Moral Particularism—Wrong and Bad

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What thoughts drive some philosophers to moral particularism? I think the ones with the widest currency are as follows: The best moral decisions often turn out to be the ones made by the most sensitive agents when they attend carefully to the details in the particular situation at hand. Furthermore, every attempt so far to codify moral requirements into a list of strictly ranked rules has ultimately failed to be plausible. Agents with enough experience of the world, or even merely with decent imaginations, know that whether one kind of moral consideration is more important than another kind depends ultimately on the particular case. ‘Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.’ Rules might be all right for those without the time or intelligence to think. However, where there is time and intelligence, the general rules, which are all potentially misleading, should be cast aside and the particular situation carefully scrutinized. This is the only way to get directly at the moral truth in the situation.

Such thoughts emanate from some of the most morally admirable people I know. Nevertheless, these thoughts overestimate the relative danger of making moral decisions by reference to general rules. Of course, poor general rules will lead us astray. And even good general rules can be misinterpreted or misapplied. Nevertheless, some non-trivial general rules do seem over­whelmingly sensible. These rules assert that certain properties always count morally against doing actions instantiating them and that other properties always count morally in favour of doing actions instantiating them. If particularism doesn’t deny what these general principles assert, it isn’t, I shall argue, a distinct position. If particularism does deny what they assert, particularism wages an uphill battle. Furthermore, I shall argue that particularism brings with it huge dangers that generalism doesn’t.

## Section 1: Some Views Not Distinctive of Moral Particularism

To be distinctive, moral particularism has to stick to some thesis that other moral theories reject. What thesis is distinctive of particularism? There is a thesis distinctive of particularism, and I shall say what it is in the following section. The present section points to theses often confused with particularism.

Consider the thesis that what is permissible is so situation-relative that the only predicate satisfied by all and only morally permissible actions is the predicate ‘is morally permissible’. This thesis will immediately require qualification since all and only morally permissible actions must also satisfy equivalent predicates, such as perhaps ‘is not wrong’. But I shall henceforth ignore the clutter necessary to accommodate conceptual equivalents.

Particularists most certainly do accept the thesis that the only predicate satisfied by all and only morally permissible actions is the predicate ‘is morally permissible’. And certainly many generalists reject it. For example, maximizing act-consequentialists reject it. They hold instead that all (and only) morally permissible acts not only satisfy the predicate ‘is morally permissible’ but also the predicate ‘would maximize the good’ (or, alternatively, the expected good). Likewise, satisficing act-consequentialists hold that all and only morally permissible acts satisfy the predicate ‘would produce “good enough” consequences’, or, alternatively, ‘has high enough expected value’. And different varieties of rule-consequentialists hold that all morally permissible acts are permitted by the set of rules with the greatest value or expected value. Meanwhile, Kantians think that all morally permissible acts satisfy the predicate ‘passes the categorical-imperative test’. And contractualists think that all morally permissible acts satisfy the predicate ‘is allowed by rules no one could reasonably reject as the basis for informed unforced general agreement’. Finally, many who think of themselves as virtue ethicists hold both that there is a general feature that makes certain settled dispositions virtues, and that all morally permissible actions satisfy the predicate ‘is what those virtues would allow one to do’.[[1]](#footnote--1)

So while particularists all accept the thesis that there is no predicate that all and only morally permissible acts satisfy in common except the predicate ‘is morally permissible’, many different kinds of generalists reject it. Then why can we not think that this is the thesis distinctive of particularism? The answer is that there are some generalists who agree with particularists about the thesis.

One very familiar kind of generalism holds that morality is composed of an irreducible plurality of principles that do not come in a strict order of priority.[[2]](#footnote-0) Generalist theories of this kind typically point to the principle against physically harming others except when necessary to defend either others or ourselves from physical harm. And they point to principles against stealing or destroying others’ property, breaking our promises, and lying. They also point to principles about giving special weight in our decisions (about the allocation of our own resources) to the welfare of those with whom we have special connections. Some principle about generally helping others also appears, as do principles about promoting justice, being grateful to one’s benefactors, and making reparation to those one has wronged.[[3]](#footnote-1) According to this familiar kind of generalism, whether an act is morally permissible depends on these principles.[[4]](#footnote-2) Let me call this form of generalism Ross-style generalism.

The other generalists—including rule-consequentialists, Kantians, contractualists, and (I think) virtue ethicists—will also want to endorse such principles. But Ross-style generalism dissents from those other kinds of generalism over the question of whether there is some further principle underwriting the various principles about harming others, stealing or destroying others’ property, promise-breaking, failing to help others, and so on.

Ross-style generalism maintains that these various principles about harming others, stealing or destroying others’ property, breaking one’s promises, and so on cannot themselves be usefully conjoined together to make one long principle. If the various principles came in a strict order of priority, then really there would be just one multi-faceted, hierarchical principle.[[5]](#footnote-3) It could take the following general form.

Never do A; never do B unless necessary to avoid doing A; never do C unless necessary to avoid doing A or B; never do D unless necessary to avoid doing A, B, or C; never do E unless necessary to avoid doing A, B, C, or D; etc.

If such a principle were correct, then every morally permissible act would satisfy a predicate other than the predicate ‘being morally permissible’. The further predicate all permissible acts would satisfy is the predicate ‘does not offend against the hierarchical principle “Never do A; never do B unless necessary to avoid doing A; …”’. (Note that a strict hierarchy of duties would resolve all conflicts between different kinds of moral consideration.)

Ross-style generalism denies that moral considerations come in a strict order of priority. In holding that moral considerations do not come in a strict order of priority, Ross-style generalists hold that none is necessarily always overriding. Rather, each is capable of being overridden by the others. In just this sense, general moral duties (general moral considerations) are in Ross’s terminology “prima facie”.[[6]](#footnote-4) Perhaps a better term is “pro tanto”.[[7]](#footnote-5) The idea is that a duty or consideration is overridable, not that it can be seen at first glance and yet on closer inspection may prove to be an illusion.

Ross-style generalism maintains that there is an ineliminable need for the exercise of judgement in order to resolve some conflicts between moral considerations. There will also of course be questions of interpretation. Interpretation is needed sometimes to ascertain whether an act would constitute breaking a promise, or whether an act would constitute destroying property, or stealing, or lying, or whether an event would make someone worse off, or whether someone’s connection to you entitles her to special weight in your practical reasoning.[[8]](#footnote-6)

In light of these points about Ross-style generalism, consider these comments of Dancy’s:

Reasons function in new ways on new occasions, and if we don’t recognize this fact and adapt our practice to it, we will make bad decisions. Generalism encourages a tendency not to look hard enough at the details of the case before one, quite apart from any over-simplistic tendency to rely on a few rules of dubious provenance. (Moral Reasons, 1993, p. 64)

But Ross-style generalism hardly tells us that the details of cases are always unimportant. On the contrary, Ross-style generalism holds that the details of the case can be crucial to the question of which generally important moral properties are instantiated. Furthermore, which of the instantiated properties is most important can depend on the details in the case.

Dancy acknowledges this (op. cit., pp. 56–7). Dancy agrees with Ross-style generalists that the details of the particular case determine which general moral properties are instantiated and which of these are most important in the case. But Dancy goes further. He maintains that whether a given property even counts morally for or against an act instantiating it depends on the circumstances.

Note that Ross-style generalists hold that satisfaction of the predicate ‘violates none of the pro tanto duties’ guarantees moral permissibility. But Ross-style generalists do not hold that all morally permissible acts satisfy the predicate ‘violates none of the pro tanto duties’. Some morally permissible acts violate one or more pro tanto duties. When pro tanto duties conflict, we can but try to decide which of the pro tanto duties is more important in the case at hand.

Section 2: Where Particularism and Ross-style Generalism Disagree

Again, Ross-style generalists agree with particularists that no one principle can determine always which acts are morally permissible. But Ross-style generalists—like all other generalists—disagree with particularists about whether there are general features of actions that always count morally on the same side such that these features help determine which acts are permissible, required, or wrong. Everyone accepts that some of the more abstract (‘thin’) moral properties of acts such as being right, being praiseworthy, and being virtuous always count positively from the moral perspective. Likewise, everyone accepts that other abstract (‘thin’) moral properties like being wrong, being blameworthy, and being vicious always count morally against.

But particularists and Ross-style generalists disagree about whether more specific properties always run in the same moral direction. Generalists hold that some more specific properties always count morally in favour of an action, and that other more specific properties always count morally against. Particularists hold that more specific properties may count morally in favour of actions in some cir­cumstances and against actions in other circumstances.[[9]](#footnote-7)

Consider, for example, pleasure. Particularists point out that the property of producing pleasure makes an act better in some circumstances, but worse in others. That an act would give pleasure to the sadist is not merely an overridden positive feature of the act. Rather, sadistic pleasure actually makes the act morally worse than it would be if it didn’t afford sadistic pleasure. As Dancy comments, the pleasure people get from watching hangings makes the hangings morally worse.

I do not see how particularism can win on this battlefield. Ross-style generalists try to ascertain a generally good-making property. Particularists then acknowledge that the property mentioned does often make acts morally better. But particularists go on to point to a context in which the property described counts against rather than for an action. At this point, Ross-style generalists have two obvious options.[[10]](#footnote-8)

One is to stick to the line that (for example) producing pleasure is always a pro tanto moral plus, even if the pleasure comes to a wicked and undeserving person. Noah Lemos defends this position.[[11]](#footnote-9) Lemos appeals to the principle that, if something is intrinsically good, anything intrinsically like it must also be intrinsically good. Lemos holds that Jones’s being pleased in Jones’s being pleased that Smith is happy is intrinsically like Jones’s being pleased in Jones’s being pleased that Smith is suffering. The first is altruistic pleasure and the second is sadistic pleasure. They obviously have different relations to other things—such as Smith’s happiness. But Lemos holds these two states of Jones are intrinsically alike.

I myself would not rest much weight on this line of argument. For I think it simply moves the battleground to the question of what counts as “intrinsically like”. Arguably, Jones’s being pleased in Jones’s being pleased that Smith is happy is not intrinsically like Jones’s being pleased in Jones’s being pleased that Smith is suffering.

Lemos has another argument in favour of the universal (i.e., unconditional) value of pleasure. Consider this state of affairs:

Jones’s being wicked and deserving no pleasure and Jones’s getting sadistic pleasure.

Lemos argues that reflection on this state of affairs shows that we hold that the sadistic pleasure is actually a good. For the state of affairs is very bad. And what is so bad is precisely that this wicked person gets pleasure, a benefit he ought not to have.

This is an intriguing argument. But it may not be compelling. The best way of attacking it starts with the distinction between benefit to a person and moral value. Thus Jones’s being pleased might constitute some benefit to him even if it has no moral value, indeed even if it has moral disvalue. Many philosophers would say that not just the moral but also the self-interested benefit of pleasure depends on its source. Pleasure based on the truth might constitute a greater self-interested benefit than does pleasure based on illusion. And pleasures accompanying more complex true beliefs or more complex achievements might constitute greater self-interested benefits than pleasures derived from simpler beliefs and simpler achievements.[[12]](#footnote-10) We might nevertheless hold that even the most base or vindictive pleasure constitutes some benefit to the agent. This is why we think that the pleasure that the wicked gets is an unjust benefit to him. Even the wrong kind of pleasure constitutes some benefit to the agent. But the moral status of pleasure depends on, among other things, what kind of pleasure it is.

Following up that thought, we might respond to particularists by admitting that sometimes pleasure is a morally good thing and sometimes pleasure is morally bad. Still, we might think we could make firm general eval­uations about kinds of pleasure. The fact that an act would produce non-sadistic pleasure counts always in its moral favour. The fact that an act would produce sadistic pleasure counts always against it morally. Non-sadistic pleasure is always a moral plus. Sadistic pleasure, even where a self-interested plus, is always a moral minus. Moral pluses and minuses might be outweighed by other moral considerations. Thus, all things considered, an act can be impermissible although it gives someone non-sadistic pleasure. Likewise, all things considered, an act can be permissible although it gives someone sadistic pleasure. Nevertheless, the moral polarity of sadistic and of non-sadistic pleasures never changes.

If (but not only if) we can run the above line, particularism is in trouble. For if we can run this line, then we can point to at least one general property—i.e. ‘would produce pleasure’—that always counts on the same moral side. When we point this out, we point to an informative general principle in normative ethics.

Dancy himself obviously hates sadistic pleasure.[[13]](#footnote-11) It is tempting to hold that sadistic pleasure is never a moral plus. But that tempting thought might be too hasty.

Suppose we believe that taking pleasure in the suffering of others is morally vicious, something deserving of retribution rather than reward. Suppose we also believe that benefiting others is always a moral plus, and that sadistic pleasure is a benefit to the person who ‘enjoys’ it. Now suppose we have a duty to promote justice. As those with sadistic desires get pleasure, their welfare increases—but so does the mismatch between what they deserve and what they get.[[14]](#footnote-12) The moral minus of the injustice always cancels out if not outweighs the moral plus of the benefit. So the fact that an act yields sadistic pleasure turns out never to be enough moral reason for doing that act. Since it is never enough moral reason for doing an act, we understandably but mistakenly slide to the thought that it isn’t even a moral plus at all.

As this discussion about benefiting others and promoting justice suggests, giving others non-sadistic pleasure isn’t the only thing that always counts as a moral plus. The fact that an act would benefit others, even if not by bringing them non-sadistic pleasure, always counts as a moral reason to do it. This reason can be overridden by other moral reasons. But it is a moral reason always anyway.

Likewise with promoting justice. How could the fact that an act would promote justice ever be anything less than a pro tanto moral plus? Again, justice may not be always overridingly important. But, where it is at stake, it always counts on the same side.

Now consider promise breaking. Does the fact that some act constitutes my breaking a promise count always on the same moral side? Perhaps centuries ago promise breaking was considered always a moral evil (even if sometimes less of an evil than the alternatives). Our modern understanding of promising, however, usually takes certain kinds of promises to carry no moral force. For example, morality exerts no pressure on agents to keep immoral promises.[[15]](#footnote-13) An immoral promise is a promise to physically harm someone, to steal, to destroy others’ property, to break another promise to someone else, or to promote injustice.

Our modern understanding of promising also dismisses promises that were made under certain conditions. Promises obtained under coercion or deception are without force. As Judith Jarvis Thomson writes, ‘anyone who thinks a word-giving whose source is coercion or fraud does nevertheless give a claim [a claim right to the person who was promised] is excessively respectful of what goes on in a word-giving.’[[16]](#footnote-14)

But what counts as coercion? We must be very careful not to count having been in a weak bargaining position as having been coerced. For if we did insist that binding exchanges of promises cannot be executed between parties in weak bargaining positions, then many mutually advantageous deals could not be struck, because the stronger party would see that the weaker party’s promise wouldn’t be binding. To undermine the possibility of exchanging binding promises between unequal parties would be bad all round. Remember that sometimes someone in a weak bargaining position wants desperately to be able to exchange trusted promises with someone in a stronger bargaining position, which would be impossible unless the promises are both binding.

My claim here is merely that differential bargaining power between the parties need not prevent their exchanging morally binding promises. Unequal bargaining power does not entail coercion. I accept, however, that promises obtained by fraud or coercion have no moral force.[[17]](#footnote-15)

Let me summarize the main points about promise keeping. We have to be careful to state our principle about promise keeping. And we must admit that promises are not always the most important moral consideration in play, not even if they are important promises.[[18]](#footnote-16) Still, we can state a general principle about promising: The fact that an act would involve keeping a morally permissible promise that was elicited from you without coercion or deception always counts morally in favour of your doing the act.

Now take stealing. Clearly, stealing is a moral minus. Yet there can be circumstances in which it is nevertheless justified. Suppose stealing someone’s change is the only way I can call an ambulance. I’m stealing the change, not borrowing it, because I have no idea whose it is, and will never be able to find out. Although stealing in such circumstances is morally right, the stealing as such has not become morally neutral, much less morally positive. Rather, it is a moral minus, though heavily outweighed by the other considerations in play in this situation.

Breaking promises to others and stealing or destroying their property are normally harmful to them, but not always. Furthermore, of course there are many ways to harm others other than stealing from them or breaking promises to them. Hence the need for an independent principle against harming others. But is harming others always a moral minus? Is harming the guilty as part of justified punishment any moral minus at all? Is harming someone in self-defense any moral minus? What about in the defense of innocent others? What about harming someone even when this is not part of one’s ends or means? What about harming others with their consent? What about harming their interests simply by outperforming them in some morally permissible competition?

As before, generalists have two obvious options here. One is to stick to the simpler line that, yes, harming others is always a pro tanto moral minus. In many cases, this minus is outweighted by opposing moral pluses. These might be the pluses of channeling disapproval of and deterring crime, or of protecting the innocent, or of respecting others’ autonomy, or of fostering the goods that come out of competition.

The generalists’ other option is to fine-tune their principle about harm. It might become ‘there is a pro tanto duty not to harm others except in the course of justified punishment, or of protecting the innocent, or of respecting their informed wishes, or of pursuing moral legitimate competition.’ Whichever option generalists take, they can think that their principle about harm gives them another weapon with which to beat particularism.

# Section 3: Examples of Merely Particular Good Practical Reasons?

Suppose we accept that generalism succeeds in showing that at least some moral considerations always have the same polarity—that some things always count morally in favour and some other things always count morally against. But what generalism needs to show, according to Dancy, is that every moral consideration must retain its polarity wherever it appears. Why? Once we admit that some moral considerations can switch their polarity depending on the circumstances, we have no reason to think of any given consideration in front of us now that it operates in the same way in all cases. Dancy suggests that, if some moral reasons are not general, then, as far as the logic of reasons goes, any reason before us may be merely particular, i.e., count in this case in a quite different way from in other cases. If a reason is really a particular one, we need not worry about how it would apply in other cases.

This seems unpersuasive to me, because generalists will say precisely the reverse thing back. If we admit that some moral reasons are general, then, as far as the logic of reasons goes, any moral reason before us may be general, i.e., count in this case as it does in other cases. If the reason is general, then we need to explore it by thinking about how it would apply in other cases.

Generalists point to some examples of perfectly general reasons. If these do indeed exist, then of course not all reasons are particular. Particularists in turn point to reasons they think are particular. If these exist, then not all reasons are general. If both general and essentially particular reasons exist, then the battle ends in stalemate, certainly not in victory for either side.

But are there any essentially particular practical reasons? Consider non-moral reasons:

For instance, that there will be nobody much else there is sometimes a good reason for going there, and sometimes a very good reason for staying away. That one of the candidates wants the job very much indeed is sometimes a reason for giving it to her and sometimes a reason for doing the opposite.[[19]](#footnote-17)

Very plausibly, all normative, or good, reasons for action are either moral or self-interested.[[20]](#footnote-18) If this is correct, we should try to interpret the example of a non-moral practical reason about the secluded spot as an example of an incomplete self-interested reason.[[21]](#footnote-19)

You have self-interested reasons to pursue pleasure and knowledge for yourself. Suppose going to the secluded spot in the bright sunshine will bring you pleasure. Suppose it will also give you some time away from distractions to think through some important questions. If so, it will perhaps increase the probability of your increasing your knowledge. If going to the secluded spot will increase either your pleasure or your knowledge or both, then self-interest gives you a good reason to go there.

Now suppose going to the same secluded spot in the middle of the night is traumatizing. Self-interest gives you a good reason to avoid things that are traumatizing. Thus you have a self-interested reason not to go there at night.

In these cases, the operative reasons are general. That some act would benefit you is a reason to do it. That an act would harm you is a reason not to do it. Of course whether going to a secluded spot would benefit or harm you depends on further facts. But this hardly lends support to particularism.

Turn now to Dancy’s example about the job candidate. We could take this as an example of moral reasons or of non-moral reasons. If we work for someone else, we have a moral reason to appoint the person who will (within moral limits) best serve our employer.[[22]](#footnote-20) If we work for ourselves, we have a non-moral reason to appoint the person best for ourselves. For the sake of argument, assume Dancy meant the example to be one about non-moral reasons. Then we can simply observe that the fact that someone very much wants the job could be evidence that this person would be happy in it and try hard. Or it could be evidence that the person is such a bad employee that she can’t find any other job. That the same fact in one context can be evidence for a conclusion and in another context evidence for the opposite conclusion does not immediately show that good reasons for action are not general.

# Section 4: Dancy’s Argument from Holism about Normative Reasons

Or does it? Dancy actually thinks it does. Indeed, his most general argument for particularism about reasons for action is that this is but an instance of a general holism about normative reasons. There are normative or good reasons for action, and normative or good reasons for belief. Dancy argues that all good reasons for belief are obviously holistic (context-dependent), and we have no powerful reason for believing that good reasons for action should be different, i.e., general. But if all good reasons for action are holistic, then they are particular in Dancy’s sense. So Dancy’s argument could be cast as:

P1 All good reasons for belief are holistic—i.e., context-dependent, particular.

P2 All good reasons for action are like good reasons for belief.

Thus, All good reasons for action are holistic (context-dependent, particular).

How are good reasons for belief supposed to be holistic? Under normal conditions, when I have the visual experience as of seeing red in front of me, this is a good reason for me to believe there is something red in front of me. But suppose I believe I have taken a drug that makes blue things appear red to me. Then my visual experience of red gives me a reason to think the thing in front of me is blue.

I find this sort of argument utterly unpersuasive. Consider its first premise—that all good reasons for belief are particular. I’m not at all confident this is correct. Perhaps a full specification of our reason for belief about a thing’s colour points not only to our visual experience but also to certain facts about context. Consider the case where I do have good reason to believe the thing is red. The reason here is that I have the visual experience of red and I believe I am in ‘standard conditions’. I believe, that is, that I am in normal lighting, have no mind-altering drugs in me, and no naturally blown fuses in my head. Likewise, in other circumstances, my good reason to believe the thing is instead blue is that I have the experience as of seeing red and I believe I have taken a drug that makes me see red where there is really blue.

If we believe that features of the context should be included in the full specification, we can still believe that usually they do not need to be mentioned in everyday reference to reasons for belief. They normally do not need to be mentioned if they are so standard that we simply presume they are in place unless we are warned otherwise. The opposing view, which Dancy prominently favours, is that features of the context must be left outside the full specification of a reason for belief. They are to be relegated to ‘enabling conditions’ or ‘defeating conditions’. My hunch is that these features of context should be included inside the full specification of the reason for belief. If my hunch about this is right, then we could hold a unified theory of normative reasons, according to which all normative reasons are general.

But I am much more confident that no argument starting from a premise about good reasons for belief could be part of a compelling argument for such a startling thesis as particularism about good reasons for action.[[23]](#footnote-21) The disanalogies between good reasons for belief and good reasons for action are deep and salient.

One disanalogy may be this. The goal of rational belief is to fit the truth. At least on most views, the truth is not constituted by what the agent has most reason to believe. So, on these views, there is a potential discrepancy between the goal of belief and what one has most reason to believe. But reasons for action constitute the goal of rational action; the goal of rational action is to do what there is best reason to do.

Another possible disanalogy may be that an outweighed reason for belief loses all its force, whereas an outweighed reason for action does not.

Suppose I see green in front of me but very firmly believe that I have been given a drug that makes red look green to me. Some philosophers think that in this case my experience as if seeing green gives me no reason whatsoever to think I’m seeing green. On the contrary, they say, it gives me reason to think I’ll looking at something that is red.

Outweighed reasons for action, on the other hand, do leave a trace. Suppose I have promised you to do something, but some much more pressing responsibility comes up. My reason to keep my promise is not outweighed. But it has a residue—I owe you at least an apology (maybe something more) though I was right to break my promise to you.

Some epistemological foundationalists will not agree with the contention that outweighed reasons for belief lose their force. But such foundationalists will presumably reject Dancy’s assumption of holism in the realm of reasons for belief. In any event, I return to the thesis that no argument starting from a premise about good reasons for belief could be part of a compelling argument for such a startling thesis as particularism about good reasons for action.

This fact renders highly suspect an argument with a premise ‘All good reasons for action are like good reasons for belief’. Admittedly, an argument of that form could reasonably convince us of an answer to a question to which we had no default answer. But what Dancy tries to do is use particularism about reasons for belief as a premise in an argument for particularism about reasons for action. He does this despite the fact that particularism about reasons for action is highly counterintuitive and thus has very widely been seen as dead in the water.[[24]](#footnote-22) To make fly what seems dead in the water, we need an argument employing overwhelmingly plausible premises. This rules out any argument with the premise ‘All good reasons for action are like good reasons for belief’.

Particularists may accuse me of having begged the question here. They might say that the argument in my previous paragraph points to a presumption against particularism, when particularism is precisely the thing at issue. How can I reason fairly from a presumption against particularism, given that particularists start with a presumption in favour of it (to say the least)?

In this section, I am not trying to persuade particularists to abandon their theory. This section has a different purpose. Its purpose is to point out to particularists that they shouldn’t expect anyone initially inclined against particularism (which after all is the vast majority of ethicists) to be persuaded by the argument from holism.

# Section 5: Particularism about the Content of Evaluative Concepts

As I indicated above, to be a moral particularist requires more than merely thinking that what is overall right or wrong depends on the circumstances. Ross-style generalists think that. To be distinctive, particularism must hold that the moral polarity of considerations need not be invariant across different particular cases. Again, generalists will at this point cite general considerations that do have invariant moral polarity. But particularists can put up one last-ditch fight.

Suppose generalists propose that the satisfaction of some general predicate, e.g. ‘produces pleasure’, is always a moral plus. The particularist replies that producing pleasure is only sometimes a moral plus. Worried by sadistic and other guilty pleasures, the generalist then proposes that it’s innocent pleasure that is always a moral plus. The particularist replies that we won’t be able to give a naturalistic specification of ‘innocent’. So if generalists add the restriction ‘innocent’, they have here abandoned the project of specifying general moral considerations in terms of some natural properties.

Particularists could take the same line with respect to justice. They might say that the very same natural properties that in one setting make someone or some state of affairs just might in another setting have the opposite effect. If so, there may be no principles tying general natural properties to moral conclusions (even conclusions about pro tanto weight).

The first point I want to make about this line of thought is that there certainly are at least some principles linking entirely natural properties to pro tanto duties. For example, that an act would bring about the involuntary death of a self-conscious human being who is not threatening others’ physical security is always a moral minus. Perhaps we do not even need the qualification ‘who is not threatening others’ physical security’. For perhaps bringing about the involuntary death of a self-conscious human always has something morally against it, though this consideration is often outweighed when that person threatens others’ physical security.

Furthermore, I think we should hope to find some principles picking out natural properties. For to the extent that questions of justice and rights aren’t tied down by concrete terminology—indeed, by the use of terms with at least fairly clear naturalistic truth conditions—people can have difficulty forming stable expectations. I shall come back to this.

Even if naturalism loses out to a particularism about evaluative concepts like ‘innocent’ and ‘just’, the problem with defining particularism as the doctrine that these concepts cannot be naturalistically specified is that this definition classifies as particularist many who took themselves to be anti-particularists. Take, for example, those consequentialists who think the good is not just pleasure but also significant achievement, important knowledge, and the appreciation of true beauty, and who admit that we can't give a plausible naturalistic explication of significant achievement or important knowledge or true beauty. Although such consequentialists might tie the right directly or indirectly to the good, they are not naturalists about the good. Yet such consequentialists become particularists on the definition of particularism now on the table. It can’t be right to offer an account of particularism that makes G. E. Moore or Derek Parfit come out as particularists.

# Section 6: Are Particular Moral Judgements Primary?

As Dancy and other particularists admit, general principles are certainly an important part of moral education. Particularists must admit this, since it would hardly be helpful to start off children’s moral education by telling them that what matters morally depends always only on the particular circumstances. Of course children start off learning about morality by learning general principles. They are told not to do ‘that’—where the ‘that’ means not merely this act on this particular occasion, but this kind of act. Parents typically teach their children by saying such things as ‘lying is bad’, not ‘lying is bad on this particular occasion’.

And children are grateful for general rules, as opposed to merely a series of particular prescriptions. Children naturally want to learn what kinds of act would anger the bigger people around them. They naturally want to learn the general features marking off the acts that anger (or please) the powerful. They want rules so that they know what to expect.

Sometimes moral particularists say moral principles are really just indications of the way a fact can count morally. This seems an especially weak answer if conjoined with the thesis, which some particularists assert, that any fact can be morally relevant. True, children need to learn which facts can be relevant. But they understandably hope this is some (relatively small) subset of all possible facts. Moreover, ideally what they want to know is which facts are relevant in which kinds of cases. They want to know, that is, some general principles.

Still, there is an argument we can imagine being put by particularists in favour of their view. This particularist argument starts with the claim that we have knowledge, in the first place, of how features of prospective actions count morally in particular situations.[[25]](#footnote-23) For example, I see that, in the particular case I’m considering, the fact that a certain act would keep my promise counts morally in favour of this action. I come to the same conclusion in a number of other cases. From these intuitions about these cases, ‘intuitive induction’ then generates the general rule that the fact that an act would constitute keeping an informed, uncoerced, morally permissible promise counts always morally in the act’s favour. But if we can always see what is important in particular cases without reference to general rules, what use are general rules?

Furthermore, what authority could rules have as against dissenting intuitions? Suppose I now come across a new case about which I have the intuition that the fact that an act would keep my promise does not seem to count at all in its favour in this case. How could the rule favouring keeping one’s informed, uncoerced, morally permissible promises have more authority than my conflicting intuition about the particular case? After all, the general rule was itself in effect merely a summary of the intuitions I’d had about a string of previous cases.

In The Right and the Good, Ross wrote,

We find by experience that this couple of matches and that couple make four matches, that this couple of balls on a wire and that couple make four balls: and by reflection on these and similar discoveries we come to see that it is of the nature of two and two to make four. In a precisely similar way, we see the prima facie rightness of an act which would be the fulfilment of a particular promise, and of another which would be the fulfilment of another promise, and when we have reached sufficient maturity to think in general terms, we apprehend prima facie rightness to belong to the nature of any fulfilment of promise. What comes first in time is the apprehension of the self-evident prima facie rightness of an individual act of a particular type. From this we come by reflection to apprehend the self-evident general principle of prima facie duty. (pp. 32–33)

Note the stress at the beginning of this passage on finding out things ‘by experience’. And note that at the end of the passage Ross specifies that the particular judgment ‘comes first in time’.

Dancy observes that Ross’s account of moral knowledge is ‘essentially empiricist’.[[26]](#footnote-24) I suspect that the general climate of respect for empiricism plus the acknowledged influence of Ross’s particularist friend H. A. Prichard persuaded Ross to hold that we apprehend particular moral truths before general ones. E. F. Carritt and C. D. Broad affirm almost the same thing about this as Ross does.[[27]](#footnote-25) Yet I know of no decent argument (in any of these or other writers) for the thesis that we apprehend particular moral truths first.

Ross offered a speculative story about history. In The Foundations of Ethics, he wrote,

We must suppose that when a certain degree of mental maturity had been reached, and a certain amount of attention had been … focused on acts which had hitherto been done without any thought of their rightness, they came to be recognized, first rather vaguely as suitable to the situation, and then, with more urgency, as called for by the situation. Thus first, as belonging to particular acts in virtue of a particular character they possessed, was rightness recognized. … [T]he general principle was later recognized by intuitive induction as being implied in the judgements already passed on particular acts. (p. 170)

This reduces to the claim that the first individuals to reach general principles must have already reached particular judgements. But why think this, unless because one thinks a general empiricism supports it? And even if, as a matter of historical fact, the first moral judgers did indeed make particular moral judgements before they espoused any general moral principle, why think this is more than a temporal contingency?

As for temporal matters, virtually all descendents of the first moral judgers, I take it, have learned general moral principles before making particular moral judgements. As I indicated, children start off being told ‘lying is bad’, not merely ‘lying on this particular occasion is bad’. The general principle is internalized before any particular judgements are made.

But are particular judgements ‘epistemically prior’ to general moral judgements in some non-temporal sense? Consider these two propositions:

(P) That an act would keep one’s informed, uncoerced, morally permissible promise is in this case a moral consideration in favour of one’s doing the act.

and

(G) That an act would keep one’s informed, uncoerced, morally permissible promise is always a moral consideration in favour of one’s doing the act.

There need be no logical error in believing (P) while not believing (G), but there must be a logical mistake in believing (G) while denying (P). This is a non-temporal sense in which (P) is epistemically prior to (G).

However, this non-temporal sense in which (P) is epistemically prior to (G) does not even entail that there has actually been someone who believed (P) without believing (G) or some other general principle that likewise entails (P). Of course particularists do believe particular propositions while denying the general principles entailing them. But the non-temporal sense in which (P) is epistemically prior to (G) does not entail that there have been some particularists. Much less does it entail that we have direct access to the truth of (P). The non-temporal sense in which (P) is epistemically prior to (G) is compatible with its being the case that our only, or at least best, access to the truth of (P) is via deduction from some general principle. Acquisition of moral knowledge may begin with acquisition of beliefs about how certain properties count in certain kinds of case

Dancy writes, ‘One way of seeing Ross is as trying to combine a particularist epistemology with a generalist metaphysic.’[[28]](#footnote-26) Dancy thinks we should keep Ross’s particularist epistemology and dump his generalist metaphysic. I think we should dump particularist epistemology and keep a generalist metaphysic.

# Section 7: Particularism versus the Value of Predictability

I think particularists won’t be able in the end to give an adequate account of moral education. But let me set that point aside to discuss a related point about grown-up moral agents.

One of the things a shared commitment to morality needs to do is provide people with some assurance that others won’t attack them, rob from them, break promises to them, or lie to them. Providing people with such assurance is of course one of law’s most important functions. Ideally, perhaps, people’s moral commitments would be adequate to provide this assurance, without the reinforcement of legal sanctions. But realistically we recognize the need for legal sanctions to protect persons and property from others, and to enforce contracts. Yet there are some things which both (a) we want people’s moral commitments to ensure that they do and (b) we do not want law to get involved with. An example may be that it is desirable for morality to pressure people to keep their spoken promises to their spouses, but we don’t want the law to poke its big nose into such matters. And even where law should and does stick in its nose, widespread internalization of moral restrictions is clearly needed. For knowing that others have certain firm moral dispositions can give us added assurance how they will behave.

Now if shared commitment to morality should, among other things, create settled expectations about how others will behave, how does particularism look? Imagine we knew of other people only that they were committed moral particularists. This is all we know of them—the particularist content of their moral view and their strong moral commitment to live by it. Would we have enough confidence that they’d virtually never attack us, rob from us, break their promises to us, etc.?

Some of my best friends think of themselves as moral particularists. These people are as dependable as anyone could reasonably desire. If one of them made a promise to me, I would certainly trust it. Experience has taught me these particular people are trustworthy. Is this empirical confirmation that moral particularism does provide enough assurance about how believers in it will behave?

But what morality people espouse and even think they follow might not be the morality they really follow. Think how common is the specter of someone who espouses kindness and sincerely thinks of himself as kind but is really uncaring, vindictive, ruthless, and so on. Since ‘actions speak louder than words’, if people who call themselves particularists act reliably and consistently in ways that accord with Ross-style generalism, I may certainly have good reason to think they won’t attack me, steal from me, break promises to me, or lie to me. My experience with them gives me good grounds for predicting their future behaviour. In fact, I may mostly ignore their own reports of their moral beliefs. I may think that these people are sincerely describing what they think they believe, but that they may be mistaken.

What we need to answer my question about particularism and reliable expectations is not merely someone who thinks of himself or herself as a particularist. What we need to consider is someone whom others think of as consistent with his or her particularist ethics. Suppose Patty is such a person. All you know of her is that she really does live by her particularist beliefs.

Now imagine that you can strike a deal with Patty. She wants you to help her get in her crop now in return for her promising to help you get yours in next month. If she would do what she promises, you would each be better off with the deal than without it. Half her crop would spoil if you didn’t help her, and she’d thus go bankrupt. Likewise, you need her help if you are to avoid going bankrupt.

Suppose you have no direct or indirect experience of Patty. Nor do you have time to ask others how trustworthy she is. All you have to go on is her self-description as a particularist.

If you had some means of forcing her to keep her side of the deal, then you wouldn’t need to rely on her moral attitudes to make her do it. You would have the means to force her to keep her side if you could bring in legal sanctions—e.g., by suing her if she doesn’t keep her side. Or you might be able to prove to the world she is unreliable if she doesn’t keep her side, and this would cost her more than would her keeping her side of her deal with you.

But suppose neither the threat of legal sanctions nor the threat of ruining her reputation would be enough next month to get her to keep her side of the deal. That is, suppose legal enforcement mechanisms and reputational effects are for some reason ineffective here. Assume that the only thing that could possibly make her to keep her promise is her moral outlook. Assume there is no doubt about the strength of her moral motivation. She is completely committed to behaving morally, according to her moral outlook. The question is only whether her moral outlook, if consistently particularist, gives you enough assurance now.

As a particularist, Patty thinks that there are no considerations that always retain their moral polarity. She thinks a consideration (e.g., the fact that she promised to do something) might be a reason for keeping her side of the deal in one situation, but a reason against keeping it in another situation. So, will she think that having made a promise to you gives her any reason to do what she promised?

Not necessarily. As a particularist, she can might attach no weight whatsoever to the promise when the time comes to keep it. And, as a particularist, she can’t point to any general considerations that mark off the situations in which a promise would be morally binding from the situations in which it wouldn’t. As a particularist, she also thinks that any fact can be morally relevant, depending on the circumstances. So she thinks any fact could conceivably interfere with the moral status and force of the promise. If Patty would really live by such beliefs, how much could you trust her?

We might think that someone would have to misunderstand the very nature of a promise in order to think that an informed uncoerced promise whose content is reasonable could lack moral force. We might also think that an ineliminable part of being trustworthy is being disposed to attach weight to every one of one’s promises as long as they were informed, uncoerced, and had reasonable contents. If this claim about the concept ‘trustworthy’ is right, then it a true particularist cannot meet the necessary conditions for being trustworthy.

Rather than rely on this conceptual argument against trusting the particularist, I want to point to a practical argument. How much trust would you put in the particularist Patty in my example? Would you trust her enough to make the deal with her? If the answer is no, then you would both be worse off than if you made the deal and then both kept their sides of it. But if you knew nothing of her except the information specified, you would have little assurance that you could predict how she would behave.

I myself think this is an extremely important argument against particularism. Of course, if the example about promise keeping is correct, the point generalizes to other moral considerations. If philosophers accept that there are general pro tanto duties, they are not particularists. If they are particularists, they think that the fact that some adult human beings have neither killed nor threatened others nor asked to be killed themselves is not need not be any moral reason to avoid killing them. Particularists will think that no moral reason for action always emerges from the fact that some property is owned by others, or from the fact that a statement would be a lie, or from the fact that some act would promote justice or relieve undeserved suffering. How safe would you feel in a society of people who lived by these beliefs?

Particularists might try to defend their view by pointing out that Ross-style generalism is not absolutist. Absolutist generalism about promise breaking, in contrast, holds that promise breaking could absolutely never be morally permissible. Ross-style generalism gives promises only pro tanto force. In other words, Ross-style generalism holds that promise-breaking is always a moral minus but can sometimes be permissible, or even morally required, if there are important moral reasons on the side of breaking the promise. Then particularists might claim that, in order to trust Ross-style generalists, we would need to trust their exercise of moral judgement about when to keep a promise. If we can rely on Ross-style generalists to exercise good moral judgement about when to keep promises (particularists might retort) then we can likewise rely on particularists.

Let us compare our particularist Patty with a Ross-style generalist, Gerry. Gerry believes that physically harming others is a serious moral minus, and that stealing or destroying others’ property, promise breaking, and lying are moral minuses. He also believes that promoting justice, helping others, and expressing gratitude are moral pluses. But he believes each of these considerations can be overridden. Just like Patty, Gerry promises you that, if you help him get his crop in this week, he will help you with yours next month. You can make a deal either with Gerry or with Patty but not with both. As is the case with respect to Patty, you cannot depend on either law enforcement or concern about reputation to get Gerry to keep a promise to you. As with Patty, the only thing that might make him keep his promise is morality. You know what morality he is committed to, including which general principles he subscribes to, but you have not had experience with him before and can’t ask others how he behaves. In sum, as is the case with respect to the particularist Patty, the moral convictions of our generalist Gerry are the only thing that could induce him to keep his promise, and his morality is the only thing you know about him.

You know Gerry subscribes to the general principle that promise-breaking is always a moral minus, unless the promise is extracted by means of coercion or deliberate deception, or is itself an immoral promise. None of these general defeating conditions obtains in the case at hand. So Gerry would hold that breaking his promise to you is a moral minus.

Admittedly, Gerry does not think that breaking his promise to you would necessarily be, all things considered, wrong. He is not an absolutist about the wrongness of promise breaking. He admits that, in certain circumstances, he should and would break his promise to you even though your financial ruin would result. In particular, he would break his promise if necessary to save the life or limb of anyone for whom he has special responsibility (because of some very special connection he has with this person).[[29]](#footnote-27) So Gerry would break his promise if necessary to save the life or limb of his parent, or family member, or friend. He would not break his promise to you, in order to work for Oxfam for the week (though this predictably would prevent more suffering and loss). For he believes the people whom Oxfam aims to rescue are not ones for which he has any special responsibility.[[30]](#footnote-28)

So, to decide whether you should depend upon Gerry, what you’d need to know is the probability of his deciding he has to break his promise in order to protect the life or limb of someone for whom he has special responsibility. Now we should admit, I think, that it isn’t exactly clear for whom Gerry thinks he has special responsibility. And even with respect to someone who falls squarely within the circle, it isn’t exactly clear how high the risk to that person’s life or limb would have to be in order to induce Gerry to abandon his promise for the sake of protecting this person. A one-in-a-million risk is obviously too little. A one-in-two risk is obviously enough. But where is the threshold between too little risk to justify breaking the promise and enough risk to justify breaking it?

For all that, you have vastly less to worry about with the generalist Gerry than with the particularist Patty. First, Gerry necessarily attaches some moral weight to the promise; Patty does not necessarily attach any moral weight to the promise. Second, there are only a very limited number of facts that might interfere with Gerry’s deciding to keep his promise. Admittedly, these facts may require interpretation and the exercise of judgement. Still, there are reasonably clear limits with Gerry. But with Patty, any fact can become pivotal to whether she will take her having promised as any moral reason at all for her to do what she promised. Given these points, and given the limited information you have about the Ross-style generalist Gerry and the particularist Patty, clearly you should think Gerry would be more likely to keep his promise to you than Patty would.

Let me be clear that the argument above does not beg the question against particularism by assuming the particularist is going to make more moral mistakes than the Ross-style generalist. My argument was that, whether or not particularism is likely to lead agents to make moral mistakes, the Ross-style generalist seems in the circumstances more likely than the particularist to keep the promise. Such circumstances are, apart from the transparency, extremely common. We often need to rely on people’s moral convictions to make them behave in certain ways.

I am not begging the question by assuming the particularist agent would make morally wrong decisions. To see this, compare the absolutist about promise-keeping with the Ross-style generalist. The absolutist will be more trustworthy than the Ross-style generalist. This is true even though (as most of us believe) absolutism is mistaken. Since we believe absolutism about promise-keeping is mistaken, we must believe that an agent who always complies with it could sometimes act wrongly. Such a person will keep promises even when something else is more important. Such a person is maximally trustworthy but not morally right. So the plausibility of a moral theory and the trustworthiness of an agent following it may part company.

I am not assuming that, because particularism is mistaken, someone trying to follow it will be less trustworthy than someone following some other theory. My argument that someone trying to follow particularism will be less trustworthy than someone following a different theory particularism does not rely on the premise that particularism is mistaken. On the contrary, let us make the entirely non-question-begging assumption that Ross-style generalism and particularism are initially equally plausible. My argument is that, given this non-question-begging assumption, particularism loses to Ross-style generalism in that collective public commitment to Ross-style generalism would lead to considerably more trust amongst strangers than would collective public commitment to particularism.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Absolutism | | vs. | Ross-style generalism | | vs. | Particularism | | |
|  | Absolutism is implausible | | |  | Assume both Rossian and particularist views are plausible | |  |
|  | Absolutist agent more trustworthy than Rossian | | |  | Rossian more trustworthy than particularist. | |  |
|  | Implausibility of absolutism too great for the theory to be rescued by the fact that absolutist agents would be maximally trustworthy | | |  | As between views equally plausible in other respects, the fact that one of them enables trust counts heavily in its favour | |  |

The example about promising generalizes. You know of generalists that they take certain general features to count morally in the same way every time they occur. You know of generalists that they point to a limited number of general features that can count as moral considerations, and thus can outweigh any one moral consideration. Neither of these things is true of particularists. By saying they reject general moral principles, particularists leave us unable to form confident expectations about what they will do. Here I am ignoring the special case where we observe some self-described particularist who is always behaving consistently and thus we discount this person’s rejection of general principles.

Let me address one final possible objection to my argument. This is the objection that the truth about morality is one thing, and what would result from our believing that others believe that truth is another matter. According to this objection, a view such as particularism might be right—even if the consequences of its acceptance, and of public awareness of its acceptance, would be bad.

This objection seems to me an overgeneralization. Belief in the best moral view could have bad consequences because of interference from some evil demon. To take a simple example, the demon might rain misery on the world if this moral view is believed. Concerning this sort of special case, we might reasonably hold the correctness of the moral view immune from contamination by the bad consequences of believing it. But in the everyday world where demons aren’t trying to bully people into rejecting some moral view, a moral view does seem unattractive if widespread awareness of its widespread acceptance would have very bad net effects on human well-being. And that is just what I think is the case with particularism.

I might be accused with begging a question against particularism by appealing to a premise that particularists will not accept. This is the premise that the social internalization of morality has some purposes, such as increasing the probability that people will conform with certain mutually beneficial practices. This is a premise shared by many kinds of consequentialists, by contractualists, by many Kantians, and by many natural law theorists. But since I believe this premise forms part of a logically valid argument against particularism, I accept that some defenders of particularism will reject the premise. I mean in this section to be addressing who are attracted to the idea is at least one of the points of our having a morality is to increase the probability of our conforming with certain mutually beneficial practices. Those who accept this idea can then use it as a premise in an argument against particularism.[[31]](#footnote-29)

1. I have in mind that virtue ethicists would offer some such account as that what makes a disposition a virtue is that it conduces to the flourishing of the individual or the species. This account of what makes something a virtue is perfectly general. And the virtue ethicist’s account of permissible action is framed in terms of these general virtues. So, although some particularists say warm things about virtue ethics, the two theories as I understand them are incompatible. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Ross, The Right and the Good (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930) ch. 2; Isaiah Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) esp. Introduction and Essay 3; Donald Davidson, ‘How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?’, in J. Feinberg (ed.), Moral Concepts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 93–113, at pp. 105–106; J. O. Urmson, ‘A Defense of Intuitionism’, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 75 (1975), pp. 111–19; Thomas Nagel, ‘Fragmentation of Value’, in his Mortal Questions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 128–41; Stuart Hampshire, Innocence and Experience. (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1992); Williams “Conflicts of Value”, in Alan Ryan, ed., The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 93–119, 185–87; “What Does Intuitionism Imply?”, in his Making Sense of Humanity. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); James Rachels, The Elements of Moral Philosophy (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 114–16, 120­­–38, 180–93; Berys Gaut, ‘Moral Pluralism’, Philosophical Papers 22 (1993) pp. 17–40; 1997; Robert Frazier, ‘Moral Relevance and Ceteris Paribus Principles’, Ratio 8 (1995) pp. 113–27; D. D. Raphael, Moral Philosophy, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); David McNaughton, ‘An Unconnected Heap of Duties?’, Philosophical Quarterly 46 (1996) pp. 433–47; ‘Moral Intuitionism’, in Hugh LaFollette (ed.), Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000); Philip Stratton-Lake, ‘Can Hooker’s Rule-consequentialist Principle Justify Rossian Prima Facie Duties?’, Mind 106 (1997) pp. 751–58. Compare Robert Audi, ‘Ethical Reflectionism’, The Monist 76 (1993) pp. 296–315; and ‘Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics’, in W. Sinnott-Armstrong and M. Timmons (eds.), Moral Knowledge? (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp. 101–36. See also Simon Blackburn’s ‘Securing the Nots’ in the same volume, 82–100, especially pp. 97–99. For an influential discussion of this sort of pluralism, see Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 34ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. If a duty of self-improvement is added, this list looks much like Ross’s (The Right and the Good, p. 21). I think a duty of self-improvement should not be added; there should instead be some qualification about how much one is required to sacrifice for others. See my ‘Non-inferential Justification, Moral Theorizing, and Contingency’, forthcoming in P. Stratton-Lake (ed.), Essays on Moral Intuitionism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. For important complexities about how these principles interact, see Shelly Kagan, ‘The Additive Fallacy’, Ethics 99 (1988): 5–31. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Thomas Nagel, ‘The Fragmentation of Value’, in his Moral Questions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 128–41, at p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Ross, The Right and the Good, pp. 22, 34–35; 1939, p. 79; Bernard Williams, ‘A Critique of Utilitarianism’, in J. J. C. Smart and B. Williams, Utilitarianism: For & Against (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 77–150, at p. 90; Gaut, ‘Moral Pluralism’, p. 35; Audi, ‘Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics’, p. 103; McNaughton, ‘An Unconnected Heap of Duties?’. For discussions of the very notion of prima facie duty, see Jonathan Dancy, Moral Reasons (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), ch. 6; Frazier, ‘Moral Relevance and Ceteris Paribus Principles’; Russ Shafer-Landau, ‘Moral Rules’, Ethics 107 (1997): 584–611, at pp. 585–587. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. C. D. Broad, Five Types of Ethical Theory (London: Routledge, 1930), p. 282; Shelly Kagan, The Limits of Morality (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 17, especially fn. 13; S. L. Hurley, Natural Reasons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 130–135. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. Carritt (A Theory of Morals, p. 114) and Shafer-Landau (‘Moral Rules’, p. 601) discuss this in terms of the need for judgement to apply even just one rule. See also Samuel Scheffler, Human Morality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 43–51; and T. M. Scanlon, What We Owe Each Other (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. Dancy, Moral Reasons, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. Shafter-Landau, ‘Moral Rules’, pp. 590, 593–94. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. See his Intrinsic Value (New York: Cambridge University Press, 199\_\_), pp. \_\_\_. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. Mill, Utilitarianism, ch. 4; William Frankena, Ethics, second edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973) pp. 89–92. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. See his Moral Reasons, pp. 56, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. This line of thought was elicited by reflecting on fascinating work on desert forthcoming from Shelly Kagan. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. For a more careful discussion, see Judith Jarvis Thomson, The Realm of Rights (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 313–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
16. Thomson, Realm of Rights, p. 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
17. For careful discussions of these matters, see Fried, *Contract as Promise*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), especially ch. 7; Thomson, Realm of Rights, ch. 12; Scanlon, What We Owe Each Other, ch. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
18. I will discuss a case in point later in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
19. Jonathan Dancy, ‘Particularism’s Progress’, in M. Little and B. Hooker (eds.), Moral Particularism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also Dancy’s Moral Reasons, pp. 60–66. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
20. The locus classicus for this view is of course Henry Sidgwick, Methods of Ethics, (London: Macmillan, first edition 1876, seventh edition 1907). See also Hooker, ‘Theories of Welfare, Theories of Good Reasons for Action, and Ontological Naturalism’, Philosophical Papers 20 (1991), pp. 25–36; ‘Parfit’s Arguments for the Present-aim Theory’, Australasian Journal of Philosophy 70 (1992), pp. 61–75; Roger Crisp, ‘The Dualism of Practical Reason’, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 96 (1996), pp. 53–73; Derek Parfit, ‘Reasons and Values’, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume 71 (1997), pp. 99–130. I myself think that there are a limited number of kinds of self-interested benefit, or components of well-being, and a limited number of kinds of action-guiding moral considerations. But this is not to espouse a ‘checklist’ theory of practical reasoning, since the agent obviously cannot run through the entire list before every decision. Even when the agent could run through the list, often this would be undesirable. To take but one example, it’s best if I spontaneously take a strong interest in my children, i.e., without this interest being the result of self-interested or moral reasoning. And of course we all do have many spontaneous affections and enthusiasms. But when asked to provide normative reasons underwriting our behaviour and attitudes, we must turn to morality and self-interest. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
21. Compare Shafer-Landau’s discussion of handshaking (‘Moral Rules’, p. 593). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
22. I do not mean this is the only moral reason in such circumstances, though this is perhaps typically the most salient one in such circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
23. I made a similar point in ‘Parfit’s arguments for the Present-aim Theory’, pp. 68–9. Incidentally, William Child contends that the best model we have for holism in the theory of reasons for belief is John McDowell’s particularism in the theory of practical reason (\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_OUP, pp. \_\_\_\_). But if the argument for particularism about reasons for belief relies on particularism about reasons for action, then the argument for particularism about reasons for action cannot noncircularly rely on particularism about reasons for belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
24. Dancy himself acknowledges that western moral philosophy and practice has overwhelmingly been generalist. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
25. This particularist foundation for moral epistemology appears in W. D. Ross (The Right and the Good, p. 33; The Foundations of Ethics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), pp. 168–71). While Ross was a generalist about moral pros and cons, Ross’s particularist epistemological foundation has understandably been seized upon by Dancy. See Dancy’s ‘An Ethic of Prima Facie Duties’, in P. Singer, ed., A Companion to Ethics (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 219–29, at pp. 225–26, 228; Moral Reasons, pp. 93–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
26. Moral Reasons, pp. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
27. Carritt wrote, ‘I cannot persuade myself that I first morally apprehend the obligation of several rules, then intellectually apprehend one of alternative actions to be an instance of one and the other of another, and finally, by a second moral intuition, see which rule ought now to be followed. I rather think that I morally apprehend that I ought now to do this act and then intellectually generalize rules.’ (A Theory of Morals (Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 116) And see Broad, Five Types of Ethical Theory (London: Kegan Paul, 1930), pp. 271–72. Cf. Dancy, Contemporary Epistemology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 220–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
28. Moral Reasons, p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
29. Cf. Scanlon, What We Owe Each Other, p. 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
30. Here Gerry will seem to some to have his priorities wrong. Why should he keep his promise to you when only your business is at stake, and when he could instead devote the time to saving the very lives of others? Indeed, whenever we have the opportunity to work to help save lives at risk, how can morality permit us not to take this opportunity? I shall not take up this crucial issue here, because the issue is not one on which the generalism vs. particularism debate turns, or at least not in a way that favours particularism. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
31. For help with this paper, I am grateful to Jamie Ball, Emma Borg, John Broome, Roger Crisp, Jonathan Dancy, John Gardner, Berys Gaut, Peter Goldie, James Griffin, Dudley Knowles, Gerald Lang, Jimmy Lenman, Richard Norman, Philip Percival, John Preston, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, John Skorupski, Philip Stratton-Lake, Elizabeth Tefler, Alan Thomas, Jay Wallace, Peter Vallentyne, James Williams, and Nick Zangwill. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)