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### Particularism and Antitheory

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### Abstract and Keywords

This article surveys the current debate over particularism. Distinguishing motives, targets, and positions, it attempts to recast the crucial issues that divide different approaches and lay out the implications of various sorts of particularism for the possibility of moral theory. In its most interesting form, moral particularism is both more insightful and less hostile to theory than many suppose: The upshot of particularism is not to dispatch explanatory generalizations in morality, but to offer a fundamentally different view of what they are and how they do their job. The main goal of this article is to provide a map through the complex terrain of moral particularism to situate more properly its various claims—and its controversies—in moral philosophy.

Keywords: particularism, crucial issues, moral theory, morality, moral philosophy

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A veritable chorus of voices in moral philosophy has lately been raised in protest against ethical theorists' recurrent tendency to ignore the importance of context. Objections have been directed, for instance, against theorists whose love of simplicity and order blinds them to the rich diversity of the moral landscape. Theory, we're reminded, isn't supposed to straitjacket everything into a few favorite categories; proposals that prune and consolidate the explanatory concepts of ethics too radically will end up leaving out important phenomena or rendering them unrecognizable. Other objections have been levied against the conceit that mere *possession* of a moral theory is sufficient for moral knowledge. However adequate a set of moral principles might be, after all, someone who doesn't notice what is salient in a situation won't know what to apply the principles to. Those who are morally obtuse will stumble about blindly, like novice hikers outfitted with Global Positioning Systems who discover (to their rescuers' deep irritation) that they are in fact poorly if expensively equipped to find their way. However good your map, it can't keep you from getting lost if you don't know where you are.

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These sorts of points, deservedly influential as they've been, are in an important sense remedial education for philosophers. If they underscore points too often forgotten or mislaid in the history of moral theory, they are claims no one, once reminded, will object to. Everyone should agree: Crude theory is bad theory, and no theory deploys itself.

(p. 568)

Another set of objections to moral theory's tendency to ignore context, in contrast, is altogether more ambitious—and controversial. *Moral particularists* have urged us to see as misguided the very goal of constructing an edifice of exceptionless moral generalizations. Working from a number of camps, but most centrally from neo-Aristotelianism, narrative ethics, and modern British moral realism, these philosophers have argued that attempts to codify the moral landscape are bound to be disappointed. As Jonathan Dancy puts it: “There are lots of reasons, there are no principles” (unpublished, p. 2). Or, as David McNaughton (1988, p. 190) once put it, “moral principles are at best useless, and at worst a hindrance, in trying to find out which is the right action.”<sup>1</sup> It's not just that moral principles are more complicated and their understanding less mechanistic than we might have suspected; they *do not exist*, or at least are far less central to the moral enterprise than is typically thought.

Questions come fast and furious. What motivates such a seemingly pessimistic view of moral reflection? Is it a certain picture of moral phenomenology, a special view of the metaphysics in question, an alternative conception of moral explanation? And again, what aspect of moral reflection is meant to be its target? Is the primary idea to urge a revisionary account of everyday moral epistemology and deliberation, or to comment on the underlying structure—or lack thereof—that moral philosophers have searched for? Most centrally, perhaps, and for either such level, just how radical are its implications for moral theory meant to be? Do particularists really mean to imply that inference from theoretical generalizations forms *no* part of everyday epistemology or that morality as a domain is not governed by laws?

Some deny that much remains of the doctrine once these questions are carefully answered. Particularism, it has been argued, either reverts to the less radical reminders about the moral landscape or remains distinct but wildly implausible. Particularists, in their turn, insist that the doctrine is both distinctive and insightful, but present their favored lessons in remarkably different ways. Discussion of the doctrine has thus been increasingly marked by confusion, with proponents and opponents alike talking past one another.

If there's confusion about the motivations for and implications of particularism, the explanation for this is, in part, that two quite different agendas get grouped together under the particularist label. Some who get cast as particularist are animated first and foremost by suspicion of the justificatory role of theoretical generalizations in morality. Emphasizing the importance of discernment, nonexplicit skill, or the narrative quality of moral understanding, their central concern is to reject the idea that moral inquiry is a theory-building project. Another group of particularists, though, are animated centrally

by denial of a specific model of how reasons work—namely, in virtue of being subsumable under exceptionless explanatory generalizations. For this group, it turns out, implications for moral (p. 569) theory remain tantalizingly open: Everything turns on the details of the account replacing that more traditional conception.

In this essay, we survey the current debate over particularism. Distinguishing motives, targets, and positions, we attempt to recast the crucial issues that divide different approaches and lay out the implications of various sorts of particularism for the possibility of moral theory. We ourselves believe that, in its most interesting form, moral particularism is both more insightful and less hostile to theory than many suppose: The upshot of particularism, as we see it, is not to dispatch explanatory generalizations in morality, but to offer a fundamentally different view of what they are and how they do their job. Our main goal, though, is to provide a map through the complex terrain of moral particularism to more properly situate its various claims—and its controversies—in moral philosophy.

## 1. Classical Principles and Their Functions

We start by exploring the notion of a moral principle. If particularism is to hang its hat on rejecting “moral principles,” we had better know what sort of creatures they would be.

The term “moral principle” is bandied about loosely: It can sound as though any list of broad moral injunctions count, which makes it difficult to isolate particularism's target. That difficulty is probably reinforced by the doctrine's name (not to mention the rhetorical flourishes its proponents sometimes favor); “particularism,” after all, sounds as though it must stand in opposition to “generalism”—a position, presumably, that attests to the existence or usefulness of generality in morality. But there are some forms of generality—for example, subsumption under concepts, or, again, everyday generalizations about, say, the frequency of unfair elections—that no one would eschew. In fact, though, the conception of moral principle that forms particularism's target is meant to be something quite specific. Let's take a look.

We can begin by distinguishing two different tasks that purported principles have been asked to play in morality. Broadly put, *normative principles* purport to articulate which considerations count as good- or bad-making, right- or wrong-making. In contrast to ontological claims about what, as it were, *make* good-making features good-making—a divine commandment, a Platonic Reality, the output of some idealized contract—normative principles aim to set forth those (p. 570) that do so count. A deontologist's list of duties, the utilitarian's injunction to maximize net aggregate utility, the Ten Commandments would all qualify—together with theoretical generalizations that try to elucidate the concepts therein (understanding, say, what makes an act count as consent, a gesture as generous).

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*Deliberative principles* are generalizations that purport to give us advice on what procedures mere mortals should follow in order to arrive at good moral verdicts. These principles lay out directions to agents about what to *do* with a given set of inputs in order to move from uncertainty to clarity, disagreement to resolution. For many, of course, the correct deliberative principles piggyback fairly straightforwardly on the correct normative principles: The best procedure is to apply one's understanding of the normative principles to the inputs at hand. The two sorts of principles needn't go hand in hand, though.<sup>2</sup> After all, one might think the moral landscape susceptible to all manner of interesting methods of divination—kicking the Blarney stone three times, following instructions to achieve the requisite meditative epiphany, doing whatever one's wise friend Fred does. Less fancifully, many utilitarians famously distinguish their normative and deliberative principles: The utilitarian calculus determines what actions are in fact good or bad, but it isn't as if one is meant to engage in expected utility calculations when deciding how to react to an abusive boyfriend. Here local rules of thumb are advised, precisely because employing them has higher utility than attempting a utility calculation.

Kant's moral philosophy was complex in part because he provided both sorts of principles. Part of his task was to outline a principle that marks a deliberative procedure for deciding what is permissible—namely, identify one's maxim, see if it could be a natural law, and then see if it could be willed as such. This is a principle that doesn't itself state contentful moral injunctions. But he also, familiarly, pulled back from that first-personal test to defend a set of normative injunctions, including directives not to lie, not to treat others as mere means (or wear wigs).<sup>3</sup>

We have, then, two agendas that are at least conceptually separable: sorting out the nature of moral reality and figuring out procedures to make our moral way.

Now obviously, a great many people, from Ann Landers to Aristotle, think there's *something* to be said by way of filling in our understanding of the normative terrain and of giving suggestions for helpful procedures. At the core of an enormously wide range of Western ethical theory, though, is a certain conception of the sort of generalization we can—and should—find in answer to these questions. The conception is sufficiently dominant, indeed, that it might fairly be called the *classical conception* of moral Principles (hence hereafter awarded capitalization). It is this sort of Principle that forms the target of particularism.

A classical Principle is marked by the following three features.

1. Classical Principles are universal, exceptionless, law-like moral generalizations (p. 571) that mark the moral import of considerations. Normative such Principles purport to *illuminate* something's moral status, or again to set forth the conditions for *understanding* its moral status, by making explicit a necessary and nontrivial connection. Deliberative such Principles, where distinct from invocations to use the former, purport to set forth procedures that, if ideally executed, *guarantee* hitting their mark, by capturing something

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essential about the nature of good deliberation (think of Kant's Categorical Imperative test rather than the utilitarian's locally useful rules of thumb). This implies that while such Principles can be rendered as universal conditionals of the form

$(\forall x)(Fx \rightarrow Gx)$ —or perhaps  $\Box(\forall x)(Fx \rightarrow Gx)$ —

where G picks out some recognizable moral property,<sup>4</sup> the conditional must assert some sort of a substantive and law-like connection between F and G. The  $\rightarrow$  is not, that is, the  $\supset$  of material implication: Surface grammar does not a Principle make.

2. The conditionals implicit in classical Principles serve genuine inferential roles in determining, criticizing, or justifying particular moral claims. They are supposed to name a genuinely possible *move* from noting that something is F to concluding it is G: They concern the import, that is, of features whose moral import—for instance, whether it counts as a reason for or against the action—is in principle questionable. Crucially, then, agreement on a given Principle can serve as epistemic leverage on beliefs, hunches, or conjectures about individual cases. Hence,  $\rightarrow$  is also not expressing merely the sort of self-evident entailment of obvious analyticity that, however helpful it might be for housekeeping and regimenting our language, is without possibility of substantive controversy.

3. Classical Principles are members of theoretical systems. A system, as the name implies, is meant to be more than simply an aggregate—or “unconnected heap,” as David McNaughton (1996) nicely puts it—of true generalizations. A system is a set of interanimating propositions whose cross-connections themselves serve to illuminate the subject matter. Crucially, then, commitment to one Principle can serve as leverage when discussing, deliberating, or disputing commitment to another such generalization. Such inter-Principle leverage can be achieved either through simplification—as when we corral otherwise disparate phenomena under a few common and elegantly interrelated categories, or by articulating a complex web whose multiplicity of inferential connections between Principles helps to tighten our understanding of each. Whatever account one prefers, something isn't a classical Principle unless it fits into a structure of other Principles that purport to systematic illumination.

Classical Principles, then, are exceptionless, explanatory, interrelated moral generalizations that are capable of serving key epistemic functions.

Highlighting these various features begins to show why there is something (p. 572) substantive in contention with their denial. It's sometimes argued that particularism's objection to Principles, far from being radical, is more a tempest in a teapot. Everyone, surely, is a generalist, once we go sufficiently far up in abstraction or far down in detail. After all, even particularists agree that the moral supervenes on the natural—two situations cannot be alike in every natural respect and differ in their moral features. This means that there must be *some* exceptionless generalizations that express the moral as a function of the natural. Such “supervenience functions,” as we might call them, may of course be enormously complex; but that's just a difference in degree, not kind. Moving to

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the other end of the spectrum, even the most committed particularist, it's said, will admit that there is *some* level of abstraction where moral generalizations are safe from exception, if only principles such as 'pursue the good' or 'do the right thing'. This means, though, that they are not rejecting principles, just squabbling over their concreteness. Particularists, in short, don't reject moral principles; they just relocate them.

But admitting the existence of exceptionless moral generalizations is not equivalent to admitting to the existence of Principles. As the foregoing criteria make clear, the latter must be explanatory, ensconced in a surrounding theory, and epistemically useful. This means, for one, that acknowledgement of mere supervenience functions does not go far toward acknowledgement of a Principle. As John McDowell (1979) points out, supervenience can be admitted so readily because doing so admits to so little: it doesn't mean that there are any useful patterns to the way in which the dependencies line up (see also Little, 2000, sec. 3; Jackson, Pettit, and Smith, 2000). While situations can't differ in their moral properties without also differing in their natural properties, that is, this does not imply that a given moral difference (say, the difference between being just and unjust) need always be found in the same natural differences. Instead, stringing together the situations in which an action is cruel rather than kind, for example, may yield groupings that would simply look gerrymandered to anyone who does not have an independent competency with the moral concepts. On such a picture, the complicated sets of properties mentioned in supervenience functions will not constitute anything recognizably explanatory; they are too disjointed—"too indiscriminate," as Jonathan Dancy (1999, p. 26) puts it—to serve.

Similarly for abstraction. It's certainly true that no one will abjure the existence of exceptionless heady abstractions in morality—at the limit, we can *invent* a predicate whose application entails invariant moral import (we could dub 'lighing', say, as the term to pick out those cases of lying that are wrong-making). But this doesn't yet mean we have on hand anything explanatory or procedurally useful. If classification as such simply reflects judgment of its objectionable nature definitionally, no substantive explanatory work will be done by the generalization that lighings are wrong. The predicate may still be useful—say, in marking off moral from pragmatic or again legal reasons; but expression of the generalization won't serve as check on one's specific intuitions. Similarly for deliberative prin (p. 573) ciples. "Choose well, grasshopper," may be a pragmatically helpful inspiration, but it hardly offers substantive guidance.

Finally, since classical Principles are meant to be pieces of theory, one cannot determine the status of a given generalization as such in isolation from its relation to other theoretical generalizations. This excludes one otherwise innocuous use of the "principlist" label as off topic here.<sup>5</sup> Someone who avows a particular list of injunctions as "principles to live by" may count in one sense as strongly principlist; if those principles, though, are a disconnected list, or involve concepts, such as Justice Stewart's conception of 'obscenity', about which no further theorizing can be done, one does not thereby count as advocating a set of Principles of the sort particularists want to reject.

## 2. Beyond Mechanical Principles

There is another source for the widespread sense that particularism is not as radical as its proponents fancy. This is the presumption that the notion of Principle being attacked actually smuggles in substantially more than our three constraints. And there are indeed conceptions of principles and the way they function in theory that are far stronger. One conception in particular—what for some has been the Holy Grail of Principles—adds a requirement of very strong context-independence. We might call it the Enlightenment model of morality—not because most Enlightenment moral philosophers espoused it, but because the Enlightenment model of explanation and perception prevalent in its philosophy of science has proved enticing to so many in the Anglo-American tradition as a picture of what moral theorists should aspire to.

On this picture, the central task of moral theory is to articulate a catalogue of moral Principles and their interactions that can take us from a highly concrete and evaluatively neutral description of a situation to a conclusion about what to do. Moral theory is supposed to offer us up various morally salient “forces”—akin to Newtonian forces of motion—each of which pushes in the direction of one of the moral verdicts, and to provide us with some sort of algorithm or moral calculus—akin to Newtonian vector analysis—for combining these moral forces into a resultant moral verdict. Further, the task is to find forces that can be rendered in morally neutral terms (say, ‘caused pain’) whose instantiation can be agreed upon by those engaged in moral disputes. On this model, then, moral theory consists of identifying a set of transparent forces that can be combined algorithmically to yield all-things-considered moral verdicts.

Much of recent moral philosophy has been marked by arguments protesting (p. 574) this model. Such a view, it's been urged, undersells by half the complexity of the moral landscape—and moral deliberation. Any number of philosophers have argued, for instance, that the inputs relevant to moral deliberation aren't features that can be picked up in this way (see, for instance, Nussbaum, 1985; Blum, 1991). If there are epistemically basic moral forces, so the objection goes, they stop a good way short of the brutally physical. How we know when infliction of pain counts as *cruelty*, or empirical disparity as *unfairness*, is simply not something for which mechanistic explanations are in order. Instead, what is required is *interpretation*—a term that is meant to signal a nonmechanistic skill not itself reducible to our ability to see physical traits of actions. There is no way to gain competence in the application of the concepts one needs to get moral deliberation going without being trained to see the moral *point* of things.

It has further been argued that the interrelationship between moral forces can't be reduced to any algorithmic principle (e.g., McDowell, 1979; Nussbaum, 1985; Sherman, 1989). There is no setting out once and for all how to balance these principles when they conflict, as all too often they do: sometimes fidelity trumps fairness, and sometimes it's the other way around. Instead, what is required is *judgment*—a term that is meant to signal a comparison not subsumable under a calculative principle. Wise moral agents

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know how to assess an action in light of the various good- and bad-making features of it, but their judgment can be passed on only by training and immersion in the particulars of moral experience.

Now these moves remain controversial in some circles. The ineliminability of interpretation is a position of vulnerability, according to some. How, it's asked, can we judge consistency of application, let alone measure justification, if there is no specifying a property's instantiation in morally neutral terms? The ineliminability of judgment, in turn, requires a philosophy of mind and epistemology that allows moves to be reasonable without being subsumable under concrete deductive laws. That, too, will raise a skeptical eyebrow or two. How, it will be asked, can we judge consistency of application, or have any hope of resolving disagreements, if there is no such law to appeal to?

If the objections are familiar, though, so, too, by now, are the rejoinders offered in their defense. Our philosophies of mind and epistemology, it's pointed out, have long had to deal with properties, such as 'being a chair', whose instantiation cannot be given in scientific terms. It is only when we demand that semantic competence and justification be reduced to machinations on what are essentially brute susceptibilities to causal influences of natural properties that dealing with them seems precarious. As McDowell (1979, 1981) says, consistency need not be found at the natural level to count as consistency; we can learn "how to go on" with patterns that look gerrymandered from the natural point of view without resorting to a spooky sort of perception, perhaps based in some modular or specially individuated faculty (see also the discussion in Dancy, 1993, ch. 5). (p. 575) Further, it is simply prejudice, as Martha Nussbaum (1985) puts it, that counts only quantitative judgments as judgments backed by reason. A variety of other models of understanding have been forwarded that allow us to see judgment as nontheoretical, yet reasonable: Aristotle's *phronesis*, Heidegger's involvement in the ready-to-hand, Wittgensteinian forms of life, and Dreyfus and Dreyfus's (1992) conception of skill all provide attempts to understand such noncalculative rational judgment (see Garfield [2000] for an explicit such application).

Now whether these arguments are in the end satisfying is, of course, a matter of continued debate. And, indeed, much of particularism's energy has been devoted to their fortification. But these moves, important as they are to the particularist, are not the particularist's claim to fame (or infamy). For while it may be a mistake to think that explanation of moral import can somehow be extricated once and for all from reliance on interpretation and judgment, that's a lesson that any number of self-declared generalists have long pressed.

Take, for example, the contextualist principlism of W. D. Ross (1930; current expositors include Crisp, 2000; McNaughton and Rawlings, 2000; Pietrowski, 1993). Ross developed and defended a list of Principles that represented the duties of morality. He urged, though, that the subject of such Principles were morally rich concepts, such as 'fidelity' and 'beneficence', that resisted reduction to bluntly naturalistic specification such as 'telling the truth' and 'decreasing pain'; and he insisted that there was no way to codify



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how to balance them when they conflict. Instead, the job of moral theory, on his view, is to develop a list of *prima facie* or “pro tanto” duties, which are understood, in the first instance, by reference to what we should do if no other such duties were present. Morally salient features of actions, then, are still governed by laws—fidelity and beneficence are always “good-making,” dishonesty is necessarily “bad-making”; but there is no mechanical way to identify when those features are instantiated, and no principled or theoretically tractable way to move from a list of the morally salient forces to an overall verdict.

They are lessons that Kant, too, would endorse. Unlike Ross, Kant thought there were some Principles, both deliberative and normative, capable of delivering all-things-considered verdicts. Nonetheless, as modern-day Kant scholars such as Onora O’Neill (2001) and Barbara Herman (1993) are wont to point out, he would have shuddered at the thought that moral judgment can function mechanistically. For one thing, there was no thought that those Principles could be applied without interpretation; just as important, he insisted that only certain aspects of morality—namely, the arena of the impermissible—were amenable to such powerful Principles. Decisions about imperfect duties and exercise of the virtues, just as essential to moral worth, were never claimed to be subsumable under them.

In short, the sort of context-dependency just insisted upon is not antiprinciplist. It simply—and importantly—insists that not all the moves we make from input to output can be modeled as even tacitly subsumable under independently (p. 576) understandable deductive principles. It argues that moral interpretation and judgment are inexpungible elements of moral knowledge.

What further claims, then, mark off the move to something deserving the name particularism? In fact, different claims are at issue for different stripes of particularist. In the following, we distinguish two broad camps, which we’ll call—for reasons we explain—*epistemological* and *holistic* particularism, and urge that the latter further cleaves between what we’ll call *metaphysical* and *defeasibility-based* holism.

### 3. Epistemological and Deliberative Particularists

The first, and perhaps most familiar, sort of particularism works to reject the epistemic or deliberative usefulness of moral Principles. We've already conceded that such generalizations don't capture the entirety of moral epistemology and deliberation—that's just what it is to agree that Principles aren't mechanical. These philosophers go further (how much further depending on how radical their views) to say that *little to none* of the work we do in trying to determine, question, understand, or justify is done with Principles, even nonmechanically understood. There is no Kantian or Rawlsian procedure to follow or neat checklist of inputs to scour situations for. To a much greater extent than is appreciated by theory-loving philosophers, moral knowledge is not about inference and application of explanatory generalizations but rather about mastering concepts and discerning their instances.

Some such antitheorists are *antistructuralists*. They focus, in essence, in denying condition 3 of moral Principles. There may be individual explanatory generalizations that help us find our way around the moral world, but they form no illuminating structure. Perhaps God offers a series of isolated injunctions that add up to no coherent or inferentially rich conception of the good: They are simply scattered orders, and the morally acceptable life is one that follows them.<sup>6</sup> The more usual basis, of course, is rather more secular, with most such commentators tracing the lack of structure to the very multiplicity of exceptionless generalizations. The moral landscape, they urge, is *irreducibly* rich. There is a veritable plethora of, there are even unboundedly many, good-making properties, and no thought they can be helpfully systematized. Strains of this sort of antitheory appear in Annette Baier (1985) and Iris Murdoch (1970; for an excellent discussion of Murdoch, see Millgram, 2002). There is no theoretical unification of the moral (p. 577) realm to be had: No smaller set of generalizations accounts for the broader multiplicity; no purchase is gained on moral confusion or dispute by way of substantive and nontrivial inferential connections between exceptionless generalizations. On this view, then, *inter-principle* epistemic leverage is radically reduced: For the most part, one simply has to come to know each explanatory generalization one by one. We may make use of individual theoretical generalizations—a definition of consent here, a commitment to the evil of gossip there—but we shouldn't hope for anything remotely resembling a theory.

A different set of moves aims to question the justificatory usefulness of the individual principles themselves. “Discernment” antitheorists urge that verdicts on cases are reached, not by applying theoretical generalizations, but by seeing what moral meaning the various saliences in a case form together. These philosophers focus, in essence, on rejecting condition 2. What theoretical generalizations we recognize in morality do not mark epistemically significant moves from premise to conclusion. While we may agree

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that gratuitous cruelty is always bad-making, this is because competent grasp of the very concept involves seeing the bad in all such actions.

To some, this is because moral principles are merely *summaries* of past judgments—potent in discursive justification because they represent a concentrated way to represent that history, but summaries nonetheless (see, e.g., Garfield, 2000). They cannot budge intuitions about instances, only reflect them. For others, it is because they involve concepts whose meaning is dominated by their noninferential role. Coming to understand ‘cruelty,’ like coming to understand ‘red,’ is fundamentally a matter of coming to be able to see it. Thus, while there can be theoretical moral generalizations like “Cruelty is bad-making,” they are like the “principle” that “Red objects are colored,” belief in which is an utterly minimal condition of competency with the concept. Such principles are of no epistemic help in getting an otherwise empirically confused person to see that something is cruel or again red, for one not already knowing this principle has no grasp at all of the concept.

Exceptionless generalizations, on either of these views, merely make explicit content implicit in the noninferential judgment of the moral expert. (All moral generalizations are, in this sense, analytic.) Such generalizations may be useful as crutches for the moral novice, in regimenting moral language, or again as reminders for someone momentarily confused; but genuine epistemic reliance on generalizations shows a lack of understanding. This sort of antitheory, then, is not based in a denial of meaningful structure (indeed, one could think that these analytic principles form a tight unified structure, akin to that found among the definitional postulates of abstract mathematics). Rather, it denies the sort of explanatory or justificatory role necessary for these generalizations to deserve the name “law-like.”

For some antitheorists—including, arguably, Baier and Murdoch—the complexity of moral deliberation reflects the complexity of the underlying nature of morality. Many who are skeptical of theory, though, are more restricted in their agenda. Such commentators may well think that, at its ultimate level (what Wilfrid Sellars [1956] would call the “scientific image”),<sup>7</sup> morality is indeed governed by Principles forming a neat theoretical structure. What they are concerned to reject is the belief that this structure has much direct contact with the way a competent moral agent reasons:<sup>8</sup> Such Principles provide no justificatory or deliberative guide at the level of everyday decision-making and assessment (at the “moral manifest level,” as it were). For these more restricted particularists, one important epistemic function of Principles could then remain: It may be that deep *understanding* of morality—as Aristotle would put it, knowing the ‘why’—may consist in knowledge of Principles. For those who reject Principles at both levels, in contrast, knowing the ‘why’ is a matter, pure and simple, of concept mastery (for more here, see Little, 2001).

Whatever their other differences, the central idea common to epistemological particularists is that inferential justification—of theoretical generalizations or of particular verdicts, at the manifest or the scientific level—plays a far smaller role than

ethical theorists have supposed. Moral principles can serve pedagogic and heuristic roles—they can help us to develop mastery of moral concepts and discern their instances; but they do not mark epistemically or explanatorily rich inferential relationships between propositions.

Now many have found plausible the claim that inferential justification via moral Principles is *less* central than traditional theory-loving philosophers have believed: A large part of moral life consists in noninferential uptake of moral significance. Controversy surfaces, though, when the claim's scope extends more radically. After all, it will be pointed out, however much we rely on discernment and judgment, it certainly *looks* as though an important part of how we justify, convince, teach, deliberate, and clarify is by pointing to explanatory generalizations whose truth we seem to endorse.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes we convert by showing a film; then again, sometimes we do it by giving an argument (say, that one shouldn't discriminate on the basis of sex). Sometimes we teach by modeling behavior; but sometimes we do it by articulating a generalization (say, that wrongful interference is measured by lack of consent). And when we want to understand what someone means when he invokes a contested concept (say, 'equality'), sometimes we ask for his verdict on a test case, but sometimes (if only to control for differing factual interpretations) we ask him to give us his definition. In short, we seem to theorize—to appeal to interrelated explanatory generalizations—all over the place. Debate over this brand of particularism, then, is in large part a matter of debating how many of these phenomena can be appropriately accounted for as heuristic rather than justificatory.

### (p. 579) 4. Valence-Switching and the Holism of Moral Reasons

Another camp of particularists is concerned with quite a different issue. These philosophers direct their attention to the first condition of classical Principles outlined earlier—their status as exceptionless explanatory generalizations. The epistemological particularists just surveyed, however otherwise radical, do allow that there are true exceptionless moral generalizations in virtue of which considerations count as reasons—there are just too many, or they merely reflect, rather than lead to, verdicts about individual cases. For another group of particularists, though, it is just this remaining concession that is rejected. Let's take a look.

A number of particularists, most prominently Jonathan Dancy (1993, 2004), have argued that considerations carry their moral import only *holistically*. A consideration that in one context counts for an action can in another count against it or be irrelevant, and all in a way that cannot be cashed out in finite or helpful terms. Pain is *prima facie* to be avoided—well, except when it's constitutive of athletic accomplishment; intentionally telling a falsehood is at least *prima facie* wrong—well, but not when playing the game Diplomacy or responding to the demands of Nazi guards, to whom the truth is not owed. Pleasure

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always counts in favor of a situation—well, except when it's the sadist's delight in her victim's agony, where her pleasure is precisely part of what is wrong with the situation, not its “moral silver lining.”<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, moral reasons, as opposed to garden-variety practical reasons, are meant to be universalizable. But this only commits us to the claim that a consideration must function as a reason in all relevantly similar situations, and the claim is that “relevantly similar” cannot be cashed out. Exceptions lurk, however carefully matters are specified. For moral considerations contribute to an action's moral status in the way that a given dab of paint on the canvas carries its contribution to the aesthetic status of a painting: The bold stroke of red that helps balance one painting would be the ruin of another; and there is no way to specify the conditions in which it will help and the conditions in which it will detract.<sup>11</sup> Just so, whether a given feature counts as any moral reason at all—and if so, in what direction—is itself irreducibly dependent on the background context.

The claim, then, is not just that the moral contribution made by these considerations gets *outweighed* by others (as when the pain of a measles shot is justified by the utility it brings); the claim is that the moral “valence” of the consideration—its positive or negative contribution to overall moral status—itself depends irreducibly on the background context in which it appears. Thus, not only can't one codify how the moral weight of a given feature stacks up against (p. 580) other moral considerations, it need not have any moral weight to begin with, and certainly none of any given direction.

Now of course, everyone thinks there are *some* sorts of considerations whose import varies wildly by context: The utilitarian can agree that wiggling one's thumb can, in the right context, constitute disutility while constituting utility in another. But moral holists claim not just that incidentals can vary in this way, but that valence can switch *at the level of explanation*. That is, the holist claims that a consideration can itself function as a reason—a full, complete, and genuine reason—while acting fully otherwise in another circumstance. To be sure, there must be further differences to be found if a consideration that counts in one case as a reason does not in another, but it's a mistake, Dancy (1993, p. 81) argues, to think that those differences must then be mentioned as part of what makes the action right or wrong.<sup>12</sup> Not all features that make an extensional difference to moral status qualify as reasons. Some function as the context in virtue of which others are reasons: They are “enabling conditions”—necessary conditions for others to function as reasons but not themselves amongst the material or substantive considerations that make something good or bad; others may be, variously, “defeaters,” “underminers,” and the like. What sets moral holists apart—for better or worse—is the claim that valence can switch at the level of the property doing the work of constituting a reason. Such a view, then, is meant to come squarely up against the traditional view that explanation must involve subsumption under exceptionless generalization.

Moral holists vary in how broadly they cast their claim. Some believe it is only so-called naturalistic reasons (those describable without obvious use of evaluative language) that function holistically; moral considerations so identified are granted invariant reason-

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giving force—that an action is just always counts in its favor, that it causes pleasure does not. For others, it's in for a penny, in for a pound: Even 'cruelty' is said to switch valence, depending on the context in which it appears, and the aphorism that you sometimes have to be cruel to be kind is to be taken at face value. Once we see that reasons need not function atomistically in order to be reasons, we see that many of the so-called thick moral properties that so impress others as invariant can themselves switch valence depending on the context—as Elijah Millgram (2002) puts it, the “defusing move” can work on just about anything. Jonathan Dancy (1995), in particular, has urged that there is no *ex ante* reason to believe moral properties must be univalent, in part because he regards the division between 'natural' and 'moral' predicates as fraught: There is simply no reason to draw a semantic line in the sand.

But this isn't to say that holists must believe that *all* moral reasons are multivariant. Indeed, Dancy himself agrees that there may well be nontrivial univalent moral reasons (he gives the example of causing gratuitous pain to unwilling victims [2004, p. 77]). For after all, there's also no *ex ante* reason to think there *can't* (p. 581) be such reasons. Philosophers are deserving of the name 'holist' just so long as they think *there are* reasons that irreducibly function holistically—just so long as they think, that is, that there are some moral reasons that do not function as such in virtue of substantive, exceptionless moral generalizations.

### 5. Objections to Holism

Claims of moral holism have generated intense objections across a range of theorists otherwise divided in their approaches. Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith (2000) for example, have been forceful critics of particularism on semantic grounds. They agree that particularism is consistent with morality's supervenience on the natural; but precisely because supervenience functions do not count as useful patterns, they urge, those functions aren't enough to connect us in needed ways to the natural. More specifically, such a view makes it difficult to see how we could come to learn to discriminate and classify according to moral predicates—"how we could have mastered that language"—since such predicates have no patterned relationship to natural properties. If particularists mean simply to return to some form of blunt intuitionism, according to which we are credited with a special, modular faculty that allows us to pick up on 'cruelty' in some causally direct way, then we'd at least have a replacement view of how the semantics story can be built. But most would consider that a high price to pay; more to the point, particularism looked like it meant to offer something more than a return to the not-so-golden oldies.

In response, holists agree that an account is needed of how we learn moral concepts. They are skeptical, though, of the assumption that the task is more difficult in the moral case than the natural one. The thought that it is seems to involve a presupposition. If one supposed that perception and conceptual understanding were fundamentally a matter of standing in a particular causal relation to the object responsible for the production of a percept, then one would well think that natural objects and properties enjoy an epistemic advantage over all others, since they are the most natural candidate causal relata.<sup>13</sup> Once we have moved beyond this sort of epistemology, though, such an asymmetry will strike one as unfounded. Following Sellars again, rejecting the idea that inferential relations are causal relations, after all, is part and parcel of the whole approach to epistemology consonant with holism. As before, the attractive epistemological positions for the particularist will be those of Heidegger, the pragmatists, Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Dreyfus and Dreyfus; and on these approaches, while an account (p. 582) is called for, there is no reason to think it any harder for moral semantic competence than for any other sort.

Others have protested from a perspective that allows moral discourse a more robust independence from the natural. A number of theorists who happily subscribe to the view that competencies with nonnatural concepts are not beholden to those with natural ones nonetheless reject holism as an account of reasons. In their view, such a move simply mislocates the lessons we should take from the importance of context. It is certainly true that natural properties switch moral valence in ways that defy helpful codification: As long as we confine our attention to naturalistically specified considerations, that is, we will find exceptions to generalizations about what is good-making. But all this shows is

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that good-making features aren't located at the natural level. They are found, instead, at the level of so-called thick moral properties—properties such as courage and cruelty, which are contentful but seem to wear their moral valence on their sleeve.

Thus Roger Crisp (2000) argues that, while we'll often begin an explanation of why an action was wrong by pointing to features such as the lie that was involved, examples such as lying in the board game Diplomacy show that the real reason the action was wrong was its *dishonesty*. If it isn't always wrong-making to refuse to return a borrowed book—as when it turns out to be stolen property—it is always wrong-making when refusing to do so in an instance of *injustice*. David McNaughton and Piers Rawling (2000) similarly argue that a great many of the countervale cases pointed to by particularists are best understood as cases in which genuine explanation for an action's moral import is located at the level of morally rich properties that don't switch valence. If the concept of injury, for instance, seems not to switch valence, it's because it is equivalent, in fact, not to mere “infliction of pain” but to *unfair* infliction of pain—and that's something that is always wrong-making. Understanding when such properties are instantiated, of course, takes a good deal of interpretation; exceptionless Principles are recovered, though, once we realize they need to include “evaluative riders” to any more naturalistically specified considerations (McNaughton and Rawling, 2000, pp. 268–269).

According to these theorists, then, once we make the distinction between “primary and secondary,” or “proximate and ultimate,” reasons, and once we're willing to be good nonnaturalists, we will see that atomism survives intact as the best theory, either writ large or at least for large swaths of the moral landscape. It's a mistake—the naturalist mistake—to think that we can construct bridge laws or even useful sufficiency conditions that can guide us in deciding what we should do; but that doesn't mean we should abandon atomism. What it means, instead, is that we must ascend to the moral level to find good- and right-making considerations.

Finally, even for those otherwise attracted to the view, there is the worry that the position proves too much. In unqualified form, moral holism of the sort just (p. 583) outlined seems to imply that lying, killing, and the infliction of pain have no more intimate connection to wrongness than do truth-telling, healing, and the giving of pleasure. After all, each, against the right context, can have a positive, negative, or neutral moral import. But the morally wise person, one might have thought, is someone who understands that there is a deep difference in moral status between infliction of pain and shoelace color, even if both can, against the right narrative, be bad-making. It is not just that infliction of pain *can* be, or in our local neighborhood *usually is*, wrong-making; we feel that there is an *intimate* connection here, one having something to do with the nature of the consideration, even if there are exceptions.

In response to these objections, holists have argued that once we are freed of the epistemological and metaphysical biases that tried to force us toward atomism, we lose the motivation to *insist* on univalence in every case. There will be cases in which ascending to a univalent property *lessens* explanatory potency, cases in which the real



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work of illuminating—rather than regimenting—is done by the thick, rich, and messy world of the multivalent. Once we realize that atomism isn't the only legitimate model of explanation, it would then be odd to insist that all explanatory moral generalizations just *must be* univalent. Thus, while it remains a crucial question whether particularism is the right substantive view of ethics—whether ethical considerations do in fact function in a holistic valence-switching manner—once one understands that genuine justificatory and explanatory work *can* be done holistically, the important war has been won.

It's one thing, though, to insist that atomism is not the only alternative, another to spell out what the better one is. Atomism is nothing if not familiar, both in morality and in the philosophy of science, in which reason is tied to explanation, which is, in turn, tied to subsumption under laws, which are typically presumed to be exceptionless. The holist, then, must do more than make gestures to nondiscursive skills, forms of life, or the “ready to hand.” In the end, the plausibility—or lack thereof—of holism turns on what replacement picture is offered of how reasons *do* function, a picture that must vindicate the genuine moral difference between lying and shoelace color.

And it is here that we come to the last, and in many ways deepest, divide among particularists. On the one side are holists who want to reject the idea of subsumption under generalization altogether. For these philosophers, one thing can be a reason for another without there being any generalization connecting them at all. For others, the lesson is that we must reconceive our idea of a principle: must find a way to see principles as both exception-laden and law-like. We begin with the first approach.

(p. 584) **6. Metaphysical Holism: Explanation without Generalization**

Jonathan Dancy, whose work has done the most to revive interest in particularism, argues that considerations function as reasons when they stand in a particular metaphysical relationship he dubs “resultance” (1993, pp. 73–79). One of the ways we explain in everyday life, he urges, is by pointing out such a relationship. That white is winning in a given position is a result of the passed pawn on the Queenside; that the painting is beautiful is a result of its colors' pensive juxtaposition. Such examples, he agrees, make it tempting to accept a *constitution* theory of resultance, according to which what it is for this object now to be G is constituted here by its being F. In the end, though, the relationship is simply hard to say much about: It is, he argues, a primitive but thoroughly familiar relationship.

At any rate, a key point is that it is a relationship that does not issue in type-type identities. “The [resultance] tree for the same property of a different object will quite probably be different, because the way in which that object gets to be F (where F-ness is a resultant property) will probably be different from the way in which this one got to be F” (Dancy, 1993, p. 74). So there is no assumption that winning in general results from passed pawns, or that passed pawns generally result in winning positions; the same color juxtaposition in another painting might well result in ugliness. Of course, this point does not itself entail that there are no type-type relations, since it is possible that there is some exhaustive list of (type-specified) ways in which something could get to be F (the relation would be “If  $P_1$  or, ... or  $P_n$  then F”). But Dancy's view is that once one begins down this road—once one recognizes that there are multiple ways to instantiate the salient moral resultant properties—there will be no reason to think that, in general, you can stop anywhere short of the particular token instance of a given property. As he says, claims of resultance are for “this property of this object now” (p. 74).

This isn't to say that all properties (understood now as types) are moral equals. Some properties, Dancy (1993, p. 103) argues, are “moral defaults.” Metaphorically put, they come to a situation already “turned on”; more formally, they are properties that need no *enabler* in order for them to function as reasons of a certain direction, though they may, of course, be “turned off” in all manner of contexts by the presence of defeaters or underminers. (By contrast, Ross thought that they could be overridden, but always must push in the same direction. Lying may be an overall good thing to do, but that is always despite the fact that its character as a lying counts against it. For Dancy, other features may change the nature of the contribution lying itself makes to the status of the whole act.) The central claim is one of explanatory asymmetry: There are some properties with a (p. 585) default valence—one that itself needs no explanation; it can, like any import, shift to another, but its doing so demands explanation. One thus may need to explain why pain is, in this case, good-making, but not why in another it is bad-making.

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Moral epistemology, on this view, is quite radically antitheoretic. The account of explanation is, broadly put, not one of subsumption but of narrative. As with describing a building, we characterize the situation in ways that will get others to interpret and see it as we do (Dancy, 1993, p. 112). To be sure, moral Principles familiar from theory are helpful devices to remind us of what moral import various considerations *can* have, but they serve no independent justificatory function. Adducing Principles can thus be useful in pedagogy or in helping others to see things as one ought; but they carry no more justificatory weight than that. And, while we can come to know which properties count as moral defaults, this crucially doesn't mean such properties count as *epistemic defaults*—it doesn't mean one is entitled to presume that the property carries that valence in the case at hand, absent evidence to the contrary.

All of this helps to make clear what Dancy has in mind when he says there are no moral principles. He agrees that there are true exceptionless moral generalizations; indeed, as we showed, he agrees that there can be nontrivial univalent properties—why not? Such generalizations are not yet principles in his sense, though. Principles have to state explanatorily substantive, not merely formal, connections; more than that, they are supposed to be *that in virtue of which reasons function* (see Dancy, 2000, sec. 1, 2004, ch. 5). It is the latter condition that is never met. For if genuinely variable considerations can genuinely serve as reasons, he says, they are functioning qua reasons in the same way that features with invariant valence so function—namely, by serving as the resultance base of the moral import. It can't be essential to the reason-giving relation that it instantiate a principle. Even if there are universal exceptionless generalizations about certain good-making properties, then, principlism is no good as an account of how reasons work.

For Dancy, then, the issue is less about whether or how many moral reasons are univalent; it's about relocating the concept of a reason away from the space of epistemology to a metaphysical relationship. It's in this sense that we call him a “metaphysical” particularist—a label he also gives himself (2004, ch. 8)—rather than because he is uninterested in the epistemological fallout. (This also explains why he puts so much weight on maintaining the category split between what count as reasons and what as context, rather than on claims about uncodifiability; for what matters to him in reason claims is what stands in a particular metaphysical relationship.)<sup>14</sup>

According to Dancy (1993, p. 106), the lesson of all this is clear: “Reasons do not function in virtue of generalizations; they are about the ways things add up here.” He wants to “deny that the explanation [of specific moral truths] has any need to be run in terms of general moral truths. The explanation will be given (p. 586) in terms of the properties from which the thin properties of rightness and wrongness result. This has no need to be generalized.” Dancy's replacement view of reasons, in short, severs their connection to generalization. The epistemic upshot of this is that understanding the reason that something is good or bad is not a function of uncovering generalizations. For Dancy, indeed, apprehending that a consideration is a reason is far more like a sort of discrete

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perception, of seeing how things add up here. The very idea of a generalization is otiose for notions of reason.

This is certainly a view that will leave some uneasy. For many, explanation is neither something to be stipulated as a brute metaphysical fact nor something that *could* be, as Dancy puts it at one point, “stubbornly particular” (1993, p. 104). It has *something* to do with generalization, even if not a deductive one.

To show this, let's return to constitution, that claimed close cousin to resultance. Citing something as constitutive of another is explanatory in a way that, say, citing a simple token-token identity is not.<sup>15</sup> The whole point of constitution is that there are multiple paths or criteria by which something might be an individual of the type, and citing which path is the actual one is both illuminatingly what “makes it” of the type and what explains its being so (that the chess position's strength here is due to the pawn's position and not, say, to the rook's). Constitution (and resultance), then, is able to be explanatory in a way that mere identity is not because different things could serve as the constitutor.

Taken as a purely metaphysical relationship, though, there are any number of different things that could be counted as “constituting” something's being phi. We could mention the position of the passed pawn; then again, we could say the position's strength is constituted here by the complex fact of the entire tree of legal game continuations, or any number of levels in between. Similarly, in the case of the painting, we could say that the beauty is constituted by the distribution of red and green, or again or that it is constituted by the distribution of atomic particles across a given region. What allows us to pick, from among these various possible levels, which one is a favored, *explanatory* relationship? How do we go about determining the level at which resultance is said to hold?

At times, Dancy seems to appeal to his narrativist epistemology to provide the answer. But whatever the pluses or minuses of narrative as an epistemology, it won't serve to locate resultance. “Narrative bases” are neither unique nor “in nature”—what is heuristically useful depends on a great number of subjective factors.<sup>16</sup> We can always imagine two different stories, each of which leaves out elements of the other, and each of which successfully enables a given listener to gestalt what there is morally to see in the situation; there is thus no unique set of properties that count, as a matter of brute metaphysical fact, as a narrative base.

Most of the time, though, this is simply of limited worry for Dancy; after all, (p. 587) according to him, resultance is primitive. He takes our intuition about which level of description is the one that “really” counts and dubs it as pointing to a special metaphysical relationship. For many, though, there is more of an answer that can—and should—be given. Whatever the details, something counts as explanatory—as a “resultance base,” if you like—when it serves a particular *epistemic function*, namely, when it can serve in particularly robust ways (with ‘robust’ interpreted differently by different theorists) as the basis of an inference to the conclusion. This, after all, is what ties the idea of something being a reason to something that can serve in reasoning. But to

play *this* role requires hooking in to generalization. To be committed to the propriety of an inference *is* to be committed to its propriety in some set of other contexts. Imagine Smith, a moral novice, who is told by Jones, the moral expert, that the reason the action they just witnessed is bad is because it is cruel. Imagine further that, when Smith again witnesses cruelty and thinks it a basis for believing, or perhaps presuming, or at least hypothesizing (all epistemic attitudes) that it is bad-making, she is met with absolute and utter befuddlement by Jones: “Whyever would you think *that*?” Surely, one loses touch of what is meant by “reason” in the face of such a reaction. As Alan Goldman (2001) puts it, the difference that stands as a reason can't just be a “one-off.”

Similarly, the narrativist account Dancy gives—an intentionally metaphoric account in which the saliences assume a shape—is not in fact equivalent to adducing reasons. There is a difference between adducing a set of facts as a reason for something and telling a story. The first gives an explanation; the second tells enough of the supervenience base to allow someone to gestalt or perceive the resultant property on her own.

This isn't to deny that the relationship of resultance is a metaphysical one. Rather, it's to say that we get to *classify* any candidate as standing in such a relationship only in virtue of the candidate's epistemic relevance. (That is, even if one could directly perceive the resultant—that this act is cruel—the proper explanation of why the relation between that property and its base counts as resultance is in virtue of the epistemic work the connection can do for us—that we can explain why this act is cruel in terms of the fact that it caused harm, etc.) Similarly with the categories of defaults, enablers, disablers, and underminers: It is not that such distinctions make no sense, or that one can't regard them as “metaphysical,” but that the criteria for counting as a member of that class must concern its ability to play an epistemological role.

Finally, Dancy's view requires that quite a lot of weight be put on moral perception. As we've seen, every brand of particularist countenances the existence of moral discernment. For Dancy, though, our talents of discernment extend to knowledge of something's counting as a reason—not to mention enabler and disabler. Something's “being a reason”—this brute metaphysical relationship in (p. 588) no way tied to generality or theory—is now just one more atomic observable, akin to “being white.” Not a few philosophers will wonder whether this is a plausible candidate for such a treatment.

## 7. Defeasible Generalizations

Another set of particularists takes a very different tack. These philosophers insist that reasons, as explanations, cannot be unmoored from generalizations. Instead, the lesson of particularism is to challenge the first condition of classic Principles—the condition that generalizations, to be explanatory, must be exceptionless. Put differently, the lesson of valence switching is not to deny the role of theoretical generalizations in morality, but to

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give a different picture of what those generalizations must look like if they're to do the work asked of them.

When we reflect on the sorts of explanatory generalizations deployed in various theoretical enterprises, a notable feature emerges: Disciplines from epistemology to biology or semantics are rife with claims that seem explanatory even while they are porous—shot through with exceptions that cannot be usefully eliminated. As a rule, matches light when struck; for the most, appearances are warrant-conferring; absent defeaters, fish eggs turn into fish. Those drawn to holism will be skeptical of finding any tractable, concrete way to fill in the conditions in which the effects actually occur (of demarcating all the circumstances in which, say, fish eggs don't turn into fish). Yet the statements don't thereby seem empty—claiming simply that such effects *can* happen, or do unless they don't. Instead, the point of the generalizations seems to involve isolating a connection that is, for one reason or another, particularly telling of something's nature.

Aristotle called them “for the most part” generalizations. Such an expression is misleading, though, since the generalizations at issue aren't merely statistical reports of what usually happens. Indeed, they can concern an effect that in fact rarely happens—as with fish eggs, whose usual fate, after all, is to end up in another creature's belly. Further, except in arenas such as quantum mechanics that are ruled by genuinely statistical laws, statements about what is “usual” are contingent expressions of local happenings, not principles with significant explanatory import. One might call them ‘*ceteris paribus*’ generalizations, but this expression, too, can be a misleading way to pick out the sorts of generalizations here at issue. Literally meaning “other things being equal,” the qualifier ‘*ceteris paribus*’ includes enthymematic cases in which what is held equal is fully specifiable (think Boyle's gas laws), or again, can be used to isolate a specific force that (p. 589) always pushes in the same direction (think the forces of physics or, again, Ross's *prima facie* duties), and that, hence, doesn't allow exceptions to claims about the direction-*pushing* or good-*making* nature of the object. In contrast, the present generalizations are meant to tell us about the nature of something, not by standing in for better versions that would be free of exceptions to the isolated connection but by demarcating what has status *of* exception. We might call them “defeasible generalizations” to mark the point.

We have elsewhere urged that the semantic content of such qualified generalizations is best understood as one that unpacks the notion in explicitly normative terms, by reference to various notions of “privileged conditions” (Lance and Little, 2004, forthcoming). The core content of a defeasible generalization on this approach is the claim that “in privileged conditions,” all As are B: Understanding such a conditional is a matter *both* of understanding what, for its purposes, count as privileged conditions, *and* what compensatory moves are required by various deviations from those conditions. Such privileging, we've argued, is a genus with different species, including the privileging of paradigm over riff, of normal conditions over interfering ones, and of certain features as

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justificatorily prior to certain others. A great deal of the nuance of such claims, indeed, lies in unpacking which is at stake in a given claim.

Whether one is drawn to this semantics or another, though, such generalizations, if meaningful, offer a different way of reading the lesson of moral holism. The exceptions pointed to by the particularist need not stand in the way of genuinely explanatory generalizations; they can, instead, be marks that the explanations in question are ones offered by defeasible generalizations. The features of an act that are genuinely explanatory of its moral status—as opposed to random details of a narrative, or, again, contingently relevant features—are subjects of defeasible explanatory generalizations. In saying that defeasibly, lying is wrong-making, we are neither saying that these features always carry this valence nor merely asserting that it usually does in our neck of the woods; we are saying, instead, that where lying lacks this valence, as it sometimes or even often may do, it is in virtue of the ways it deviates from what are classified as paradigm or somehow illustrative conditions. In our view, again, this is best parsed out in terms of the notion of privileging maneuvers. Infliction of pain is defeasibly bad-making: It can be good-making, bad-making, or neutral, but its status in each case is understood by the way in which that given case relates to conditions that are in some appropriate sense privileged.

Moral defeasible generalizations, we believe, exhibit the full range of the privileging typology. Sometimes, the privileging is meant to mark out that something is morally *amiss* in cases where the countervalence holds. Take the moral status of killing. Killing is always wrong-making in privileged conditions; but in certain others—one's favorite postapocalyptic scenario, say, where the world is infested with vicious and unreasoning brutes intent on killing one's family—it may be a (p. 590) good-making feature of one's act that one shoot first and ask questions later. In such a case, though, the very fact that killing is not right-making is a signal that something in the situation (namely, the prevalence of vicious and unreasoning brutes) is morally defective—*would* that killing were here wrong-making! In these sorts of cases, privileged conditions are morally superior situations; the countervalence cases bear the “trace” that they are worse to the extent, and in the way, that they depart from those superior situations.

In another central sort of privileging, the priority of the privileged condition is an explanatory or justificatory one. Defeasibly, lying is wrong-making; but there are morally innocuous cases of reversed valence—as when lying while playing the game Diplomacy. Here, the priority of the privileged condition is constituted not by its moral superiority but by its explanatory primacy: We can understand a situation in which lying is wrong-making without resort to any context in which it has the opposite valence; but to understand the moral status of lying in Diplomacy, one must understand the players as having agreed to play a game with these rules in a context in which lying does have its typical valence. Without such an agreement, or without its having been made in a situation in which lying has the normal valence, it would not be thusly moral to lie during the play of the game.

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According to such a view, moral understanding essentially involves skill at “navigating the normal.” It requires understanding not just the various sorts of privileged conditions and notions of privilege, but where one is in relationship to them, what compensatory moves that relationship urges, and an ability to recognize the trace left by the necessary defeasible generalization in nonprivileged conditions.

Such a view can maintain a radical position on the valence-switching propensity of moral considerations without flattening the moral field in such a way as to render shoelace color and infliction of pain moral equals. Shoelace color and the infliction of pain can both be bad-making, but the similarity ends there. For while shoelace color can have various moral imports in various contexts, it has none of them defeasibly. In contrast, lying not only can have a negative moral import, but also, always, and necessarily, it has the property of being defeasibly bad-making.

In this way, note, the view can agree with Dancy that some properties constitute moral “defaults” in the metaphoric sense of “coming already with” a particular valence; but the notion of a default is no longer understood as some brute metaphysical feature unconnected to the giving of reasons and explanations. Rather, to say that some features have a default valence simply means that they defeasibly have that valence—that they have that valence, that is, in situations that are fundamental in one of the various senses.<sup>17</sup> It also makes clear the sense in which this notion of “default” is not equivalent to the notion of *epistemic default* (p. 591) fault—of the import one may presume the feature has until presented with evidence to the contrary. Lying will have an epistemic default status of being wrong-making in many contexts, but it precisely won't in deviant circumstances.

Now some who are attracted to this broad approach retain the antitheoretic stance common to so many particularists.<sup>18</sup> Defeasible moral generalizations, it is argued, while illuminating of underlying moral reality, are of no help in daily epistemology, for they are, once again, mere summaries of prior specific knowledge. One's conception of illustrative conditions, and again of the compensatory moves required by a situation's relation to them, is simply and entirely filled in by first-order verdicts of particular cases. Others, though—ourselves included—believe that moral experience can help give us a relatively independent grasp of the defeasible generalizations themselves. Even if one's understandings of defeasible generalizations and particular moral verdicts are inextricably *intertwined*, that is, one's skill at appreciating the generalizations can often be developed with some degree of independence from particular verdicts one might reach. The former can thus exert leverage on one's commitments about particular instances and can stand as serious epistemic checks on one's other moral intuitions. In such cases, understandings of defeasible generalizations can function, much as traditional theory was meant to, as both argument for moral conclusions and unifying explanation of moral phenomena.



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Such a view is nonetheless loyal to certain fundamental particularist claims. Just so long as one's epistemic grasp of the shape of the illustrative conditions, and of the difference that a departure from them makes, is not itself capturable as a set of Principles, the holism the particularist cherishes will be preserved. Further, and crucially, the view retains the core particularist claim that no moral verdict is guaranteed by any substantive explanatory considerations, conceived of independently of the particular case. It simply argues that such an insight does not stand in contrast to all generality, or even theoretical generalizations as laws; it stands in contrast to conceptions of those laws that obscure the centrality of our skills of navigating the space of privilege and exception. It is radical, if radical it seems, not because it is eliminativist of the epistemic use of explanatory laws but because it challenges so fundamentally a certain picture of how those laws must function.

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### Notes:

(1.) Note that McNaughton's view has interestingly changed; see McNaughton and Rawling, 2002.

(2.) Richardson, 1995, offers an excellent exposition of the difference. On analogy, he points out, one might believe that revealed preference theory counts as the correct theory of what practical reasons there are, while thinking that such a theory would be a dreadful guide for deliberation.

(3.) Modern Kantians differ according to which aspect receives emphasis in their own version of the theory. Some find Kant's method incapable of yielding meaningful directives but find wisdom in his respect-based normative ethics; some who resist much that is said at the level of emergent normative principles find most wisdom in the method—and then there are those who think them too intricately tied to be judged independently.

(4.) Which doesn't mean the predicate need be recognizably a moral one.

(5.) The conversation over "principlism" in bioethics has been dogged by just this confusion. Objections to Beauchamp and Childress's classic *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 2001, are a mixture of what are, by this essay's lights, genuine particularist worries and worries that the four principles they make use of are simply too abstract, or again too few, to be the most perspicuous such list to use.

(6.) There are interpreters of the Old Testament who maintain that this was the common understanding of early Hebrew scripture. God is not presenting us a theory—even an infallible one—or even a picture of goodness that can be understood as a coherent whole. He is merely giving orders, ones we would do well to follow.

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(7.) The manifest image is the conceptual space of ordinary objects, properties, and relations, most of which are noninferentially observable. The scientific image is the conceptual space of theoretical posits and the laws that govern them. This image is populated by purely theoretical entities—that is, by entities belief in whose existence is justifiable only inferentially. ('Scientific', in this sense, need have nothing to do with 'science' understood as a naturalistic enterprise.)

(8.) An example would be a utilitarian who endorsed a virtue theoretic moral epistemology, perhaps on the ground that the greatest utility in worlds reasonably close to ours would always be achieved by agents who trusted the judgments of virtuous moral experts. See again Richardson, 1995.

(9.) This paragraph is taken from Little, 2001.

(10.) The pain example is from Millgram, the Diplomacy example a variant of one of McNaughton's, and the pleasure example from Dancy.

(11.) This nice example is David McNaughton's, personal communication.

(12.) It is worth noting that just this move is made in epistemology by Wilfrid Sellars. One of the key points urged in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," 1956, is that there are many forms of epistemic dependence. A claim, according to Sellars, can be genuinely noninferentially justified, and yet its status as such depend on the existence of other beliefs of the agent. That is, a claim Q can depend for its status on another claim P, without P being a reason (or evidence) for Q. P is, to put it in Dancy's terms, an enabler of the noninferential status of Q. The same goes for inferential beliefs. It may be that P is good reason for Q only in the context of R, without this implying that it is really P and R that form the reason for Q.

(13.) So, if it is assumed that things are straightforward in the natural case, that learning the concept dog, say, is a matter of learning to perceive and identify dogs, and that this latter ability is merely coming to be in a particular sort of causal relation with dogs, then one would indeed find nonnaturalistically reducible moral concepts especially problematic.

(14.) Others argue that what matters most deeply is the anticodification theme made famous in McDowell's writings. After all, if there were crisply codifiable generalizations about which conditions count as enabling, we could accept the category split between reasons and "context" without needing to shift our underlying view of how moral explanation or epistemology works.

(15.) Jon may well be Uncle Bud, but there is a clear sense in which being Uncle Bud isn't the reason why he is Jon.

(16.) At times of course also with the relation of constitution, as when the picture is made up of dots.

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(17.) If the privilege is justificatory, then these precisely are cases not calling for justification. One can rely on a noninferential assumption that lying is bad-making.

(18.) Jay Garfield, 2000, is perhaps a good example. He seems to be drawn to what would broadly qualify as a defeasibility-based particularism, in our sense; yet he argues that the resulting moral generalizations, “suitably festooned with *ceteris paribus* clauses” (p. 200), are mere summaries of prior case verdicts. Hence they still serve no justificatory roles—only (valuable) heuristic and pedagogic ones.

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