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Moral Particularism

Pekka Väyrynen
University of Leeds

Moral particularism, as it figures in the past few decades of moral philosophy, is not a single sharply defined position, but a family of views, united by an opposition to giving moral principles any fundamental role in morality.[1] As such, particularism challenges the project of ambitious moral theory in the traditional style of Kant, Mill, and virtually every other major figure in the history of moral philosophy. Moral generalism is, likewise, a family of views, united by the thought that moral principles do play some fundamental role.

This paper first distinguishes two central roles which 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 in recent literature. It then surveys some of the leading arguments for and against thinking that principles play these central roles.

1. Two Roles of 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 concept. 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.

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. Other philosophers who express sympathy towards particularism in some of their work include David McNaughton, Richard Holton, Anthony Price, Simon Kirchin, and Alan Thomas.

An account of what a moral principle is should not, however, require any specific normative content. For instance, consequentialists and non-consequentialists 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.

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 moral principles express general prescriptions or other non-cognitive attitudes (perhaps in a propositional guise), whereas Mill and Moore hold the cognitivist view that moral principles are in the business of capturing 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 which 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 understand 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 what things are right and wrong, beneficial and harmful, cruel and kind, before action, not only in hindsight.[2]

2 These two roles that moral theories have been asked to play make different demands on

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. Let us now consider these two roles in more detail.

Principles might play an important theoretical role in morality by explaining why things have the moral features they do. These are not 'brute' facts: the moral features of things 'result' from other, typically non-moral, features; for instance, some wrong actions are wrong in virtue of involving lying, others because they cause pain, and so on.[3] One thing that principles can claim to do is to provide a general connection between a given moral feature and the features or conditions in virtue of which things have it. To count as genuine principles, such 'standards' for the correct application of moral concepts must have modal and explanatory implications.[4]

Genuine moral standards have modal implications because they must support counterfactual conditionals ('If P were the case, then Q would be the case'); moreover, at least fundamental or non-derivative 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.

Some moral claims which have the requisite modal character can be accepted on all hands. If 'murder' were defined or analyzed as 'wrongful killing,' then 'Murder is wrong' would be a trivial analytic truth which no one, particularists included, need deny.[5] Similarly, some necessary moral truths,

moral claims. It is therefore possible that no moral claim, principle or otherwise, succeeds in playing both roles. Some philosophers deny that an adequate moral theory must be action-guiding.

3 Dancy (1993: 74; 2004: 85-7) notes that particularists agree. The general idea that moral facts hold in virtue of other facts is discussed in Strandberg (2008) and Väyrynen (2009a).

4 The term 'standard' is due to McKeever and Ridge (2006: 7).

5 Compare such standard examples of putative analytic truths as 'Bachelors are eligible unmarried adult males' or 'Nothing is both red all over and green all over.'

such as 'Any action that is not permissible is wrong,' are uninformative and not material for an interesting debate. But 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 principles. Many (though not all) generalists and particularists agree that basic moral knowledge is a priori. That would 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.

Other moral claims which have the requisite modal character fail to be explanatory. Consider the widely accepted claim that the moral 'supervenes' on the non-moral.[7] This is to say that no two objects can differ in any moral respect without some non-moral 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 which 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 to cognitively limited humans). By contrast, a genuine principle should refer only to features which are directly relevant to whether the moral feature in question obtains.[8]

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 introduction to the topic of supervenience is McLaughlin and Bennett (2008).

8 Discussions of supervenience in the context of particularism include Dancy (1993: 73-8; 2004: 86-9), Jackson, Pettit, and Smith (2000), Little (2000), McKeever and Ridge (2006: 7-8), and Strandberg (2008). See also Väyrynen (2009a: 298-9).

Principles understood as standards come in two kinds, corresponding to a distinction between 'contributory' and 'overall' moral claims.[9] Some moral claims concern a contribution of some factor to the moral character of a particular action or situation, whereas others express an overall moral assessment which is a function of all the various contributions. A principle may advance either sort of claim. Claims about moral reasons, as claims about what considerations count in favor or against what actions or attitudes, are one example of contributory claims. Another are pro tanto moral claims to the effect that something is right or wrong, or good or bad, or what one has reason to do or not do, so far as its being of a particular kind goes (promise-keeping, truth-telling, killing, ...). A prominent example of pro tanto moral claims are 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 sometimes, when a lot is at stake in the promise but the potential benefits to others are minor, the right thing to do overall may 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

9 Dancy (2004: Ch. 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 an epistemic notion (such as 'what at first appears to be a duty'). He means moral considerations which 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.

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 what one ought to do all things considered in general principles, despite 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 to possible specify principles determining how individual non-moral 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 non-moral 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 argument will be discussed below 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

11 Kagan (1988) and Dancy (2000). See also Berker (2007).
12 Dancy (1993; 2004) and Little (2000).

assistance than without it.[13] A reliable guide for 'acting well' in this sense need not be an 'algorithmic' decision procedure which 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 non-moral concepts which 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. 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 which may be useful as one input to future deliberations. Such summary generalizations will lack the requisite modal and explanatory implications. 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 Particularism

We have seen that particularism is defined by opposition to general principles concerning the contributory and the overall. There are three main forms which opposition to principles – whether as theoretical standards, practical guides, or both – may take within an anti-nihilist agreement that some substantive moral claims are correct and knowable. One is that there <u>are no</u> true or valid moral

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).

principles. The second, an evidential variant of the first, is that there is no good evidence for the existence of true or valid 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 some patterns that can be captured in principles, while denying that morality must be so or that anything in morality hangs on it.

In the course of the debate, some particularists have moved towards the third form of particularism.[17] What exactly it says turns on what kind of relation of dependence is at issue and what 'moral thought and judgment' is taken to cover.[18] Many generalists allow that there can be moral agents who do not accept or even implicitly rely on moral principles, just as many particularists allow that some agents (however mistakenly) follow principles. What these generalists would claim is not that such agents are incapable of engaging in moral thought and judgment, but that they are unlikely to get their moral judgments reliably right.

The third position counts as a form of particularism about standards so long as it denies that particular moral facts depend for their existence, or moral judgments for their correctness, on principles. And it counts as a form of particularism about guides so long as it denies that reliable moral guidance or the practical accessibility of moral truths depends on principles. These claims do not require that the very conditions of moral thought and judgment depend on principles. But if they are correct, principles will still have a hard time playing any fundamental role in explaining, or guiding us to, particular moral facts.

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).

3. Arguments for and against Particularism

Let us now review some main arguments that have been offered for and against moral particularism, beginning with the theoretical role of principles. 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. But this strategy 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. But one thing that the long-standing debates in normative ethics have made clear is that although any overarching overall principle which 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 some general considerations which are relevant to the role of principles in morality, whatever their specific content. Some argue that morality requires some principles, whatever their specific content, on the basis of 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 which are conceptual truths, even if it is difficult to work out what they are or we are incompetent in doing so. Hence its plausibility depends on the prospects for substantive and yet conceptual moral truths (to which generalism as such has no particular commitment, as noted earlier), its response to G. E. Moore's 'Open Question

19 Jackson, Pettit, and Smith (2000), as well as Peacocke (2004).

Argument,'[20] and more.

The most prominent argument for particularism also appeals to a general claim that bears on the role of principles in morality. This is known as the argument from 'holism.' The holism at issue concerns an important kind of context-sensitivity of morality, and reasons for action generally, which bears on the theoretical role of principles in explaining particular moral facts. According to holism about reasons for action, a consideration that is a reason to φ in one set of circumstances may be no reason at all, or a even a reason not to φ, in a 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 something is a reason to φ in a particular context, then it is a reason to φ in every other context.[21] Analogous holisms can be formulated for other contributory notions, such as right-making and good-making factors. One example is that although actions which cause pleasure are often the better for it, they are 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] Particularists argue that if reasons are contextually variable in the way that holism implies, then general principles are too blunt an instrument to capture their behavior across contexts. 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 which 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

20 Moore (1903/1993). Very roughly, the Open Question Argument aims to show that no substantive moral claims are true merely in virtue of their meaning.

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.

22 A large selection of such examples can be found in Dancy (1993, 2000) and Little (2000).

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), whereas others limit holism to non-moral 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 'defeaters,' whose presence makes something that would in their absence have been a reason not be one (perhaps, for example, that my promise was given under duress), and from 'enablers,' whose presence is required to make something that would in their absence not have been a reason be one (such as that what I promised to do is itself morally permissible).[25] Reasons can be variable in the way holism requires only if they depend on further background conditions which 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 defeaters or enablers.[26] Thus 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. If reasons are composed in this inclusive way, it becomes less plausible that what is a reason in one

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 (2001, 2004: Ch. 3). Reasons, defeaters, 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.

26 Stratton-Lake (2000), Hooker (2000; 2008), and Raz (2000; 2006).

context may be no reason at all or even an opposite reason in a different context. But 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]

Other generalists object to a claim which some particularists associate with holism, namely that any consideration whatever can be a reason, given suitable circumstances.[29] This threatens to 'flatten the moral landscape' by jettisoning the strong intuition that considerations like killing, infliction of pain, and truth-telling have a greater and deeper moral import than considerations like shoelace color or hair parting. Some particularists seek to capture this difference by arguing that some considerations, 'default' reasons, need no enablers and hence are reasons unless some defeater prevents them from being so, whereas others, 'non-default' reasons, are not reasons unless enabled by some features of the context.[30] Issues in this debate include which of the various possible notions of a default reason (e.g., pragmatic, epistemic, and metaphysical) particularism needs, which of these notions are plausible, and whether particularism offers the best account of any plausible default reasons that there might be.[31]

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 which follows from holism.[32] Principles can make

27 McNaughton and Rawling (2000) and Väyrynen (2006).
28 Schroeder (forthcoming).
29 Dancy (1993), Little (2000), and Cullity (2002). Holism alone does not yield this view, for reasons might be context-dependent without being determined solely by features of context.
30 Dancy (1993: 26, 103; 2004: 111-17) and Lance and Little (2006a).
31 Väyrynen (2004), McKeever and Ridge (2006: Ch. 3), and Horty (2007).
32 Jackson, Pettit, and Smith (2000), Väyrynen (2004; 2006), McKeever and Ridge (2005; 2006: Ch. 2).

reference not only to features which provide reasons but also, in some or other fashion, to contextual features like defeaters and enablers. For instance, one could endorse a principle like 'Necessarily, that an action promotes pleasure is a reason to do it, unless the pleasure is sadistic.' This specifies the fact that an action promotes pleasure as a reason for doing it and the condition that the pleasure is not sadistic as something which must obtain in any particular case in order for the fact that an action promotes pleasure to be a reason to do it.

One particularist reply to this objection is that the argument from holism is 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.[33] How exactly such an indirect argument is to be understood is a complicated issue.[34] Some generalists offer accounts of moral principles according to which the best overall explanation of particular moral facts under holism still relies on principles.[35] Others argue, on more epistemological grounds, that the way in which enablers, defeaters and all the other distinctions and complications on which holism insists work out in reasoning can in fact be predicted and explained by general and independently plausible principles.[36]

The force of these objections to the validity of the argument from holism depends less on the extent to which morality is context-sensitive than on what exactly is required by all the other conditions for being a principle. Thus an increasingly active topic of discussion has been whether general principles can capture all the context-sensitivity which they must capture to accommodate holism and still retain the requisite modal implications, count as appropriately explanatory of particular moral facts, and so on.

The argument from holism remains a central focus of debates about

33 Little (2000: 277), Stratton-Lake (2000: 129), and Dancy (2004: 82).
34 McKeever and Ridge (2006: 32-41) and Leibowitz (2009).
35 Väyrynen (2006; 2009b).
36 Horty (2007) and Schroeder (2009, forthcoming).

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 hedges. Generalists can try to accommodate holism in two different ways depending on this issue.

One strategy is to pursue 'unhedged' principles which enumerate the potential defeaters and enablers. The idea is that it is possible to specify a complete list of the requisite qualifications and exceptions, and thus to give at least contributory principles which hold without exception.[37] 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).[38]

The success of this strategy requires that the list of the potential defeaters 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 moral facts are not brute can be used to support generalism.[39] 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 which are reasons but also to the absence of various potential defeaters and the presence of various enablers, defeaters for defeaters, and the like. 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

37 Ross (1930: Ch. 2), Gert (1998), McKeever and Ridge (2006: Ch. 7), and Hooker (2008).

38 Note that not all exceptionless generalizations count as genuine principles. Some are merely accidentally true and therefore lack the requisite modal implications. One example from outside morality would be 'All nuggets of gold are smaller than 1,000 cubic meters.'

39 This argument is due to McKeever and Ridge (2006: Ch. 6-7). For critical discussion, see Schroeder (2009) and Väyrynen (2009b).

reliably judge whether various considerations are undefeated reasons.[40] 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 which are hedged in some way need not thereby fall short of other requirements on principles.[41] To be sure, certain ways of hedging principles do 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 which 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, defeaters, enablers, and the like. On this score, some take the 'unexceptional' cases where pain is bad, lying wrong, etc., as basic and argue that exceptions can then be explained in terms of deviations from them.[42] But explanation might run deeper: just as the moral status of an action (as right or wrong, for instance) requires explanation

40 There is a stronger claim in this vicinity, namely that the list of potential defeaters 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 epistemically irrelevant even if true. This alone would not be a problem for generalism about standards.

41 Pietroski (1993), Lance and Little (2006b; 2007), Robinson (2006), Väyrynen (2006; 2009b).

42 Lance and Little (2006a; b).

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 sensibly wonder why inequality is not morally irrelevant instead.) Such an explanation might well turn on features which 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 which incorporate the common explanatory basis of both moral reasons and their enabling and defeating conditions.[43] More remains to be said here as well. For instance, how the notion of explanation is best understood in ethics remains controversial.[44]

Let us now turn to arguments concerning principles in their practical role as guides. Some of these 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 agents go morally 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, whereas if holism is true, the consideration <u>can</u> make a moral difference in other cases, too, but is not

43 Väyrynen (2006; 2009b) and Robinson (2006) develop two different accounts of this kind.
44 Little (2000), McKeever and Ridge (2006), Väyrynen (2009a; b), and Leibowitz (forthcoming).

guaranteed to matter.[45]

Generalism is, however, hurt by this argument only if it is incompatible with holism. A different worry is that even if principles can capture holism, they might be able to do so only by becoming too complex to be adequate guides. But, again, the roles of principles as standards and as guides are distinct.[46] 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.[47] For instance, 'Killing is wrong' can be a reliable heuristic guide in the actual world even if what is fundamentally wrong with killing is some more specific feature not possessed by all killings and even if most killings are permissible in hypothetical Mad Max worlds.

Other particularist arguments are more directly practical. Some particularists claim that relying on principles tends to direct our attention only to the features which already figure in our principles and we may thus miss morally relevant features which we would have noticed, had we only given the details and nuances of the particular case the kind of attentive examination which particularists think can be sufficient for reliably acting well. So they claim that, at least in imperfect humans, relying on principles instead of cultivating the kind of moral sensitivity that marks the virtuous person easily breeds moral laziness, rigidity, or narrow-mindedness. They recommend 'principle abstinence' as an antidote.[48]

Some generalists respond that principles are more useful than anything particularism offers in ensuring the benefits of interpersonal assurance, coordination, and the like.[49] Others respond, more directly to the point of the objection, that principles may be able to provide reliable guidance even if their

45 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.

46 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.

47 Sunstein (2005), McKeever and Ridge (2006: 8-9), and Väyrynen (2008).

48 McNaughton (1988: 62, 190-3), Dancy (1993: 64, 67), and perhaps McDowell (1979).

49 Hooker (2000; 2008).

guidance is fallible and does not take the form of a rigid check-list of considerations. Generalists can agree that the kinds of sensitivity to reasons and skill of judgment on which particularists insist is necessary (though perhaps not sufficient) for acting well, and they can accommodate the evidence from cognitive science that people's moral decisions are often not consciously based on principles.[50] Acceptance of principles might instead be best understood as informing and shaping one's responsiveness to reasons and bringing with it a commitment to further cultivating moral sensitivity and judgment.

One challenge to particularists is to explain how we are able to learn from moral experience, as we plainly are, if not by coming to grasp generally applicable principles. The typical reply is that experience can inform our judgments in new cases by telling us what sorts of features can be morally relevant and what sort of relevance these various features can have in different cases. But getting from such information to accurate judgments of particular cases would seem to be quite complicated under particularism. So the worry arises whether particularists can offer valuable guidance to that multitude of us who are still trying to refine our moral sensitivities and judgment and advance on our path towards practical wisdom.

Particularists regard describing someone as 'a person of principle' as criticism, not praise. But relying on principles which 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 people to adhere dogmatically to the principles they accept.

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

50 McKeever and Ridge (2006: Ch. 9) and Väyrynen (2008). See also Dworkin (1995).

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 well not be the best policy.

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