

## a matter of principle

Forthcoming in *Noûs*

In the last few decades, moral philosophy in the tradition of Kant and Mill – ambitious moral theorizing – has been challenged by *moral particularism*. What moral particularists object to about what they typically conceive of as the hegemonic received dogma of moral theory, is its appeal to *principles*. So it is not hard to read off the titles of Jonathan Dancy’s *Ethics Without Principles* [EWP] and Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge’s *Principled Ethics* [PE] on which side of this debate they lie. These recent volumes bring the last few decades of debate over particularism to a head, and together provide a synoptic entry point, for those late to the party.<sup>1</sup>

The invitation to this party, of course, is one you might be leery of accepting. The particularism/generalism debate (‘generalist’ is the usual name for particularists’ opponents) is notoriously obscure, and it is not encouraging to be told by Jonathan Dancy that though he ‘used to think that particularism was a position in moral epistemology’, he now thinks that it is a view about moral metaphysics [EWP 140]. The debate’s reputation for obscurity is probably well-earned, and its latest turn is not beyond exemplifying this trend. For example, though his book outlines several models for how principles might work, it is disappointing to discover that nowhere in 215 pages of what is supposed to be the definitive statement of his anti-principle views, does Dancy tell us in so many words exactly what a principle is actually supposed to be. But the issues addressed in this debate are also deeply important, and of great centrality to moral theory. They are well worth struggling to sort out.

One of the many virtues of McKeever and Ridge’s volume is that they are careful to distinguish many different issues that might be at stake in the debate between particularists and their opponents. Distinguishing six different conceptions of moral principles, five different ways in which principles can be rejected, and two further binary questions over which particularists might vary, they open their volume with an intimidating array of up to 120 different

---

<sup>1</sup> Together with Hooker and Little [2000], they provide a picture of most of the debate about particularism.

combinatorially possible particularist positions. Their primary adversaries, however, are relatively few: Margaret Little and Mark Lance's (Little [2000], Lance and Little [2004], [2005]) rejection of all kinds of 'unhedged' principles, Richard Holton's [2002] 'principled particularist' idea that there are principles, but that no finite number of them suffices to cover the moral terrain, and of course, Jonathan Dancy's thesis, which they call *anti-transcendental particularism*, that 'the very possibility of moral thought and judgment does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles'.

The primary divisions worth being concerned about, however, are those between questions in moral epistemology – of the kind Dancy once thought particularism to be about – and those in moral metaphysics. I'll focus on moral metaphysics first, and briefly return to moral epistemology later. Since Dancy tells us that the question *he* is interested in is one in moral metaphysics, I'm guessing that he misspeaks, in telling us that his thesis is that 'the very possibility of moral thought and judgment' does not depend on 'the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles'. This sounds, after all, like a thesis about *moral thought*, not about the metaphysics of morality itself.

This consideration leads me to suspect that what Dancy is really concerned to reject are views like the following:

**clarkean generalism**     Nothing is wrong unless something is intrinsically wrong.

If something is intrinsically wrong, then it is wrong in its *own right*, and independently of the circumstances it is in. So if something is intrinsically wrong, then there must be an exceptionless generalization to the effect that anyone who does it is doing something wrong. Consequently, Clarkean generalism is a thesis about the metaphysics of morality – it says what things have to be like in order for anything to be wrong. And it is the thesis that this depends on *principles* – on something which grounds exceptionless generalizations. I call it 'Clarkean generalism', because it was a view prominently articulated by Samuel Clarke, and shared by the British Rationalists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, particularly by Ralph Cudworth and Richard Price.<sup>2</sup> Clarkean generalism about wrongness strikingly resembles Moore's thesis about goodness:

**moorean generalism**     Nothing is good unless something is intrinsically good.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Clarke [1706], Cudworth [1996], and Price [1948].

Since the final four chapters of EWP focus on questions about value, I'll be suggesting in a little bit that understanding Dancy as being motivated to reject this kind of view puts the details of his disagreement with Moore into perspective.

It is natural to read much of historical moral theorizing through the lens of Clarkean and Moorean generalism. The study of right action, on this view, is the search for the list of actions that are intrinsically wrong, and the study of value is the search for the list of things that are intrinsically good.<sup>3</sup> This is the theory of the right in the tradition of Clarke, Price, and Sidgwick, and the theory of value in the tradition of Mill and Moore. If Clarkean and Moorean generalism turned out to be false, then that would upset a major strand of the tradition in moral theorizing. It is natural, even, to perceive such views as hegemonic. If this is the view Dancy is attacking, then he is attacking a view that is important and widespread.

But it is also important to appreciate that plenty of perfectly general moral theorizing in the historical tradition rejects both Clarkean and Moorean generalism. Take, for example, a version of the Divine Command Theory, according to which *everything* that is wrong is wrong because God commands us not to do it. Through the lens of Clarkean generalism, it is natural to interpret such a view as holding that disobeying God is the one action that is intrinsically wrong, and that other actions are wrong insofar as they circumstantially involve (given God's actual commands) disobeying God (Cudworth [1996]). But that is not what Divine Command Theorists of this kind hold, on pain of incoherence (see Schroeder [2005a]). For their theory says that *everything* that is wrong is wrong because God commands us not to do it. But disobeying God is not the sort of thing that could be wrong because God commands us not to do it and it is wrong to disobey God (Cudworth [1996], Price [1948]).

Divine Command Theorists have a perfectly general explanatory theory of what makes things wrong, which commits them to exceptionless generalizations. So in some perfectly good senses of 'generalist', they are generalists *par excellence*. But they are not Clarkean generalists. According to Divine Command Theorists, *nothing* is intrinsically wrong – not even disobeying God – though many things are wrong by virtue of God's commands. So Clarkean generalism is an important and widespread view in ethical theory – and one worth evaluating in its own right – but rejecting it would not amount to rejecting moral generalizations wholesale. If Dancy thinks that

---

<sup>3</sup> This is a pervasive assumption, and philosophers who make it often assume that everyone else is committed to it, as well. For example, McNaughton and Rawling's [1991] preferred way of making the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative moral theories, for example, only works on the assumption of something like Clarkean generalism.

rejecting Clarkean generalism will leave no central place in moral philosophy for exceptionless generalizations, then he is mistaken.

Now, historically Clarkean generalism comes paired with a theory about moral explanations which complements and supports it. This theory is what I have elsewhere called the *Standard Model Theory*. According to the Standard Model Theory about wrongness,

**smt wrong**      If it is wrong for X to do A because X bears  $\mathfrak{R}$  to A, then that must be because doing what you are related to by  $\mathfrak{R}$  is wrong, and doing X is derivatively wrong, because it is a way of doing what you are related to by  $\mathfrak{R}$ .

The Standard Model Theory is just what you want to have in hand, if you are going to bat against a moral theory like the Divine Command Theory. It says that the Divine Command Theorist's claim that lying is wrong because God has commanded us not to lie can be correct *only if* it is wrong to disobey God – precisely what the Divine Command Theorist was concerned to deny. Now, obviously the Standard Model Theory is going to be something that such a Divine Command Theorist is going to reject, but that has not prevented numerous authors who implicitly accept something like the Standard Model Theory from using it to bludgeon not only the Divine Command Theory, but a wide array of theories that bear its same structure: of claiming to offer a perfectly general explanation of everything that is wrong.<sup>4</sup>

Analogous to the Standard Model Theory about wrongness is the Standard Model Theory of goodness, which supports and complements Moorean generalism:

**smt good**      If X is good because it is R, then that must be because being R is good, and X is derivatively good, because it is a way of getting something that is R.

Mill apparently accepts something like the Standard Model Theory of goodness; it is the most compelling explanation of the mysterious passage in *Utilitarianism* in which he argues that the question of what is intrinsically good is incapable of proof. I understand him to mean this: that if there were any further principles from which we could derive the conclusion that happiness is good because it has some other feature, then we would thereby have failed to show that it is *intrinsically*

---

<sup>4</sup> See Schroeder [2005a] for a general and detailed discussion. Also see Korsgaard [1996] for an explicit generalization of Clarke's arguments to this effect, and Hampton [1998] for a typical version of a structurally isomorphic argument, in her case advanced against instrumentalist conceptions of reasons.

good, because what would be intrinsically good would be having that further feature. That is why, I suspect, Mill thinks that the only way to convince you that happiness is intrinsically good is to get you to see that this is what you already think.

Now, I have been for some time now digressing on Clarkean generalism about wrongness, its Moorean cousin about goodness, and the theories about how moral explanations must work which complement them. I've been trying to provide at least some cursory evidence both that these theories have played a central and important role in the historical tradition, but also that they are quite strong – and by no means accepted by everyone who is in the business of looking for highly general, explanatory moral theories, or even for exceptionless generalizations. What I am about to suggest, however, is that it is fruitful and resolves a great deal of confusion about the issues and arguments over particularism, to suppose that Clarkean generalism, and views like it including Moorean generalism (and Rossian generalism, to be introduced shortly), are what Dancy's metaphysical version of particularism is primarily concerned to reject.

When we put together Clarkean generalism with the Standard Model Theory of wrongness, what we get is a theory according to which everything that is wrong is wrong *because* of some moral principle: because it is, given the circumstances, a case of doing something that is intrinsically wrong, and hence wrong in any circumstances. The role of moral principles in this theory is *explanatory*. Nothing could be wrong, except *because* of one of them. Now among the six possible interpretations offered by McKeever and Ridge of the nature of moral principles, is what looks to be a way of cashing out this idea: that moral principles are *truthmakers* for their instances: that in virtue of which their instances are true. This is a promising beginning – if the truth of Clarkean generalism is one of the central issues at stake in the debate over moral particularism, then it will be important to distinguish possible conceptions of principles on which they are *explanatory* in this kind of way. But they go on to set this important question aside: 'While [this question] is philosophically interesting, it is not a question we address in this book' [PE I2].

So why, if views like Clarkean generalism have played such an important role in historical moral theory, and are such a good candidate for what Dancy is trying to reject, do McKeever and Ridge so quickly set them aside? The answer appears to be that they are misled by their own, overly substantive, characterization of the problem in terms of *truthmaker* theory. R.M. Hare, they argue, was a paradigmatic generalist – in fact, Dancy's views were historically developed in response to Hare. But since Hare's prescriptivist theory has no place for truthmakers in the technical sense

– which are the province of the correspondence realist – the debate over this question can't be one that captures the sense in which Hare was a generalist.

There are two sorts of problem with this reasoning. The first is the contrast with another kind of generalism which McKeever and Ridge call *constitutive generalism*. Constitutive generalism, defended by Jackson, Pettit, and Smith [2000], is the view that the basic moral principles are in fact conceptual truths – their acceptance is required for conceptual competence in moral thought. The fact that Hare did not believe that there are any substantive basic moral principles that are required for conceptual competence in moral thought does not prevent McKeever and Ridge from spending an entire chapter discussing this topic. As McKeever and Ridge themselves note, there are 'many moral particularisms', and the different issues clumped together under the same title may in fact be quite different and espoused by different people.

The second problem with their reasoning is that truthmaker theory is only *one way* of making sense of claims about direction of explanation. Though Hare did not believe in truthmakers for moral truths, he did hold that some things are wrong because others are wrong. Simple 'because' claims like these are all that we need in order to be able to make sense of the general claim about explanatory priority which is a central part of the Clarkean generalist's model of morality. Hare will simply have a different metaethical theory about the semantics of these 'because' claims than the realist view entailed by truthmaker theory. It is unfortunate, then, that McKeever and Ridge so quickly set this important conception of generalism aside – not only because it is interesting, but because it plausibly distorts their understanding of Dancy, if I am correct that it is this kind of generalism which Dancy is most concerned to reject.

Take, for example, the relationship between holism and particularism, over which Dancy spends close to half of his book. Holism about reasons, as Dancy describes it, is the thesis that 'a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another.' Dancy makes huge weather out of the connection between holism and particularism, and admits that 'on occasions' he has 'been rash enough to claim that, given holism, moral principles are impossible' [EWP 80-81]. Yet it is quite obvious that it is consistent for there to be perfectly exceptionless generalizations about in which cases a feature is a reason in favor of some action and in which case it is an opposite reason. All these generalizations would need to do, for any given feature, would be to partition the possible cases into those in which it is a reason for some action, those in which it is no reason at all, and those in which it is a reason for the opposing action. If

there is such a non-empty partition, then holism is true, but this is described by an exceptionless generalization – perhaps even by quite a simple one.

How could Dancy have thought that holism entailed that moral principles are impossible, if moral principles are just exceptionless normative generalizations? Expanding on an argument earlier presented by Jackson, Pettit, and Smith [2000], McKeever and Ridge provide examples of plausible such generalizations. Since you can be a holist and still have exceptionless generalizations, holism seems not to entail particularism at all, but to be perfectly consistent with generalism. And this is one of McKeever and Ridge’s main talking points for the significance of their book – something that they think other generalists have failed to appreciate, in their rush to deny holism, in order to resist the argument for particularism on the basis of holism.

Though McKeever and Ridge are exactly right on this point, it is hard not to think that something is being missed. It is simply too obvious that it is at least logically possible for there to be generalizations about when a consideration is a reason and when it is not (or even when it is a contrary reason), for this to have plausibly been the sticking point all along. Moreover, even after acknowledging McKeever and Ridge’s examples, Dancy *still* claims that holism leads to a compelling argument for particularism (in fact, as I noted, he spends something like half of his book over this). So what could possibly be going on?

I think the answer is that Dancy really doesn’t just care about the existence of generalizations. He is worried about a particular kind of theory about the *explanation* of reasons. The theory he is worried about, is the counterpart to the Clarkean generalism that we encountered earlier, and Dancy’s preferred way of thinking about the problem is by reference to Ross. Now Ross didn’t accept Clarkean generalism. He thought that some actions are wrong, but no action is intrinsically wrong. But this, he held, is only because wrongness is an ‘all-things-considered’ notion, bringing together all of the *prima facie duties* that there are. But about *prima facie duties* themselves, Ross had a view structurally identical to Clarke’s:

**rossian generalism**      No action is a *prima facie* duty unless some action is intrinsically a *prima facie* duty.

According to Ross, there is a short list of actions which are intrinsically *prima facie* duties. So it follows that they are *prima facie* duties in any circumstances whatsoever. Now, since the things which are *prima facie* duties are action-types, let us suppose that an action-type is a property of particular actions. We can now translate back and forth between *prima facie* duty talk and how

Dancy seems to conceive of reasons in the following way: reasons are features (properties) of individual actions. A feature of some action is a reason to perform that action just in case that feature is an action-type which is a *prima facie* duty. This translation schema leads to the thesis that Dancy seems to be most concerned to reject:

**neo-rossian generalism** No feature is a reason to do what has it unless some feature is intrinsically a reason to do what has it.

And, of course, it is a perfectly good argument against neo-rossian generalism to insist that even if there are *some* features that are intrinsically reasons (and hence reasons in any circumstances whatsoever), there are not enough of these in order for all reasons to be derived from them. And this, I think, is one of the important things that Dancy is trying to say.

On my reading, one of the Big Issues Dancy means to confront in his espousal of particularism is the kind of background assumption that is shared by Clarkean generalism, Moorean generalism, and Rossian generalism – the idea that at bottom, once you get down to the basic (as opposed to the all-things-considered) moral categories, nothing can really be wrong (a reason, good) unless it is or is derived from something which is wrong (a reason, good) intrinsically – in its own right. This makes sense of why Dancy is so concerned with Ross, and it makes sense of what the issue about holism is all supposed to be about.

The argument from holism has certainly gotten a heated enough response to make it clear that this kind of background assumption is widely shared. Joseph Raz [2000] and Roger Crisp [2000], for example, have strongly reacted against holism, and clearly articulated their adherence to doctrines closely akin to what I am calling ‘neo-rossian generalism’. When Dancy says that some consideration is a reason only given some further circumstance – what Dancy calls an ‘enabler’ – they object that this *can’t* be right, unless there is a more basic reason hiding behind this, which is itself intrinsically a reason.

Whence the defensiveness in the face of holism? One of the things engaging with Dancy helps us to appreciate, is just how defensive so many of us are, when it comes to the thesis of holism, thinking that it *can’t* be that way. My interpretation that this is what is at stake offers, I think, a way of understanding why the question of holism strikes such a nerve, even though holism is perfectly consistent with the existence of exceptionless moral generalizations – and obviously so. So it looks to me like Dancy is concerned to reject a prominent and widely held kind of view – a dogma, even. It simply isn’t the rejection of all kinds of generalization – thinking that would

require conflating generalist theses like those of Clarke, Moore, and Ross with the postulation of exceptionless generalizations more generally.

Even so, however, I worry that Dancy's conclusion is exaggerated. If Rossian generalism is a suitable successor to Clarkean generalism, preserving its main ideas even in the face of evidence that nothing is (or too few things are) intrinsically wrong, perhaps an analogous move can provide a suitable successor to Rossian generalism, even in the face of evidence that nothing is (or too few things are) intrinsically a reason. In fact, Dancy points us the way toward how to develop such a view, when he considers the possibility that reasons might themselves be based on *defaults*, in a similar way to how Ross based wrongness on prima facie duties:

**default generalism**      No feature is a default unless some feature is intrinsically a default.

This idea is not, moreover, mere idle speculation; building in part on ideas in Schroeder [2005b] and [2007] and in part on the tools of non-monotonic logics, Jeff Harty ([2007], [forthcoming]) has shown in illuminating and precise detail how to model reasons as undefeated defaults, how to understand defaults, and how to understand their defeat by appeal to general principles. Harty's model allows for all of the distinctions and complications which Dancy insists on – enablers and defeaters for reasons, intensifiers (which make a reason stronger) and attenuators (which make it weaker), and so on. And it predicts how all of these phenomena work by appeal to general and well-motivated principles.

One of the basic ideas behind Ross's rejection of Clarkean generalism is that 'wrong' claims behave holistically not because they defy generalization, but because they are *generalizations* – summaries of the effects of *all* of the prima facie duties there are. Hence, they are 'holistic' in the same way that any universal generalization is holistic. Similarly, one of the basic ideas behind Harty's approach is that 'reason' claims behave holistically not because they defy generalization, but because they are themselves generalizations – this time about the effects of all of the *defaults* there are.<sup>5</sup> If something like Harty's proposal idea is right, then Dancy has shown us the way to a richer understanding of the fabric of morality, but it is still governed in predictable ways by explanatory generalizations.

---

<sup>5</sup> This is my way of putting the diagnosis, not Harty's; I elaborate on and further explain this diagnosis in Schroeder [unpublished].

Further evidence for the interpretation I've been offering derives from a look at the comparison between Dancy's views about the holism of *value* and Moore's doctrine of organic unities. In four chapters that Dancy obviously sees as an integral part of his project in EWP, but which can initially seem to be about quite a different topic than the holism-particularism dialectic of the first eight chapters, Dancy investigates holistic theses about value, and in this domain it is Moore, rather than Ross, who is the primary antagonist.

Dancy and Moore agree that when you put together some things that are good to make a bigger thing, the total value of the bigger thing can be sometimes greater than that the parts had by themselves. According to Moore, the parts have the same value as they always did, but the whole has some extra value, over and above the values of the parts. According to Dancy, when you put the parts together, they become more valuable, so that the value of the whole is still no greater than the sum of the values of the parts.

Moore's doctrine is dictated by his view that final or non-instrumental value is itself an intrinsic property. Since it is intrinsic, the value of each part can't come or go in virtue of its environment – what kind of whole it is part of. So the increased value of wholes must come from somewhere else than the parts – it must come from the value of the wholes themselves, and be intrinsic to *them* as an *organic unity*. But Dancy denies Moorean generalism for the same reasons as he denies Neo-Rossian generalism. They are both claims about what *has* to be the case – to the effect that nothing *can* be a reason (good), unless something is a reason (good) intrinsically. That is why he thinks that he wins, simply by illustrating another way that things *could* be.<sup>6</sup>

So much for moral metaphysics; McKeever and Ridge's master argument for their favored form of generalism, what they call *generalism as a regulative ideal*, begins with moral epistemology. The fact that we are able to arrive at moral judgments on the basis of finite descriptions of situations, they argue, means that we must have access to at least some set of *hedged* moral principles – generalizations which at least hold, other things being equal. If there were no such hedged principles, then we could not ever be justified in forming moral conclusions on the basis of limited sets of information. Without true hedged principles, limited information would never justify our moral conclusions.

---

<sup>6</sup> There may still be a problem about specifying the relevant modality, however. The Neo-Rossian generalist, for example, may acknowledge the intelligibility of Dancy's view, but claim that her thesis is one about metaphysical possibility, not about bare logical possibility. That would raise the stakes for what Dancy's argument must show.

The idea mentioned earlier, that normative claims behave holistically because they are really generalizations, raises a problem for this argument, however, unless it is further developed. We arrive at universal generalizations all of the time on the basis of limited evidence. It happens every time that we engage in inductive reasoning. Yet it is far from clear that inductive inferences cannot be justified unless there are true, hedged principles which say things like, ‘if you’ve seen 100 swans, and they are all white, then other things equal, all swans are white’. Even if *some* hedged principles like this are true, inductive inferences can be justified in at least some cases in which they are not. And all of this makes the claim that justified inference to moral conclusions on the basis of limited information has to require true hedged principles very suspicious. Presumably McKeever and Ridge would want to draw some distinction between these cases, but I’m not sure just what it is supposed to be.

To get to unhedged principles, McKeever and Ridge appeal to the concept of *practical wisdom*. The practically wise person is able to judge in new circumstances what is right and what is wrong, so long as she has access to complete information about those circumstances. The practically wise person cannot perform her task, they argue, unless there are finitely many things that she can check, in order to ascertain what is right and what is wrong – both finitely many (in fact, a relatively small number of) possible moral reasons, and finitely many (in fact, a relatively small number of) possible defeating conditions on those reasons.

I didn’t find this argument particularly convincing, either. For one, I wasn’t encouraged by their claim that practical wisdom as they conceive of it is something that particularists must grant, because they are not moral skeptics. Not being a moral skeptic may require allowing that there really is some moral knowledge, but I don’t see how it requires allowing that it is possible for someone to be able to correctly judge what is right and what is wrong in any completely new set of circumstances. Their consideration of cases of engagement with fiction does considerably better to support this point, however.

But more deeply, the argument from practical wisdom seems to jar with their idea that moral and epistemic reasons are very different in structure. Though McKeever and Ridge believe that moral reasons must be relatively few in number and have a relatively small set of possible defeaters, they allow that anything can be an epistemic reason for anything, and can in principle be defeated by just about anything. (In making this distinction, then are denying an analogy that Dancy places great weight on, and reasonably so, from the methodological standpoint of the natural working hypothesis that moral reasons and epistemic reasons are two kinds of the same

thing: reasons.) But of course, epistemic defeaters can defeat your claim to knowledge about any old thing. The fact that it is possible to know about any old thing, however, does not show that the list of possible epistemic reasons in favor and against had to be manageably short or that the list of their possible defeaters had to be, either. Yet we manage, all the same.

One generalist epistemological thesis that McKeever and Ridge *don't* defend, is the idea that our epistemic access to moral truths begins with general principles and proceeds to instances, as we subsume those under the principles. They explicitly reject one version of this view – the constitutive generalism of Jackson, Pettit, and Smith – and implicitly reject others, such as Clarke's view that moral knowledge comes from rational intuition, which is of principles. In general, though they make great efforts to find a place for principles in actual moral epistemology and prescriptive suggestions for moral thought, I think that McKeever and Ridge's declining to defend this kind of strong, principles-first, view about moral epistemology is evidence that among the many particularist theses, the ones about moral epistemology tend to be more plausible or compelling than the ones about moral metaphysics. At any rate, it is a sign of philosophical moderation, which is certainly a virtue.

The particularist literature has been thought to be a refuge for those with patience for the murky. But if Dancy's *Ethics Without Principles* is not quite a *paradigm* of philosophical clarity, it is without doubt a book that wrestles with the consequences of important and central ideas, and it contains flashes of genuine brilliance. McKeever and Ridge's *Principled Ethics*, meanwhile, injects much-needed clarity and organization into the debate, but in the process may – at least, so I have suggested here – have lost track of at least some of the big issues at stake. Though I disagree with much that they say about details, what their volume has in ample supply is common sense.

In the next stage of the debate, I look forward to more philosophers taking McKeever and Ridge's apt diagnosis of the 'many moral particularisms' further to heart than they have done, themselves. Until relatively recent responses to particularism such as that of McKeever and Ridge, no one set out to defend generalism *as such*. It is particularists, wrapped up in the idea of rejecting some central pillar of the hegemonic tradition that includes nearly everyone since Aristotle, who have sought to define 'generalism' as everything to which they are opposed. But once we can tease apart 120+ possible generalist theses, it becomes harder and harder to see any one generalist theory that has really played such a central role. Once we look closely, as I've tried to do here in at least a cursory way, I think philosophers' understandings of the nature and role of generalizations in their moral theories can be observed to be as diverse as those theories themselves.

All of these questions are interesting, but if this is right, then the attempt to defend ‘the tradition’ against particularists’ attack may be as misguided as the attack on ‘the tradition’ as such. Once we recognize the diversity of the many moral particularisms, we should tackle each on its own, and in its own terms. One of my own philosophical principles is that the only way to confidently evaluate philosophical theses is to keep firmly in view what is *important* about them. It is striking that neither Dancy nor McKeever and Ridge begin their books with a clear explanation of why their questions are important, other than to remind us that they are hotly disputed. It is easy to see why this is, of course; different ‘particularist’ theses may be important for vastly different reasons. But that, again, looks like an excellent reason to simply discuss them separately. Once we do so, new authors will be able to write books which start from scratch with a clear sense of what is at stake over their questions – rather than jumping into the middle of the discussion, and having to make sense of it before moving onward. Until then, these two volumes are well worth struggling with, both as a challenging introduction to these issues, and in search of the way forward.<sup>7</sup>

#### references

- Clarke, Samuel [1706]. *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation*. Selections reprinted in Raphael, ed., *British Moralists 1650-1800*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, 191-225.
- Crisp, Roger [2000]. ‘Particularizing Particularism.’ In Hooker and Little [2000]: 23-47.
- Cudworth, Ralph [1996] (1731). *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*. Sarah Hutton, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

---

<sup>7</sup> Special thanks to Earl Conee, Jake Ross, Stephen Finlay, Jeff Horby, Jonathan Dancy, Sean McKeever, and Michael Ridge.

- Dancy, Jonathan [2004]. *Ethics Without Principles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hampton, Jean [1998]. *The Authority of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holton, Richard [2002]. 'Principles and Particularisms.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl.: 169-210.
- Hooker, Brad, and Margaret Little, eds. [2000]. *Moral Particularism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Horty, John F. [2007]. 'Reasons as Defaults.' *Philosophers' Imprint* 7(3): [www.philosophersimprint.org/007003/](http://www.philosophersimprint.org/007003/).
- \_\_\_\_\_. [forthcoming]. 'Defaults with Priorities.' Forthcoming in *Journal of Philosophical Logic*.
- Jackson, Frank, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith [2000]. 'Ethical Particularism and Patterns.' In Hooker and Little [2000]: 79-99.
- Korsgaard, Christine [1996]. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lance, Mark, and Margaret Little [2004]. 'Defeasibility and the Normative Grasp of Content.' *Erkenntnis* 61: 435-455.
- \_\_\_\_\_. [2005]. 'Particularism and Anti-Theory.' In David Copp, ed., *Essays in Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Little, Margaret [2000]. 'Moral Generalities Revisited.' In Hooker and Little [2000]: 276-304.
- McKeever, Sean, and Michael Ridge [2006]. *Principled Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mill, John Stuart [1978] (1859). *Utilitarianism*. Elizabeth Rapaport, ed. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Moore, G.E. [1903]. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Price, Richard [1948]. *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*. D.D. Raphael, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Raz, Joseph [2000]. 'The Truth in Particularism.' In Hooker and Little [2000]: 48-78.
- Schroeder, Mark [2005a]. 'Cudworth and Normative Explanations.' *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 1(3): [www.jesp.org](http://www.jesp.org).
- \_\_\_\_\_. [2005b]. 'Instrumental Mythology.' *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* symposium 1: [www.jesp.org](http://www.jesp.org).
- \_\_\_\_\_. [2007]. 'Weighting for a Plausible Humean Theory of Reasons.' *Noûs* 41(1): 138-160.
- \_\_\_\_\_. [unpublished]. 'Holism, Weight, and Undercutting.' Unpublished manuscript.