

Moral Generalism and Moral Particularism

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Most of us are brought up to think that stealing is wrong, that you should keep your promises, that morality requires us not to hurt others, and so on. We recognize that moral principles like these may need to be made a bit sharper to deal with exceptions, such as its being morally permissible to hurt someone to defend yourself from them. But it is commonplace to think that there are correct moral principles at least in their vicinity. *Moral particularism*, as it figures in the past few decades of moral philosophy, is a family of views united by an opposition to giving moral principles a fundamental or important role in morality.¹ Particularism challenges the project of ambitious moral theory in the traditional style of Kant, Mill, and most other major figures in the history of moral philosophy. *Moral generalism* is, likewise, not a single sharply defined position but a family of views united by the thought that moral principles do play some such fundamental or important role.

This chapter first distinguishes two central roles that moral principles have traditionally been asked to play in moral theory and three different forms which opposition to principles playing either of those roles has taken. It then surveys some of the leading arguments for and against thinking that principles play these central roles and notes various questions that remain live.

1. TWO ROLES OF MORAL PRINCIPLES: STANDARDS AND GUIDES

What it means to deny that principles play some important role in morality depends on what a moral principle is. Some important features of principles seem clear. Principles by their very nature involve some kind of generality and a specifically moral principle presumably must deploy a moral predicate or concept, such as “right,” “wrong,” or “morally should.” If a moral principle is to be something that can be thought about, accepted, doubted, or denied, it must also be a proposition or at least expressible as one.

An account of what a moral principle is should not require any specific normative content. For instance, consequentialists and nonconsequentialists in normative ethics can all be generalists. Philosophers otherwise as diverse as Plato, Aquinas, Kant, Mill, Sidgwick, Moore, Ross, Hare, and Rawls debate whether the morally right thing to do is

what brings about the best outcome available, but agree that whatever the morally right thing to do may be, it can be captured in general principles.²

Nor should an account of what a moral principle is require any specific metaethical account of moral propositions or their subject matter. For instance, Mill, Moore, and Hare have significant differences regarding the semantics, metaphysics, and epistemology of morality. In semantics, for example, Hare holds the expressivist view that statements of moral principles express general prescriptions or other noncognitive attitudes (perhaps in a propositional guise), whereas Mill and Moore hold the cognitivist view that moral principles are in the business of stating beliefs concerning general moral facts. But they all count as generalists in virtue of accepting some or other form of utilitarianism as the fundamental principle of morality. These two points illustrate how the generalism-particularism debate concerns the structure of morality more than its specific normative content or metaethical foundations.

Looking at the roles that moral theorists have asked principles to play in morality provides a grip on what the sort of moral principles over which generalists and particularists disagree would need to be like. Moral theories can be thought of as having both a *theoretical* and a *practical* function. First, moral theories (like theories in general) aim to *explain* certain phenomena. Those who take morality seriously wish to know not merely what things are morally right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust, but also *why* they are so. Second, moral theories aim to *guide action*. Those who take morality seriously wish to figure out before acting (not merely in hindsight) what things are right and wrong, beneficial and harmful, cruel and kind.³ What generalists and particularists dispute is whether general principles serve any fundamental theoretical or practical function in morality beyond functioning merely as useful rules of thumb.

Principles would play an important theoretical role in morality if explanations of why things have the moral features they do depended on principles. Facts about which particular things have which moral features are not “brute” facts. They “result” from other, typically nonmoral, facts. For instance, some wrong actions are wrong in virtue of involving lying, others because they cause pain, and so on.⁴ One thing that principles can claim to do is somehow to fix a general connection between a moral feature like being right or being wrong and the features or conditions in virtue of which things have it.

One feature that such “standards” for the correct application of moral concepts must have to count as genuine principles are certain *modal* implications.⁵ For instance, they must support counterfactual conditionals (“If P were the case, then Q would be the case”); moreover, at least fundamental or nonderivative principles are usually regarded as necessary, not contingent. If a claim like “It is wrong to harm others” were correct merely as a summary of actual past harmings, it would not support the counterfactual “If I were to harm another person, that would be wrong.” If the former claim were also a necessary moral principle, it would entail something logically yet stronger, namely that harming others is wrong in all possible worlds.

Having the requisite modal character is not enough for counting as a genuine moral principle, however. One reason is that some moral claims with that character can be accepted on all hands. If “murder” were defined or analyzed as “wrongful killing,” then no one, particularists included, would need to deny the truth of “Murder is always wrong.” Its truth would be uninformative or trivial, and thus not material for an interesting debate. Another example of a trivial analytic moral truth (one that holds in virtue of the meanings of its terms) would be “Any action that is not permissible is wrong.” A genuine moral principle should be *substantive* in some sense. That said, the

generalism-particularism debate should leave it open whether some moral truths might be substantive and yet analytic. Particularists would protest if told that some such principle as Kant's fundamental Categorical Imperative is true, irrespective of whether it were held to be an analytic truth.

Similar neutrality applies to the epistemic status of moral principles. Many (though not all) generalists and particularists agree that basic moral knowledge is *a priori*. That provides one way to explain how we can have moral knowledge of hypothetical cases and come to know whether what we are considering doing is right or wrong before doing it.⁶ But particularists would protest if told that some such principle as the principle of utility is true, irrespective of whether it were held to be knowable *a priori*.

Another reason why the requisite modal character is not enough relates to the widely accepted claim that the moral "supervenes" on the nonmoral.⁷ This is to say that no two objects can differ in any moral respect without some nonmoral difference between the objects or the broader world(s) they inhabit. Assume that moral nihilism is false: some things are right and wrong, good and bad, and so on. And take a right action and an exhaustive description of the world in which it occurs (including the action itself). On these assumptions, supervenience entails that, necessarily, any action that is just like this one is also right. Particularists need not oppose necessary "supervenience functions" of this sort. An exhaustive description of a right act will include many facts that are irrelevant to whether it is right, such as having been done east of Hollywood. (Such a description may also be too complex to be a possible object of thought for cognitively limited humans.) By contrast, a genuine principle should refer only to features that are directly relevant to whether the moral feature in question obtains.⁸

A common conception of genuine moral standards accordingly requires that principles are *explanatory* of particular phenomena in some significant way. Normally phenomena are explained by factors that are suitably directly relevant to the obtaining of those phenomena. What explains why the bridge collapsed is not the presence of sunbathers by its side but its structural deterioration or the fact that a ship ran into it (as the case may be). There is something to the thought that if something in the vicinity of "Killing is wrong" states a genuine moral principle, it should make some significant contribution to explaining the wrongness of a particular killing that is wrong. Many have thought so, at any rate. (But it is not that simple, as we will see.)

Principles understood as standards come in two kinds, corresponding to a distinction between "contributory" and "overall" moral claims.⁹ Some moral claims concern the contribution of some factor to the moral character of a particular action or situation, whereas others express an overall moral assessment that is a function of all the various contributions. A principle may advance either sort of claim. Claims about moral reasons to act in certain ways are one example of contributory claims: they are claims about what considerations count in favor or against what actions or attitudes. Another example are pro tanto moral claims to the effect that something is right or wrong, or good or bad, *so far as* its being of a particular kind (promise-keeping, truth-telling, killing, etc.) goes. A prominent example of pro tanto moral claims is what W. D. Ross calls "prima facie" duties.¹⁰ This distinction is required because individual contributory claims rarely determine what one ought to do all things considered. Reasons can be opposed (most things have some features that count in their favor but others that count against them) and outweighed (considerations on one side are stronger than those on the other).

Overall moral assessment is determined jointly by the various morally relevant factors. The way such factors combine in different contexts to do this is clearly quite complex.

Consider, as but one example, conflicts between the duty to keep one's promises and the duty to help others. Sometimes, when a promise is trivial but the potential benefits to others are great, the right thing to do overall may be to break the promise. But when a lot is at stake in the promise and the potential benefits to others are minor, the right thing to do overall may instead be to keep the promise. In either case, the balance of reasons may shift yet again depending on whether any further morally relevant factors are in play and their importance. This may not happen in any straightforwardly additive fashion.¹¹

Contributory and overall principles play importantly different roles in the generalism-particularism debate. Many otherwise different classical moral theorists—Bentham, Mill, and Kant alike—agree that it is possible to spell out in general principles what one ought, all things considered, to do, in spite of all the complexity in how such facts are determined. Others, such as Ross and his plurality of “prima facie” duties, argue that while it is possible to specify principles determining how individual nonmoral features of circumstances contribute to their overall moral nature, the way these contributory factors combine to determine overall moral assessment is much too complex and sensitive to context to be captured by anything worth calling principles.

In contrast to both camps, contemporary particularists argue that the ways in which the nonmoral features of particular circumstances combine to make something morally relevant in the first place and determine its valence as morally positive or negative (and not merely to determine its weight relative to other relevant factors) is too complex and sensitive to context to be captured even in principles concerning how morality works at the contributory level, let alone in principles concerning how it works at the level of overall moral assessment. This will be discussed later as the “argument from holism.” The point for now is that debates about whether there are overall or merely contributory principles are typically classified as family disputes within generalism, whereas particularists are united by their opposition to principles of both kinds.¹²

Turning now to the practical function of morality, principles might play an important practical role by providing guidance for moral reasoning, decision, and action in the face of moral novelty, uncertainty, and difficulty. A principle counts as a valuable “guide” if people—or, at least, conscientious moral agents who care about living up to the demands of morality—can more reliably act in morally valuable ways and avoid immoral actions with its assistance than without it.¹³ A reliable guide for “acting well” in this sense need not be an “algorithmic” decision procedure that will achieve this goal without fail and can be applied to particular cases without any further exercise of judgment.¹⁴ Judgment is necessary (though fallible) even in the application of both the moral and nonmoral concepts that figure in principles. (To use a famous example by H. L. A. Hart, does a war-memorial statue of a Jeep count as a “vehicle” with respect to the rule “No vehicles in the park”?) This is especially clear with principles that require varied implementation in different cases (such as “Teachers should set work which is adjusted to each student’s level of ability”).¹⁵ As we will see, particularists nonetheless argue that, even allowing the need for judgment, relying on principles in deliberation is often a hindrance to acting well.

Particularists’ opposition to moral principles does not extend to everything one could decide to call a principle. As we will see, in addition to trivial moral truths (e.g., “Any action that is not permissible is wrong”), they can accept principles understood as rules of thumb or other heuristic aides for deliberation. For instance, they can grant that how past situations have turned out morally could be summarized in true generalizations that may be useful as one input to future deliberations. Such summary generalizations will lack the modal and explanatory implications discussed earlier. They are also in principle

dispensable in deliberation. Hence, they make no claim to play a fundamental theoretical or practical role.

2. THREE FORMS OF MORAL PARTICULARISM

We have seen that moral particularism is defined by opposition to general principles concerning not just the overall but also the contributory. There are three main forms which opposition to principles—whether as standards, guides, or both—may take within an antinihilist agreement that some substantive moral claims are correct and knowable. Since particularism is usually treated as a negation of generalism, there are three correspondingly different forms of generalism.

One form of particularism is that there *are no* true or correct moral principles. The second, an epistemic variant of the first, is that there is *no good evidence* for the existence of true or correct moral principles. The third option is that morality *in no way depends* on the existence of moral principles. A leading particularist, Jonathan Dancy, puts this idea as follows: “The possibility of moral thought and judgment do not depend upon the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles.”¹⁶ This position is logically weaker than the first two: it can allow that morality displays patterns that can be captured in something worth calling principles, but denies that morality must be so or that anything in morality hangs on it.

In the course of the debate, some particularists have moved toward this third form of particularism.¹⁷ What exactly it says turns on what kind of relation of dependence is at issue and how “moral thought and judgment” is to be understood.¹⁸ A natural option is to read the latter in epistemological or practical terms, that is, as concerning the nature of moral knowledge or moral deliberation. Here care must be taken to understand the question properly. Neither party is making mere descriptive empirical claims about how people in fact deliberate. Many generalists allow that there can be moral agents who do not accept or even implicitly rely on moral principles in their deliberations. Similarly, many particularists allow that some agents (however mistakenly) follow principles. The claims on both sides should be understood as concerning whether these agents can get their moral judgments reliably right. A different option is to frame the debate in metaphysical terms, as concerning how particular moral facts and distinctions (the things that our moral thought and judgment are *about*) relate to general moral principles.

Understood as a form of particularism about standards, this third form of particularism denies that particular moral facts and distinctions depend for their obtaining (or that moral judgments depend for their correctness) on principles. Understood as a form of particularism about guides, it denies that reliable moral guidance or the practical accessibility of moral truths depends on principles. These claims do not interpret generalists as saying that the very conditions of moral thought and judgment depend on principles. But if these claims are correct, principles will still have a hard time playing any fundamental role in explaining particular moral facts or guiding us to them.

3. THE THEORETICAL ROLE OF MORAL PRINCIPLES

Let us now review some main arguments that have been offered for and against moral particularism, beginning with the theoretical role of moral principles as standards. Consider first those particularists who claim that there are no true principles or no good

evidence for their existence. Generalists could settle their debate with those particularists in one of two ways.

One strategy is to try to establish some specific moral principle. This is not likely to provide a distinctive or swift resolution to debates about particularism. Historical and contemporary normative ethics already contain ample discussion of the merits of various specific principles. To any particular candidate, a particularist could reply that the spirit of generalism requires a supply of principles to cover the whole of morality. So establishing one specific principle helps the generalist cause only if it is an overarching overall principle like the principle of utility or Kant's Categorical Imperative. One thing that the long-standing debates in normative ethics have made clear is that although any overarching overall principle that purports to be substantive and explanatory will be highly controversial, such principles also often prove to be resourceful in dealing with putative counterexamples.

A different strategy is to pursue general considerations whose bearing on the role of principles in morality doesn't depend on any specific moral content. For instance, some defend metaethical claims to the effect that competence with moral concepts, and therefore their deployment in genuine moral judgments, requires at least an implicit or tacit grasp of some moral principles.¹⁹ This implies that there are some explanatory principles that are conceptual truths, even if it is difficult to work out what they are or we are incompetent in doing so. The plausibility of such views depends on the prospects for substantive and yet conceptual moral truths, its response to G. E. Moore's "Open Question Argument,"²⁰ and more.

The most prominent argument for particularism also appeals to a general claim that bears on the nature of moral principles and their role in morality. This is known as the argument from "holism." The holism at issue concerns an important kind of context-sensitivity of morality, and normative or justifying reasons for action generally, which bears on the theoretical role of principles in explaining particular moral facts. According to the holism of reasons, a consideration that is a normative reason to ϕ in one set of circumstances may not be (so far as its being a reason goes) any reason at all, or may even be a reason not to ϕ , in some different set of circumstances. Contrary to "atomism" about reasons, it is not part of what it is to be a reason for action that if some feature (e.g., that the act would save a life) provides a reason to ϕ in a particular context, then that feature provides a reason to ϕ in any other context where it is present.²¹ Analogous holisms can be formulated for other contributory notions, such as right-making and good-making factors. One example is that although actions that cause pleasure are often the better for it, they may be in no way better when they bring pleasure to a sadist delighting in his victim's pain; another is that even if the fact that I promised to do something is often a reason to do it, that fact may be no reason at all when the promise was given under duress or fraud.²²

Early developments of particularism presented general principles as incapable of capturing even contributory moral considerations if their behavior is contextually variable in this way. Generalists have taken issue with this argument with respect both to its soundness, contesting holism, and to its validity.

Some generalists argue that holism is false because morality is based on some factors that are or generate invariable reasons. Perhaps, for instance, morality is based on virtues and vices, and these give rise to invariable reasons. The idea would be that whether an action is right or good is determined by whether it is generous, courageous, just, and so on, and if something is generous, courageous, just, and so on, that is invariably a reason to do it. This view can grant to holists that considerations such as lying might have

variable moral import; perhaps not all lies need involve dishonesty, which is the real and invariable reason why lying is wrong, when it is.²³ In reply, some particularists deny that specific virtues and vices are invariably relevant in the same way. Perhaps actions can sometimes be worse for being honest or considerate, or better for being cruel. Others agree that cruelty always has negative moral valence and limit their holism to nonmoral considerations.²⁴

Other arguments against holism target the distinction that holism requires between considerations that are reasons (e.g., that I promised) and other features of the broader context which can be relevant to whether some consideration is a reason without themselves being reasons. Reasons are thus distinguished from two kinds of defeaters for their standing as reasons: the presence of “disablers” and the absence of “enablers.”²⁵ A disabler is a consideration whose presence makes something that would in its absence have been a reason not be one. Examples might be that my promise was given under duress or that the pleasure I would derive would be sadistic. An enabler is consideration whose presence is required to make something that would in its absence not have been a reason be one. An example might be that what I promised to do is itself morally permissible. Reasons can be variable in the way holism requires only if they depend on further background conditions that may vary by context.

Some generalists object that the examples in support of holism are ineffective because they specify reasons incompletely. Full reasons for action include the background conditions which holism classifies as disablers or enablers.²⁶ The reason for me to fix your bike is not simply that I promised; it is that I made an uncoerced and informed promise to fix your bike, and fixing your bike is not itself morally impermissible, and so on for any other relevant features of the background context. That we can pick out the full reason by mentioning just the fact that I promised without mentioning its enablers may reflect not the metaphysical nature of reasons but pragmatic facts about the workings of linguistic communication. If reasons are composed in this inclusive way, it becomes less plausible that what is a reason in one context may be no reason at all or even an opposite reason in a different context. This debate fast becomes difficult to track, because both sides rely on different judgments about what exactly is the reason in a particular case in the first place; hence the debate cannot be settled by examples alone.²⁷ Those judgments may also be unreliable in predictable ways, and hence a poor basis for arguments either way.²⁸ An important question here concerns the success of further arguments that the distinctions drawn by holism are metaphysically robust, not merely pragmatic.²⁹

A different response to the argument from holism is to argue that holism is compatible with generalism and hence does not support particularism even if true. A common claim here is that principles concerning moral reasons can incorporate as part of their content the very contextual variability of reasons that follows from holism.³⁰ Principles can make reference not only to features that provide reasons but also, in some or other fashion, to contextual features like disablers and enablers. Then a case where a pleasure would be sadistic (a disabler) would be tolerable exception, rather than a counterexample, to a principle that takes an action’s promoting pleasure as a reason to do it.

One particularist reply to this defense of generalism is that the argument from holism is best understood as indirect. Although holism is compatible with generalism, particularism provides a better explanation of holism. Given holism, it would be a mere “cosmic accident,” rather than anything supporting the dependence of morality on principles, if reasons behaved in a way that can be captured in general principles.³¹ How exactly such an indirect argument is to be understood is complicated.³² Some generalists offer

accounts of moral principles according to which the best overall explanation of particular moral facts under holism still rests, in some way or other, on principles.³³ Others argue that the way in which enablers, disablers, and all the other distinctions and complications on which holism insists work out in reasoning is predicted and explained by general and independently plausible principles about reasoning and thought.³⁴

The force of these objections to the validity of the argument from holism to particularism depends less on the extent to which morality is context-sensitive than on what exactly is required for something to qualify as a moral principle in the relevant sense. The main question here is whether general principles can capture all the context-sensitivity that they must capture to accommodate holism and still count as appropriately explanatory of particular moral facts.

The argument from holism remains a central focus of debates about particularism because discussions of it bear on a wide range of important further issues. One is whether genuine principles must hold without exception or may include some kind of qualifiers or hedges. Generalists can try to accommodate holism in two different ways depending on this issue.

One strategy is to pursue “unhedged” principles that enumerate the potential disablers and enablers. The idea is that it is possible to complete a list of the requisite qualifications and exceptions, thus arriving at least at contributory principles that hold without exception.³⁵ An example might be that the fact that one promised to do something will always be a reason to do it, provided that the promise was informed and uncoerced, requires nothing morally impermissible, has not been canceled by the promisee, and ___ (where the blank stands for all the further relevant features, whatever they may be).³⁶

The success of this strategy requires that the list of the potential disablers and enablers is finite. This claim has been defended by arguments from moral epistemology. One is that if knowledge of what is morally right and wrong in particular cases is possible (as particularists agree it is), then the idea that particular moral facts are not brute can be used to support generalism.³⁷ If the moral features of things result from their other features (such as that they are cases of lying, killing, and so on), then moral knowledge in particular cases requires appropriate sensitivity to these underlying features. Under holism this requires sensitivity not only to considerations that are reasons but also to the absence of various potential disablers, the presence of various enablers, or the presence of further considerations that might defeat the status of something as a disabler or enabler. Unless there were only finitely many factors for moral standards to list and for us to check, cognitively limited beings like us humans could not have moral knowledge, since we could not reliably judge whether various considerations are undefeated reasons.³⁸ But more remains to be said about why epistemological considerations should constrain the complexity of moral facts.

A different strategy is to allow that the list of potential exceptions and qualifications might be open-ended and not fully specifiable, but argue that general moral claims that are hedged in some way need not thereby fall short of other requirements on principles.³⁹ To be sure, certain ways of hedging principles would trivialize them. If “Breaking promises is wrong, other things being equal” amounted merely to “Breaking promises is wrong, except when it is not,” it could not explain when or why breaking promises is wrong. But many philosophers accept that the special sciences, such as biology and psychology, feature genuine laws that permit exceptions. Some argue that the same is true of morality: such claims as “In suitable conditions, lying is wrong,” or “All else equal, pain is bad” can state principles even if there is nothing wrong with some lies or nothing bad about some

instances of pain, so long as their hedge clauses can be given substantive content. This grants to particularists that substantive moral generalities may be subject to exceptions, but not that there are no genuine principles.

The success of this strategy requires an account of how hedged principles can be explanatory if they permit exceptions and how grasping them can improve our reliability in detecting reasons, disablers, enablers, and the like. On this score, some take the “unexceptional” cases where pain is bad, lying wrong, and so on, as basic and argue that exceptions can then be explained in terms of deviations from them.⁴⁰ But explanation might run deeper: just as the moral status of an action (as right or wrong, for instance) requires explanation in terms of its other features, why those other features contribute to its moral status as they do might itself require explanation; these might not be brute facts either. For instance, if some government policy is bad because it increases the inequality of well-being, perhaps there should also be some explanation of why such inequality has negative moral significance in the first place. (One might coherently wonder why inequality is not morally irrelevant instead.) Such an explanation might well turn on features that are not manifested by all instances of inequality. For instance, perhaps unequal distributions of well-being are bad when and because of some such deeper moral flaws as that they are unfair or not to everyone’s benefit. Exceptional cases might then be explained in the same stroke by the absence of the very same features whose presence explains why inequality is bad, when it is. Perhaps inequality as such is not bad when those who have less are worse off through a fault or choice of their own (in which case the inequality is not unfair) or when it makes everyone better off than they would otherwise be. Some generalists argue that the best account of this kind of explanation delivers principles that incorporate the common explanatory basis of both moral reasons and their enabling and defeating conditions.⁴¹

Here, too, more remains to be said. One issue is that how the notion of explanation is best understood in ethics remains controversial.⁴² In what ways is explanation in ethics similar to and different from explanation in other domains? Another issue is that some prominent accounts of laws of nature take them to be mere necessary universal generalizations in their logical form (“Necessarily, every F is G”).⁴³ Such generalizations are explained by their instances, irrespective of whether their truth is accidental or not. Laws of nature so conceived would then seem to be unable to explain their instances (why a particular F is G). Same issues arise about moral principles. For example, suppose that utilitarian moral theories are interpreted as saying that the rightness of every morally right act is fully grounded and explained by nonmoral facts about utility-maximization (tempered, if you like, with hedges about sadistic pleasure and the like). In that case the utilitarian principle would seem to be a kind of summary of the individual explanation relations between specific instantiations of moral rightness and utility-maximization—but idle in the explanation of rightness facts.⁴⁴

If moral principles were explanatorily idle in this way, the result might not be particularism. Particular moral facts and distinctions might still depend on a suitable supply of moral principles. But it is also not clear just what kind of generalism might result. It would prompt the question of what distinctive or special explanatory role moral principles are supposed to play with respect to particular moral facts. If they are not part of what explains why a particular act is wrong, do they instead underlie or otherwise mediate those first-order explanations—and if so, how? Or should we instead think that genuine moral principles are not mere universal generalizations but some different kind of thing? If we concluded that moral principles are generalizations that aren’t explanatory

in any distinctive way, the common conception of moral generalism as saying that morality depends on explanatory moral principles might require adjustment. Interpreting generalism as saying instead that morality depends on *substantive* moral principles might just move the bump in the rug. What might it be for a principle to be substantive, if not that it plays some distinctive explanatory role? All this matters also to our understanding of particularism, since these positions are defined as negations of each other.

4. THE PRACTICAL ROLE OF MORAL PRINCIPLES

So far we have focused on metaphysical arguments about generalism and particularism which primarily concern moral principles in their theoretical role as standards. Let us now turn briefly to arguments concerning moral principles in their practical role as guides.⁴⁵ Some such arguments are corollaries of theoretical considerations such as the argument from holism. If moral reasons were context-sensitive in some way that principles cannot capture, then relying on principles for guidance might be more likely than not to make our moral thought go astray. It might, for instance, encourage the thought that if a consideration was a reason to ϕ in one case, then it will be a reason to ϕ in others. If reasons holism is true, this is not guaranteed to be something we can rely on.⁴⁶ But generalism is hurt by this argument only insofar as it is incompatible with holism or otherwise unable to tolerate exceptions to principles.

A different worry is that even if principles can capture the holistic behavior of contributory moral considerations, they might be able to do so only by becoming too complex to be adequate guides. But since the roles of principles as standards and as guides are distinct, they can come apart.⁴⁷ A rule that is too simple to be accurate and explanatory with respect to all actual and possible cases in its scope might still be a valuable guide precisely if it oversimplifies in useful ways, even if it also sometimes leads to error.⁴⁸ For instance, “Killing is wrong” or “Killing is wrong except in self-defense” can be highly reliable heuristic guides in the actual world even if what is fundamentally wrong with killing is some more specific feature that is not possessed by all killings but behaves in a principled way. Nor will these generalities become unreliable simply if most killings are permissible cases of self-defense in hypothetical Mad Max worlds where it is a rule rather than an exception that your life is under threat.

One challenge to particularists is epistemological: How are we able to learn and get moral knowledge from experience, if not by coming to grasp generally applicable principles? This challenge is particularly pressing insofar as particularists want to agree that, as a general matter, pain is bad and breaking promises is wrong, and that we can know these kinds of general moral truths even while they fall short of counting as moral principles. One option is to treat such general moral truths as useful reminders that pain has often been bad in the past (etc.) and may well be so in the future. Experience can thus inform our judgments in new cases by telling us what sorts of features *can* or *would* be morally relevant and what sort of relevance these various features *can* or *would* have in different cases.⁴⁹ But one might worry that such information is too weak to secure reliably accurate judgments about particular cases. For all that information says, a given particular case can go any which way morally. It is thus not very clear how moral knowledge—or even reliable moral guidance—would be available to that multitude of us who are still trying to refine our moral sensitivities and judgment and advance on our path toward practical wisdom.

An alternative, more substantial option is to interpret general moral truths such as that pain is bad as saying that pain has a defeasible presumptive or “default” status of being bad or of being a reason against actions that would cause it.⁵⁰ Perhaps pain’s being bad doesn’t require any further explanation, but when pain is not bad something must explain why it is not. The same is not true for the color of my shoelaces even if wearing red shoelaces is bad in certain circumstances, such as when my doing so sends a signal to my accomplice in crime. This move promises to provide a more robust basis for moral knowledge. However, the notion of a default can be understood in several ways (e.g., as a pragmatic, epistemic, or metaphysical fact) and it remains disputed whether there is a notion of default reasons or default moral status which is both independently plausible and delivers a distinctively particularist account of moral knowledge.⁵¹

Other particularist arguments about principles as guides are more directly practical. Some particularists claim that relying on principles tends to direct our attention only to the features that already figure in our principles. This can lead us easily to miss morally relevant features that we would have noticed, had we only attended properly to the details and nuances of the particular case.⁵² At least in imperfect humans, relying on principles is more likely to breed moral laziness, rigidity, or narrow-mindedness than to cultivate the kind of moral sensitivity that marks the virtuous person. Some particularists recommend “principle abstinence” as an antidote.⁵³ This would seem to require that an appropriate sensitivity to the particulars will be sufficient for reliably acting well.

Some generalists respond that principles are more useful than anything that particularism can offer in ensuring the benefits of interpersonal assurance, coordination, or the like.⁵⁴ Others respond, more directly to the point of the objection, that principles may be able to provide reliable guidance even if their guidance is fallible and does not take the form of a rigid checklist of considerations. Generalists can agree that the kinds of sensitivity to reasons and skill of judgment on which particularists insist are necessary (though perhaps not sufficient) for acting well. Generalism can also accommodate the evidence from cognitive science that people’s moral decisions are often not consciously based on principles represented in propositional form.⁵⁵ Acceptance of principles might be better understood as informing and shaping one’s responsiveness to reasons and bringing with it a commitment to further cultivating moral sensitivity and judgment. Some generalists suggest further that reasonable moral agents must explain themselves when they have reason to doubt their moral judgment in a particular case, and that such explanations commit us to general moral principles.⁵⁶

For particularists, describing someone as “a person of principle” is criticism, not praise. But relying on principles that are more than mere rules of thumb for guidance need not mean dogmatism, rigidity, or narrow-mindedness. As a view about the structure of morality, generalism has no commitment to any particular substantive view about the content of the correct moral principles. Thus it need not recommend that people adhere dogmatically to the principles they accept and close their minds to moral improvement. Fundamentalists and fanatics aside, many people are uncertain about at least some of the moral views they hold and regard some others as capable of refinement and improvement. Generalists no less than particularists can acknowledge that our actual moral outlooks are works in progress and that resolving uncertainty, error, and disagreements about particular moral principles requires thinking hard about a wide range of notoriously difficult and controversial concrete moral problems. Both can agree that the best remedy for poor moral judgment is better moral judgment. But as with sex education, so with moral principles: teaching abstinence may not be the best policy.⁵⁷

NOTES

1. The most prominent particularists are Jonathan Dancy and Mark Lance and Margaret Little; they often cite the work of Iris Murdoch and John McDowell as inspiration. Most moral philosophers aren't particularists, but most of them would grant that it is a position worth taking seriously.
2. The case of Aristotle is more controversial. See McDowell (1979), Irwin (2000), and Leibowitz (2013).
3. These two roles that moral theories have been asked to play make different demands on moral claims. It is therefore possible that no moral claim, principle or otherwise, succeeds in playing both roles, and some division of labor may be required. Some philosophers deny that an adequate moral theory must be action-guiding.
4. Dancy (1993, 74, 2004, 85–7) notes that particularists agree.
5. I adopt the term “standard” from McKeever and Ridge (2006, 7).
6. Among particularists, Dancy holds the idiosyncratic view that basic moral knowledge is *contingent a priori* (2004, 146–8, for discussion, see McKeever and Ridge 2006, 159–69).
7. A good general introduction to the topic of supervenience is McLaughlin and Bennett (2021). On supervenience in ethics, see McPherson (2021).
8. Discussions of supervenience in the context of particularism include Dancy (1993, 73–8, 2004, 86–9), Jackson et al. (2000), Little (2000), McKeever and Ridge (2006, 7–8), Strandberg (2008), and Tsu (2016).
9. Dancy (2004, chs. 2–4) explains well both the distinction between the contributory and the overall and problems with various attempts to analyze the former in terms of the latter.
10. See Ross (1930, ch. 2). He grants that “prima facie duty” is a misleading label insofar as it suggests the epistemic notion “what at first appears to be a duty.” He means moral considerations that do not simply vanish if they are outweighed by other, stronger considerations, but remain in force (and may ground residual duties of compensation, regret, and the like). This is how “pro tanto,” as explained in the text, is to be understood.
11. Kagan (1988) and Dancy (2000). See also Berker (2007).
12. Dancy (1993, 2004) and Little (2000).
13. McKeever and Ridge (2006, ch. 9) and Väyrynen (2008).
14. As McDowell (1979) emphasizes, and such generalists as O'Neill (1996), Crisp (2000), McKeever and Ridge (2006), and Väyrynen (2008) agree.
15. O'Neill (1996, 75).
16. Dancy (2004, 7).
17. Compare, for instance, the positions defended in Dancy (1993) and Dancy (2004).
18. McKeever and Ridge (2006) and Väyrynen (2006).
19. Jackson et al. (2000), Peacocke (2004), and Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014).
20. Moore (1903/1993). Very roughly, the Open Question Argument aims to show that no substantive moral claims, such as “Pleasure is good,” are true merely in virtue of what terms like “pleasure” and “good” mean.
21. Holism can allow that some considerations may be invariable reasons, so long as they are so not *qua* reasons but because of idiosyncratic features, such as their particular content (Dancy 2000, 136–7).
22. Dancy (1993, 2000) and Little (2000) offer many examples like these. See also Cullity (2013).

23. Crisp (2000) and McNaughton and Rawling (2000).
24. Dancy (2004, 121–2) vs. McNaughton and Rawling (2000). See also Little (2000).
25. On these distinctions, see Dancy (2000, 2004, ch. 3). Reasons, disablers, and enablers can further be distinguished from “intensifiers” and “diminishers” (or “attenuators”), which can make a reason stronger or weaker in strength than it would otherwise have been. An excellent discussion of how these different kinds of normative relevance are related to each other is Bader (2016).
26. Stratton-Lake (2000), Hooker (2000, 2008), and Raz (2000, 2006). Tsu (2018) offers a different critique: reasons holism requires that features that function as reasons can be individuated separately from those that function as enablers, but this cannot be done.
27. McNaughton and Rawling (2000) and Väyrynen (2006).
28. Schroeder (2011).
29. Bader (2016) and Wygoda Cohen (2020).
30. Jackson et al. (2000), Väyrynen (2004, 2006), McKeever and Ridge (2005, 2006, ch. 2).
31. Little (2000, 277), Stratton-Lake (2000, 129), and Dancy (2004, 82).
32. McKeever and Ridge (2006, 32–41) and Leibowitz (2009).
33. Väyrynen (2006, 2009).
34. Horty (2007) and Schroeder (2009, 2011).
35. Ross (1930, ch. 2), Gert (1998), McKeever and Ridge (2006, ch. 7), and Hooker (2008).
36. An exceptionless generalization will not count as a genuine principle if it is merely accidentally true. One example from outside of morality is that “All gold spheres are less than a mile in diameter” is true, but not a law of nature.
37. This argument is due to McKeever and Ridge (2006, chs. 6–7). For critical discussion, see Schroeder (2009) and Väyrynen (2009).
38. There is a stronger claim in this vicinity, namely that the list of potential disablers and enablers must be not only finite but also short enough that principles can exhaustively specify them all without becoming too complex to be possible objects of (human) thought. If principles failed to be cognitively manageable in this sense, generalism about standards might be true, but epistemically irrelevant unless supplemented by guides for moral thought.
39. Pietroski (1993), Lance and Little (2006b, 2007), Robinson (2006), Väyrynen (2006, 2009).
40. Lance and Little (2006a, 2006b).
41. Väyrynen (2006, 2009) and Robinson (2006) develop two different accounts of this kind.
42. Little (2000), McKeever and Ridge (2006), Väyrynen (2009, 2021), and Leibowitz (2011).
43. Carroll (2020) is a useful survey.
44. Berker (2019) defends this kind of view. One response is Enoch (2019).
45. For reasons of space, I will survey both epistemological and practical arguments about particularism under this single heading. A longer treatment would usefully distinguish them, as is done by Ridge and McKeever (2020).
46. The truth of holism would also complicate the use of hypothetical cases like the trolley problems in normative ethics, since one might not be able to generalize widely from them. Compare Kagan (1988) and Dancy (1993).
47. Similarly, the content of the correct moral standards need not depend on contingent facts about human psychology in the way that what counts as a valuable guide so depends.

48. Sunstein (2005), McKeever and Ridge (2006, 8–9), and Väyrynen (2008).
49. Dancy (1993, 2004), Harman (2005), Leibowitz (2014), and Kuusela (2021).
50. Dancy (1993, 26, 103, 2004, 111–17). See also Cullity (2002), Thomas (2011), and Kuusela (2021). Lance and Little (2006a) defend the stronger position that default generalizations are explanatory despite their defeasibility; see the discussion of exceptions above.
51. McKeever and Ridge (2006, ch. 3) discuss various different notions of defaults; see also Väyrynen (2004). Horta (2007) discusses reasoning with defaults. Stangl (2006) is a critical discussion of both heuristic and default reasons accounts by particularists; Kuusela (2021) responds. Thomas (2011) defends a particularist default reasons account of moral knowledge and reasoning.
52. Zamzow (2015) argues that empirical evidence on these matters doesn't support this worry, but rather counts against particularism.
53. McNaughton (1988, 62, 190–3), Dancy (1993, 64, 67), and perhaps McDowell (1979).
54. Hooker (2000, 2008).
55. McKeever and Ridge (2006, ch. 9) and Väyrynen (2008). See also Dworkin (1995). For an extended discussion of the relationship between moral principles and the capacity and activity of moral judgment, see Albertzart (2014).
56. Mintoff (2016).
57. Thanks to Christian Miller for excellent comments on this chapter.

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