaining this. First, it is not always true that we should regret not acting on a defeated reason. Second, residues can be left even when there was no reason in the first place. For example, an agent might rightly regret not saving a life even in a case in which it was not possible for the agent to save the life. Assuming that having a reason to  $\phi$  implies that one can  $\phi$ , such a residue clearly cannot be explained by appeal to the presence of a defeated reason. Third, even when there is both a residue and a defeated reason, the defeated reason may not provide the intuitively best explanation of the residue. Returning to our previous example, the manager's regret may be *explained* simply by the fact that there is now a loyal and skilled employee out of work, not by the fact that there was some reason not to put him out of work.<sup>29</sup> Fourth, when follow-up action is called for this may be justified by further principles. If our manager has reason to, say, help the laid-off employees find new work or to give them preferential treatment in the event of re-hiring, we might seek to explain this by appeal to principles governing, say, what a full partner to cooperation is due if one party must unilaterally withdraw. After all, it might be more than a bit peculiar to say that the *explanation* of the fact that the manager has reason to preferentially re-hire former employees is that he had some reason not to lay them off in the first place. The role of regret and follow-up action is complex. Some of that role may be explained by our account of what it is to be a contributory reason, but we should not assume that it all must be.

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particularists argument is only as convincing as her claim that this must be true of any plausible generalism, and this is doubly doubtful.

<sup>29</sup> Here it is important to distinguish the content of regret from the explanation of the regret. Here the content might be, *that I laid Jones off* while the explanation is *Jones is a wonderful employee who is now struggling*. For various types of regret, see (Foot, 1983) and (Brink, 1994).

#### ***4. The argument from "looking away."***

The concern that principles might lead agents to confront circumstances with insufficient attention is repeatedly expressed by particularists. If the concern is merited, then it might well lead us to abandon principles qua guides (though not qua standards; again the failure by particularists to mark these distinctions is significant). Dancy's presentation of this argument is worth quoting in full,

Particularism claims that generalism is the cause of many bad moral decisions, made in the ill-judged and unnecessary attempt to fit what we are to say here to what we have said on another occasion. We all know the sort of person who refuses to make the decision here that the facts are obviously calling for, because he cannot see how to make that decision consistent with one he made on a quite different occasion. We also know the person who insists on a patently unjust decision here because of having made a similar decision in a different case. It is this sort of *looking away* that particularists see as the danger in generalism. Reasons function in new ways on new occasions, and if we don't recognize this fact and adapt our practice to it, we will make bad decisions. Generalism encourages a tendency not to look hard enough at the details of the case before one, quite apart from any over-simplistic tendency to rely on a few rules of dubious provenance. (Dancy, 1993, 64)<sup>30</sup>

A commitment to generalism, it is claimed, is an invitation to laziness in one's estimation of the case before one. Rather than carefully analyze the present case, a generalist is more

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<sup>30</sup>Dancy also associates reliance on principles with "bad faith." (Dancy, 1992, 463). Brad Hooker provides an extended reply to this sort of argument. (Hooker, 2000)

likely to look just hard enough to see which of the rules to which she is committed applies, and then immediately make a decision. The moral theorist's typical insistence that we always be ready to compare our judgment in one case with our judgments in a range of other (often bizarre and hypothetical) cases risks the distortion of our actual practice. Philosophers once again stand accused of corrupting the youth.

Naturally, this argument is most well-suited to establishing Principle Abstinence Particularism. In reply, the generalist may point to the way in which the particularist, in always focusing on the case at hand, faces the opposite danger of ad hoc decision-making, self-interested rationalization or outright inconsistency. In this vein, the generalist might emphasize the important role that principles have in coordinating our behavior. It is often easier to make reliable predictions about the behavior of a principled person (someone who is sincerely wedded to a set of principles) than it would be to make such predictions about someone who is not principled. Hence, it might well be that principles serve an important function in allowing us to solve various interpersonal coordination problems. Without principles, we might well fall prey more frequently to assurance problems, prisoners' dilemmas, and the like. In this respect, the generalist might argue that a world in which people eschew principles might well be much more dangerous than a world in which people embrace and follow reasonable principles, *even if* the problem of "looking away" were a serious one.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, only dogmatic generalism warrants a "looking away" worry. As long as we are intellectually modest, and realize that principles to which we are antecedently committed may be incorrect we should remain attentive to new cases and willing to revise



or abandon those principles. A generalist may even allow that sometimes it is appropriate to judge two cases differently even if one can not yet articulate a relevant difference between them.<sup>32</sup>

### **5. *Moral Vision.***

Particularists emphasize the apparently perceptual phenomenology of moral judgment. Morality seems very different from paradigmatically rule-governed activities like mathematics and logic, where the phenomenology does seem to fit well with the model of subsumption of particulars under general and antecedently given rules. Instead, moral judgment seems much more like perceptual judgment in which one “just sees” that this case has certain features. This sort of perceptual model sometimes goes under the heading of “intuitionism.” This perceptual model seems most well-suited to establishing Anti-Transcendental Particularism. Since the perceptual model is silent on the utility of principles, it provides no support for Principle Abstinence Particularism. Nor does it suggest that there are no moral principles (Principle Eliminativism) or that there is no reason to think there are any (Principle Scepticism). If successful, an argument based upon moral vision would seem antithetical to Principled Particularism which claims that morality is not finitely codifiable even though moral judgment involves the application of principles. By contrast, the appeal to a perceptual model might seem to provide a good case for Anti-Transcendental Particularism. For perceptual judgment more generally does not seem to presuppose principles. For example, the judgment that something is crimson

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<sup>31</sup> For useful discussion of this point, see (Goldman, 2002) and (Nozick, 1993, 3-40). See also (Hooker, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Nor do generalists have a monopoly on dogmatism. There is, for example, the familiar problem of the person who simply refuses to see the situation at hand in a different light because she is so sure that *her* way of seeing it is the correct one.

does not presuppose that color concepts could be codified in non-chromatic terms.

(McNaughton, 1988, 202)

Matters are somewhat more complicated than this suggests, though. Defenders of the perceptual model do not really think moral vision is literally another form of sense-perception like vision and taste. Most defenders of the perceptual model allow (indeed emphasize) that some of our moral knowledge is a priori and based on this perception-like ability to just see that certain actions would be right (or wrong) under given conditions. This idea is important to preserve, because we are capable of forming justified moral judgments about merely hypothetical cases or actual cases with which we are not directly acquainted. Moreover, this a priori moral knowledge cannot plausibly be based on analytic truths, especially given particularism. For those analytic truths presumably could themselves serve as moral principles. So the particularist defender of the perceptual model must make sense of the controversial Kantian category of the synthetic a priori. Perhaps this idea is intelligible, though this is not obvious.<sup>33</sup>

The particularist faces a deeper dialectical problem, though. The perceptual model seems to fit well with particularism in part because we could distinguish paradigmatically rule-governed judgment like mathematical judgments from paradigmatically perceptual judgments like judgments of color or taste. However, once the commitments of the perceptual model are made clear, this contrast evaporates. For the relevant notion of perception must allow for a priori intuitions, and Kant famously argued that mathematical judgments are best understood as synthetic a priori judgments

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<sup>33</sup> Laurence Bonjour has recently defended the synthetic a priori. (Bonjour, 1998) Bonjour's work is frequently cited by contemporary intuitionists as providing support for their account. (Stratton-Lake, ed., 2002)

based on a priori intuitions. Nor is Kant's account without plausibility; careful reflection on a mathematical proposition can provide a priori warrant for believing that proposition even if it is not analytic. If a practice of judgment as paradigmatically rule-governed as mathematics can plausibly be understood as based on a priori intuitions then intuitionism no longer looks well-suited to provide support even for the more modest thesis that moral thought and judgment do not presuppose the provision of a suitable set of principles.<sup>34</sup> For mathematical thought pretty clearly presupposes principles in some sense, Gödel notwithstanding.<sup>35</sup> Any plausible argument from the perceptual model to Anti-Transcendental Particularism must emphasize similarities between morality and mathematics while explaining important differences.

***Conclusion.***

At this point it should be clear that 'moral particularism' can refer to any one of a number of distinct doctrines. Moreover, the soundness of each of the many arguments for moral particularism depends on which of these many distinct doctrines is being defended. One lesson we have learned from our study of moral particularism is that greater sensitivity and discernment are needed not only in our ethical thought, but in our assessment of theories analyzing that thought. Taking stock, we find that the arguments offered in favor of particularism are not compelling. In a few cases, they are simply unconvincing. In others, arguments which might appear to be freestanding in fact presuppose other

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<sup>34</sup> It is worth noting that even if the relevant perceptual model did presuppose moral principles this would be consistent with (though not an argument for) Principled Particularism .

<sup>35</sup> This is not the place for a discussion of Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem. Suffice it to say that his Theorem is compatible with the idea that morality is codifiable in a number of important senses. Furthermore, any appeal to Gödel to support particularism would seem to depend upon conceiving of principles as algorithms whose implications could be produced mechanically, whereas many generalists would agree, even urge, that the application of moral principles requires judgment.

arguments for particularism. In all cases, generalists have plausible lines of reply.

However, the failure of arguments for particularism is not itself an argument for generalism, and at the very least the particularist challenge should wake generalists from their dogmatic slumbers and prompt them to provide a positive argument for the presupposition that morality must be principled.

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