

A Defense of a Particularist Research Program

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Abstract What makes some acts morally right and others morally wrong? Traditionally, philosophers have thought that in order to answer this question we must find and formulate exceptionless moral principles—principles that capture all and only morally right actions. Utilitarianism and Kantianism are paradigmatic examples of such attempts. In recent years, however, there has been a growing interest in a novel approach—Particularism—although its precise content is still a matter of controversy. In this paper I develop and motivate a new formulation of particularism as a research program and I show that my formulation is not vulnerable to the most common objections to particularism. Moreover, I argue that the particularist research program shows enough promise to warrant further exploration.

Keywords Particularism · Generalism

1 Introduction

Particularism is one of the most interesting and controversial doctrines in moral philosophy today. Yet despite the considerable attention it has received in recent years, there is still extensive disagreement about its precise content, and whether it is a viable alternative to traditional moral theories. The most prevalent objections to particularism are that particularism is demonstrably false and that particularism is unmotivated.¹ I believe that these negative assessments of particularism result from a misconception of the nature of particularism. I hope to show that particularism, properly understood, is a well-motivated project that should not be dismissed out of hand.

I proceed as follows: first, I outline one recent version of a standard argument against particularism and explain why it is based on a misconception of particularism (“Section 2”). Then, I offer a new formulation of particularism as a *research program*, and I show that my

¹See, for example, Sinnott-Armstrong (1999); Irwin (2000); Hooker (2000); Crisp (2000); McKeever and Ridge (2005a, 2005b, 2006); and Raz (2006).

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formulation is not vulnerable to the most common objections to particularism (“Sections 3 and 4”). Next, I argue that particularism is a promising research program that warrants further exploration (“Section 5”). Last, I respond to two possible objections to my proposed formulation of particularism (“Section 6”).

2 The Standard Debate over Particularism

Recent interest in particularism has given rise to a plurality of distinct views that go under this heading. Particularism has been identified as a claim about moral psychology,² a statement about the nature of reasons,³ a view about the relationship between descriptive and evaluative predicates,⁴ a thesis about the *normative priority* of particular moral judgments,⁵ a denial of the existence of exceptionless moral principles,⁶ the theory that morality cannot be codified by any finite set of principles,⁷ and as the claim that the possibility of moral thought and judgment does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles.⁸

The common feature of all particularist theses is often identified as the denial of (some feature of) principle-based moral theories. For example, McKeever and Ridge (2006) [henceforth M&R] claim that: “Different forms of particularism are defined by the different negative claims they make about moral principles.” (14) And that “The different species [of particularism] are united in that they all assert what intuitively is a negative thesis about moral principles.” They go on to propose a classification of particularist theories based on the negative thesis each version advocates, and they add that “each form of particularism which falls out of our taxonomy corresponds neatly to a form of generalism which is the negation of that particularist thesis.” (5) Similarly, Lance and Little (2006) claim that particularism “hangs its hat on” rejecting *classical principles*. They identify classical principles as “exceptionless, explanatory interrelated moral generalization that are capable of serving key epistemic functions,” (571) and they individuate each version of particularism according to the component of the *classical principles* framework it rejects. Joseph Raz (2006), in a recent critique of particularism, considers (and rejects) several possible particularist theses. In each case he characterizes the particularist thesis by identifying a generalist thesis it denies. Particularism, then, is often construed as a negative thesis, and the dialectic between particularists and their generalist opponents is often characterized as follows: generalists propose moral principles or principle-based accounts of morality, and particularists object to these principles/accounts.

After identifying the common feature of all particularist theses, M&R go on to argue that all particularist theses are false. In Chapter Six of their recent book, M&R present what I take to be their main argument against particularism:

[O]ur judgments about all things considered moral verdicts, insofar as those judgments constitute knowledge, suffice to ensure the availability of a suitable moral principle,

² Dancy (1983); McNaughton (1988); Dworkin (1995).

³ Hooker (2000); Little (2000); Richardson (2007); Kirchin (2007).

⁴ Jackson et al. (2000).

⁵ Irwin (2000).

⁶ Shafer-Landau (1997); McNaughton and Rawling (2000); Dancy (1983); Raz (2006).

⁷ Holton (2002).

⁸ Dancy (2004).

namely a default principle. So moral judgment, insofar as it constitutes knowledge, does presuppose the availability of a suitable stock of moral principles. [Particularism] about hedged principles is thus false. (120–121)

I propose the following two-step reconstruction of their argument⁹:

The Knowledge to Principles (KP) Argument:

1. There are instances of moral knowledge.
2. If there are instances of moral knowledge, then there are exceptionless moral principles.
3. Therefore, there are exceptionless moral principles.

*The Principles to Generalism (PG) Argument*¹⁰:

4. There are exceptionless moral principles.
5. If there are any exceptionless moral principles, then particularism is false.
6. Therefore, Particularism is false.

M&R spend most of chapter six defending premise (2). They claim that premise (2) is demonstrably true, and indeed, they argue for its truth by constructing a method for generating exceptionless moral principles.¹¹ According to M&R, moral knowledge is based on the identification of purely descriptive facts that are moral reasons for and against performing a certain action. Given the limitations of our perceptual faculties, cases of moral knowledge must be cases in which the number of morally relevant features is limited—otherwise, we will not be able to register all the morally relevant facts, and our knowledge claim will be defeated. So in cases in which we have moral knowledge we can, at least in principle, list all the morally relevant facts.¹²

⁹ The argument in Chapter Six is meant to show that particularism about *hedged moral principles* is false; in Chapter Seven M&R argue that we can “trim the hedges”—that we have reason to be confident that there are non-hedged moral principles that can codify the entire moral landscape. A hedged principle, according to M&R, is a principle that doesn’t specify all the possible defeaters and countervailing reasons, but instead it quantifies over them. For example, the following principle is a hedged principle: For any action, A, if A involves torturing babies for fun and no other reasons are present, then A is morally wrong. This principle is a hedged principle because of the qualification “and no other reasons are present.” This “hedge” doesn’t specify which features may outweigh the fact that the act involves torturing babies for fun. Instead, this principle states that as long as such feature are not present—whatever they might be—an act that involves torturing babies for fun is wrong. To the best of my knowledge no one defends what M&R call “particularism about hedged moral principles.” M&R discuss this version of particularism as a step in their argument against particularism about non-hedged principles. However, M&R’s argument against particularism about hedged moral principles—indeed, the fact that their taxonomy allows for particularism about hedged principles and generalism about hedged principles—illustrates a standard misconception concerning the debate over particularism. I will argue that the issue is not whether there are hedged or non-hedged moral principles, but rather whether there are principles that are both explanatory and exceptionless. For simplicity of exposition, then, I reconstruct M&R’s argument in the main text as an argument for the conclusion that particularism is false.

¹⁰ The most common argument—the “standard argument”—against particularism is the (PG) argument. The (KP) argument is an original contribution by M&R.

¹¹ Since M&R assume that all participants in the particularism-generalism debate accept premise (1), they do not argue for it.

¹² It is worth noting that M&R are committed here to a strong intellectualist conception of moral knowledge. Those who believe that the best account of moral knowledge is given in terms of skillful grasp of situations which is not reducible to propositional inference may resist M&R’s claim that the possibility of moral knowledge guarantees the possibility of listing all the morally relevant features of actions. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.

If one accepts *Atomism* in the theory of reasons—that a feature that is a (primary) reason¹³ in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity, in any case¹⁴—then one has a recipe for generating exceptionless moral principles: (1) consider any particular morally right action; (2) list all the relevant moral reasons; call the conjunction of all these reasons (RC). The following principle, then, is an exceptionless moral principle:

(K) For any action, *A*, if *A* instantiates (RC) and no other reasons are present, then *A* is morally right.

However, particularists reject atomism; instead, they favor *holism* in the theory of reasons—a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another.¹⁵ For example, that a job applicant really wants the job may be a reason to hire her in one context—say, in a context of hiring a new faculty member to a philosophy department, and a reason not to hire her in another context—say, in a context of hiring a new guard for Abu Ghraib prison.¹⁶ Thus if holism is true, then even if an action instantiates (RC) and no other reasons are present, the action may be morally wrong because (RC) can change its polarity in different contexts in which it is instantiated. But since the polarity of (RC), even according to holism, is determined by features of the context, then there are some features of the context that explain why (RC) changes its polarity when it does. Consequently, even if holism is true, the following is an exceptionless moral principle:

(K') For any action, *A*, if (a) *A* instantiates (RC), and (b) No feature of the situation explains why (RC) would fail to be a reason to perform *A*, and (c) No other (moral) reasons are present, then *A* is morally right.¹⁷

Therefore, even if holism is true, the possibility of moral knowledge, according to M&R, guarantees that there are exceptionless moral principles. Therefore, premise (2) of the (KP) argument is true.

But is (K') really a moral principle? Moral principles are supposed to identify an exceptionless relation between non-moral properties and moral properties.¹⁸ Yet arguably, not *any* relation of this sort qualifies as a For example, consider the following claim:

(GR) For any action, *A*, if (and only if) *A* is a member of *Group-R*, then *A* is morally right.

¹³ Some proponents of atomism differentiate primary (or ultimate) reasons from other (non-ultimate) reasons. These atomists allow that some reasons can sometimes count in favor of an action, and sometimes count against an action, but they insist that primary (or ultimate) reasons always make the same contribution. For example, they grant that the fact that my claim will be a lie may be a reason against making it on some occasion and no reason at all on another occasion (e.g., when playing 'Countersand'). Nevertheless, they maintain that a claim's being dishonest always counts against making it. See, for example, Crisp (2000).

¹⁴ See, for example, Dancy (2004) p. 7. See also Shafer-Landau's discussion of *The Delimiting Thesis* in Shafer-Landau (1997) esp. pp. 591-597.

¹⁵ See, for example, Dancy (2004) pp. 73-78.

¹⁶ For more examples see Dancy (1993) pp. 60-64.

¹⁷ M&R statement of this principle is slightly different (See pp. 117-8). My version of (K') is a simple generalization of their statement.

¹⁸ One might be satisfied with moral principles that identify exceptionless relations between thick moral properties and thin moral properties. See, for example, McNaughton and Rawling (2000). However, since (K') is supposed to identify an exceptionless relation between non-moral properties and moral properties, the possibility of principles from thick to thin will not concern us here.

Let *Group-R* be the set of all (and only) morally right actions. If moral properties supervene on non-moral properties, then all members of *Group-R* can, in principle, be described in purely non-moral terms.¹⁹ Consequently, (GR) identifies an exceptionless relation between non-moral properties and moral properties. But it may seem odd to call (GR) a moral principle. (GR), though true and exceptionless, is uninteresting—it identifies the wrong *kind* of relation between non-moral and moral properties. The worry is that (K') also identifies the wrong kind of relation between non-moral and moral properties, so it may not qualify as a genuine moral principle. I do not offer here an account of the kind of relation between non-moral and moral properties that is required in order to qualify as a genuine moral principle. My point is only that not any such relation will do. Consequently, we have reason to doubt whether (K') is a genuine moral principle.

Moreover, (K') seems to amount to the claim that there must be some non-moral difference between any two actions that differ in moral status; that is, that moral properties supervene on non-moral properties. But particularists accept this claim and they believe that particularism is compatible with it.²⁰ In addition, particularists acknowledge that this supervenience relation entails that there are true exceptionless statements of the form:

$$(SP) \forall x(Gx \rightarrow Mx)$$

[*x* ranges over actions, *G* is a non-moral property, and *M* is a moral property](SP) is true and exceptionless when *G* describes a complete world state. Yet particularists deny that (SP) is incompatible with particularism, and M&R said nothing to counter this claim. If this is right, then (K') has no dialectical force in an argument against particularism.

Opponents of particularism have typically focused their efforts on trying to establish that there are exceptionless moral principles. So far, I have claimed that it is debatable whether M&R's (KP) argument establishes that there are any such principles. But suppose that it does—that is, suppose that (K') is a genuine moral principle. Or alternatively, suppose that we can just see that there are some exceptionless moral principles. For example, one might think that no one should object to the following principle:

(TBF) For any action, *A*, if *A* involves torturing babies for fun and no other reasons are present, then *A* is morally wrong.

If (K') and/or (TBF) are genuine exceptionless moral principles, is this a problem for particularists?

It has often been taken for granted that if there are any exceptionless moral principles, then particularism must be false. In other words, premise (5) of the (PG) argument has been thought to require no support. I suspect that this premise has been accepted as a result of the interpretation of particularism as the denial of all principle-based moral theories. The thought, perhaps, is that if there are any exceptionless moral principles, there is no reason to oppose a principle-based approach. Particularists, on this interpretation, are committed to the claim that all moral principles are objectionable.

Particularists, I submit, should resist this construal of their thesis. First, if particularism is understood as the denial of the existence of any exceptionless statement of the form $\forall x(Gx \rightarrow Mx)$ then particularism is clearly false. As we have seen, (GR) and (SP) are obvious counterexamples to this claim. So particularists will have to specify which

¹⁹ For ease of exposition I use properties and predicates interchangeably throughout this paper.

²⁰ See Dancy (2004) p. 85-93.

statements of this form qualify as genuine principles.²¹ But the philosophical import of marking this distinction, independent of the particularism–generalism debate, is far from obvious; it would be a mistake to reduce this exciting debate to a debate over the proper application of the term *moral principle*.

Second, it is hard to imagine how particularists could succeed in showing that there are no unobjectionable principles. Proofs of non-existence are notoriously difficult, and in the absence of a proof for the non-existence of exceptionless moral principles, the particularist conclusion would always be tentative—perhaps the correct moral principles have not yet been discovered or formulated. Thus, identifying particularism as the claim that all moral principles are objectionable places the particularist at a dialectical disadvantage.

Finally, even if particularists could establish that *all* conceivable principle-based moral theories are problematic, it might still be rational to retain a principle-based approach to morality. Theory choice is a comparative task—we adopt the theory that has the best overall balance of advantages over disadvantages. So if particularists want to argue that the principle-based approach to morality should be abandoned, they must offer a plausible positive non-principle-based account of morality; pointing out that a principle-based approach is problematic is not enough. Understood as a negative thesis, then, particularism is essentially only a partial story.

But if particularism is not a negative thesis, if it is not the denial of (some form of) principle-based moral theories, then what is it?

3 What is a Research Program?

I propose to understand particularism as a research program. Research programs, according to Imre Lakatos (1970), consist of theories and methodological rules that specify which paths of research to avoid (negative heuristic), and which paths to pursue (positive heuristic). Research programs are individuated by their “hard core”—the set of commitments that cannot be abandoned without abandoning the research program altogether.

The following example should help us get a sense of what a research program is. In 1781 William Herschel discovered planet Uranus. By the early 1800’s it became clear that the planet’s observed location did not match the path predicted by Newton’s laws. Despite the discrepancies between theory and observation, very few astronomers doubted the truth of the Newtonian theory. They believed that this anomaly could be resolved without relinquishing Newton’s laws. Some astronomers, for example, suggested that observations that were incompatible with the predicted path should be discarded. Others—most notably, Le Verrier—suggested that the discrepancy in Uranus’ motion was due to the existence of an unknown planet, and that once the gravitational force on Uranus due to this planet is taken into account, Uranus’ motion will comply with Newton’s inverse-square law. We can say that these astronomers were pursuing a Newtonian research program. The hard core of

²¹ It is noteworthy that the question ‘What statements of the form $\forall x(Gx \rightarrow Mx)$ qualify as genuine principles?’ is equally pressing for the generalist, since no one thinks (and M&R do not claim) that principles like (GR), (SP), (K’) and (TBF) are the kind of principles that will partake in a generalist account of morality. It should, therefore, seem surprising that statements like (SP) and (TBF) can refute particularism despite being entirely unhelpful in constructing a generalist account of morality.

the program—the set of protected commitments, as it were—included Newton’s laws, and the negative heuristic of the program forbade directing a *modus tollens* against this hard core.

Nevertheless, some astronomers were willing to question the accuracy of the Newtonian framework; they suggested that the discrepancies in Uranus’ orbit lie with Newton’s law of gravitation. These astronomers, we can say, were pursuing an alternative research program. The hard core of their research program included all available observations of Uranus, and perhaps the rule that one should not posit the existence of unseen entities. Proponents of this research program had to explain the motion of Uranus without Newton’s law of gravitation. For example, some proposed that Newton’s laws become different at a great distance from the sun.

In 1846 the planet Neptune was observed at the location predicted by Le Verrier. Le Verrier assumed that Newton’s law of gravitation was true, and calculated an orbit of the yet-unknown planet that together with Newton’s theory would account for the motion of Uranus. And indeed, when the gravitational pull of Neptune on Uranus was taken into consideration, Uranus’s observed motion harmonized with its predicted orbit. The discovery of Neptune was a great triumph not only for the Newtonian research program, but also for Le Verrier himself.

It is not surprising, then, that Le Verrier was a passionate devotee of to the Newtonian research program, and that upon considering the anomalous motion of The Planet Mercury in 1849 he proclaimed: “If the tables [of Mercury’s position] do not strictly agree with the group of observations, we will never again be tempted into charging the law of universal gravitation with inadequacy.”²² In 1859 Le Verrier published his report on the anomalous motion of Mercury, and offered the hypothesis that the anomaly is due to a yet-unobserved mass orbiting between Mercury and the Sun.

Here, again, we can distinguish between those pursuing a Newtonian research program, and those who were willing to question the adequacy of Newton’s laws. Proponents of the former research program began looking for the missing mass. Sure enough, various sightings of Vulcan—the intra-Mercurial planet—were reported, but all predictions of Vulcan’s location based on these observations were disconfirmed. Nonetheless, Le Verrier’s belief in the existence of an intra-Mercurial mass never wavered. In 1874 he wrote: “There is, without a doubt, in the neighborhood of Mercury, and between that planet and the Sun, matter hitherto unknown.”²³

In contrast, we can characterize a competing, non-Newtonian research program by its hard core—that the motion of Mercury can be explained without appeal to a yet-to-be-found intra-Mercurial mass. For example, in 1894 one astronomer suggested a modification to the law of gravitation in order to explain Mercury’s motion; instead of inverse-square, he proposed that the exponent ought to be 2.00000016.²⁴

The puzzle of the motion of Mercury was resolved in 1915, when Einstein showed that his General Theory of Relativity explains the observed motion of Mercury. Consequently, the Newtonian research program was abandoned.

²² Quoted from Baum and Sheehan (1997) p. 133.

²³ Quoted from Baum and Sheehan (1997) pp. 173–4.

²⁴ See Hall (1894)

4 Particularism as a Research Program

Surely there are numerous dissimilarities between science and moral philosophy (methods, goals, language, etc.) Nevertheless, there is at least one thing they have in common. Moral philosophy, like science, is in the business of *explaining* certain features of the world.

Suppose we observe that actions $A_1, A_2 \dots A_n$ are morally right.²⁵ We may want to explain these observations. We may ask, for example, (Q1) What is it that makes these actions morally right? We can think of various ways of approaching this question—or alternative research programs. According to one research program—*generalism*—a satisfactory answer to (Q1) must be in the form of an exceptionless principle that identifies features that $A_1, A_2 \dots A_n$ have in common. The generalist research program appeals to a familiar notion of *explanation*—explanation as subsumption under exceptionless principles. So one advantage of the generalist research program is that *if* we find an exceptionless principle that gives the right verdict about $A_1, A_2 \dots A_n$ we will thereby have a satisfactory answer to (Q1).²⁶

According to an alternative research program—*particularism*—we can answer (Q1) without presupposing that there are exceptionless principles that will give the right verdict about $A_1, A_2 \dots A_n$. Proponents of this research program do not search for features that all and only these actions have in common. Instead, they try to come up with an explanation of the rightness of each of these actions without appealing to exceptionless principles. They could point out that in some areas of inquiry we are used to, and comfortable with, explanations that do not appeal to exceptionless principles. For example, when we explain the aesthetic status of an artwork we do so without mentioning exceptionless aesthetic principles.²⁷ Similarly, explanations in the special sciences—e.g., psychology, economics,

²⁵ I do not intend to commit to any particular account of moral epistemology or any specific theory about the nature of moral properties when I say that we *observe* that $A_1 \dots A_n$ are morally right. One could replace this “observation statement” with whatever one thinks is the source of the relevant data for moral theorizing.

²⁶ Both monists and pluralists are generalists because they both believe that an explanation of the rightness of an action is inadequate unless it is grounded in an exceptionless moral principle. Nevertheless, monists and pluralists disagree about the number of intrinsically morally relevant properties (henceforth IMR-properties). Let us say that a property, P , is intrinsically morally relevant if and only if P is morally relevant for its own sake, or non-derivatively morally relevant. A property is extrinsically morally relevant if and only if it is non-intrinsically morally relevant; that is, if it is only derivatively morally relevant, or morally relevant only in virtue of its relation to some IMR-property. Monists claim that there is only one IMR-property—call it P —and that every action that exemplifies P is morally right. Pluralists maintain that there are several IMR-properties—call these properties $P_1 \dots P_n$ —and that for each IMR-property, P_i , there will be a *presumptive*, or *pro tanto*, principle: for any action, A , if A exemplifies P_i then A is presumptively morally right (or wrong). See, for example, Ross (1930) Ch. 2, and Shafer-Landau (1997). For instance, consider the following version of act-utilitarianism: (AU) An act, A , is morally right if and only if A maximizes utility. (AU) is a monist theory. According to (AU) there is only one IMR-property—namely, utility-maximization. If an action exemplifies this property, it is morally right; otherwise, it is morally wrong. Justice, for instance, can only be extrinsically morally relevant according to (AU); if justice is morally relevant, it is only in virtue of its relation to utility-maximization. Pluralists, in contrast, hold that there are several morally relevant properties. So pluralists may claim that being just, being truthful, and being beneficent are all IMR-properties. Nevertheless, pluralists are generalists because they think that in order to explain the rightness of A , it is not enough to recognize that A exemplifies beneficence, and that beneficence is right-making here; pluralists believe that we must identify an exceptionless principle that states that for any action, if it exemplifies beneficence, then it is *presumptively* morally right. I discuss this in more detail in Leibowitz (forthcoming).

²⁷ For example, one cannot fail to mention symmetry as a relevant feature to the aesthetic merits of the Taj Mahal. Yet, it seems absurd to think that symmetry is always aesthetically relevant; the contribution of symmetry to the overall aesthetic status of an object can change its polarity – it may contribute positively, negatively, or make no contribution at all. See Little (2000); and Dancy (2004) p. 76.

and history—seem to conform to a different model of explanation than the model of subsumption under exceptionless principle.²⁸

The particularism–generalism debate, I propose, is best understood as a debate over which research program we ought to pursue. Generalism is a research program characterized by the core hypothesis that in order to explain morality, and especially the rightness and wrongness of actions, we must appeal to exceptionless moral principles. Utilitarians and Kantians, for example, are generalists; despite their disagreement about the content of the correct moral theory, they both strive to identify exceptionless moral principles in order to explain the moral status of actions. Particularism, in contrast, is an alternative research program characterized by the core hypothesis that morality—including the rightness and wrongness of actions—can be explained without appealing to exceptionless principles.

We are now in a position to see why particularists need not argue that all moral principles are objectionable, or why premise (5) of the (PG) argument is false. Strictly speaking, research programs are not *true* or *false*. Research programs consist of theories and methodological rules. Theories may be true or false, but methodological rules require a different mode of evaluation. Lakatos suggests that instead of truth and falsehood we should evaluate research programs for their success. In order to explain what makes for a successful research program, Lakatos introduces the following terminology:

Let us say that...a series of theories is theoretically progressive (or ‘constitutes a theoretically progressive problemshift’) if each new theory has some excess empirical content over its predecessor...Let us say that a theoretically progressive series of theories is also empirically progressive (or ‘constitutes an empirically progressive problemshift’) if some of this excess empirical content is also corroborated...Finally, let us call a problemshift progressive if it is both theoretically and empirically progressive, and degenerating if it is not. (33-4)

With the notions of *progressive problemshift* and *degenerating problemshift*, Lakatos states the criterion for success of research programs as follows: “A research programme is successful if [it] leads to a progressive problemshift; unsuccessful if it leads to a degenerating problemshift.” (48)

Clearly, some modifications are required in order to import these definitions to our discussion in moral philosophy.²⁹ The key point, though, should be clear enough: a research program provides a strategy for modifying theories in the face of anomalies; if by employing this strategy we generate better theories—that is, theories with greater explanatory power—then the research program is successful. So perhaps instead of premise (5) we should consider the following premise:

(5′) If there are any exceptionless moral principles, then particularism is unsuccessful.

But premise (5′) is clearly false. Even if there were exceptionless moral principles, it would not *entail* that the particularist research program is unsuccessful, since it is surely possible that several research programs would lead to progressive problemshifts. Even if

²⁸ For instance, economists may appeal to the law of supply and demand in order to explain the change in price of certain products, even though this law is not exceptionless.

²⁹ It should be interesting to work out whether, and if so, how Lakatos’s terminology can be “translated” into terms that are appropriate for moral philosophy. For example, it would be interesting to figure out what (if anything) in the moral realm corresponds to “excess empirical content” and how (or whether) this “empirical content” can be “corroborated.” However, I will not pursue this route here.

there were no counterexamples to the principle of utility, for instance, it would not follow that the particularist research program is unsuccessful.

Perhaps the availability of exceptionless moral principles undermines the *motivation* to pursue the particularist research program. The thought is that if we had a satisfactory principle-based account of morality, then there might well be no reason to pursue the particularist research program, since there would be no need for alternative explanations. This seems right to me. Yet, not *any* exceptionless principle would undermine the motivation to pursue the particularist research program, but only an exceptionless moral principle that provides an *adequate account of morality*. So, I think that the following premise is true:

(5") If there are exceptionless moral principles that provide an adequate account of morality, then particularism is unmotivated.

But principles like (K'), (GR), (SP) or (TBF) clearly do not provide an adequate account of morality. Indeed, no one has ever claimed that they do.

I take this to show that the standard debate concerning the availability of *any* exceptionless moral principles is misguided. For example, Sinnott-Armstrong (1999) claims that generalists have the dialectical upper hand in the particularism–generalism debate. He writes:

Consider the dialectical situation: A generalist holds a theory with a long list of defeaters shaped into groups. A particularist comes up and claims, "This example shows you need another item on your list." A generalist can always respond, "No, it doesn't. Your moral judgment about the example is incorrect." Alternatively, a generalist can respond, "OK, I'll add another item to my list." A particularist can then come up with more examples, but a generalist again has these two possible responses—and so on...[it seems possible] in principle for generalists to keep adding qualifications and defeaters until no more are needed. (7–8)

Generalists, according to Sinnott-Armstrong, can always accommodate counterexamples offered by particularists by adding these counterexamples to the list of defeaters to a proposed principle. Eventually, one might hope, the particularist will run out of counterexamples, and so the generalist should be able to formulate the following exceptionless principle:

$$(AH) \forall x[(Gx \& \neg C_1x \& \neg C_2x \dots \& \neg C_nx) \rightarrow Mx]$$

[x ranges over actions, G is a non-moral property, M is a moral property, and $C_1 \dots C_n$ are the known defeaters to the principle $\forall x(Gx \rightarrow Mx)$] But even if (AH) is exceptionless—that is, if it were possible to list *all* defeaters³⁰—it is hardly an *explanatory* principle, since it is manifestly *ad-hoc*. And since (AH), like (K'), (GR), (SP), and (TBF) plays no role in a generalist account of morality, the question of whether (AH) is exceptionless is tangential to the debate over particularism.

To the best of my knowledge, no one has yet presented an argument against particularism based on the availability of exceptionless *explanatory* principles. I suspect that the reason no such argument has been offered is that all exceptionless explanatory principles that have been formulated thus far are, at best, controversial and as a result they

³⁰ See Robinson (2006) for some worries concerning the possibility of listing all defeaters (esp. pp. 349–50).

have no dialectical force in the context of the particularism–generalism debate. Consider, for example, the following argument:

7. If there are exceptionless moral principles that provide an adequate account of morality, then particularism is unmotivated.
8. The principle of utility is an exceptionless moral principle that provides an adequate account of morality.
9. Therefore, particularism is unmotivated.

In order to defend this argument one would have to argue for the claim that the principle of utility provides an adequate account of morality. And likewise, if one replaces the principle of utility in line (8) with any other comprehensive moral theory—e.g., Kantianism, Rule Utilitarianism or Rossianism³¹—one would have to defend that particular theory in order to demonstrate that particularism is unmotivated. But debates over the adequacy of such theories have occupied center stage in moral philosophy for many years, and the prospects for a conclusive argument for the adequacy of any one of these comprehensive moral theories, at least at present, look grim.

It is not surprising, then, that opponents of particularism have tried to argue against particularism without arguing for the truth of any specific principle-based moral theory. “This book,” M&R write, “is a defense of moral principles, yet it is not a defense of any specific moral principle. Although we are as interested as anyone in determining the specific content of morality, we here address the prior question of whether morality is principled at all.” (3) M&R, like all other opponents of particularism, try to undermine particularism *without* defending any specific comprehensive principle-based moral theory. But once we understand particularism as a research program, we can see that without defending a specific comprehensive principle-based account of morality, the prospects for a demonstrative argument against particularism are extremely bleak.

5 The *Positive Heuristic* of a Particularist Research Program

So far, I have claimed that my formulation is not vulnerable to the most common objections to particularism. Still, in order to motivate particularism it is not enough to show that the standard objections are ineffective; particularists must also indicate what a particularist account of morality could look like. That is, particularists must answer the following question: if one wants to pursue the particularist research program, what should one do? Or in other words, what is the positive heuristic of the particularist research program? The positive heuristic of the generalist research program is well known—try to formulate a principle that is not susceptible to counterexamples, and when faced with a counterexample, adjust the principle (in some acceptable way) so that it yields the correct verdict about the proposed counterexample. Can particularists recommend any comparable positive heuristic?

In this section I will outline two research paths particularists could pursue. These paths by no means exhaust the research possibilities open to particularist. Nevertheless, identifying these alternatives should suffice to demonstrate that there are promising research paths for particularists to explore.

³¹ Ross (1930).

Jonathan Dancy—the philosopher most associated with particularism—initially thought that holism in the theory of reasons simply entails particularism.³² Accordingly, a large portion of his work on particularism has centered on developing and defending holism in the theory of reasons.³³ However, M&R (2006:29) have shown that holism is *compatible* with the existence of exceptionless moral principles.³⁴ They presented the following principle:

(U) The fact that an action would promote pleasure is a reason to perform the action if and only if the pleasure is nonsadistic. The fact that an action would promote pain is a reason not to perform the action. An action is morally right just in case it promotes at least as great a balance of reason-giving pleasures over pain as any of the available alternatives; otherwise it is wrong.

Recall that holism in the theory of reasons is the thesis that a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another case. Principle (U) is compatible with holism since it allows that a certain feature—namely, that an action would promote pleasure—is a reason in favor of performing an action in some situations (i.e., in situations in which the pleasure is nonsadistic), and it is no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in other situations (i.e., in situations in which the pleasure is sadistic). We should note that M&R do not argue that (U) is an exceptionless moral principle, but only that one could formulate principles that are compatible with holism, and that for all we know some such principle may be exceptionless.

As a result, Dancy (2004:82) now acknowledges that “one cannot argue from holism directly to the conclusion that moral principles are impossible.” His current view is that if holism were true then “it would be a sort of cosmic accident if it were to turn out that a morality could be captured in a set of holistic contributory principles.” (82)³⁵

Recently, several philosophers have argued that holism provides no support for particularism. Joseph Raz (2006), for example, questions Dancy’s ‘cosmic accident’ thesis. He argues that since “claims [about principles] are conceptual or perhaps metaphysical, if principles are possible and have a role then it would seem that there are principles. After all conceptual or metaphysical truths are not a domain in which accidents are possible.” (117) Moreover, according to Raz, even if the ‘cosmic accident’ thesis were true, it would not help Dancy’s case for particularism because “to succeed Dancy must show that principles are impossible; not even a universal accident can bring them about.” (117) But since holism is compatible with the existence of exceptionless principles, Raz concludes that “Dancy’s [holism] lends no support for particularism, because it cannot show (and Dancy himself does not claim) that true [exceptionless] principles are impossible.” (117) Similarly, M&R (2006) reject Dancy’s ‘cosmic accident’ thesis: “holism about reasons does nothing to support the thought that the finite and useful codification of morality would be metaphysically mysterious.” (35) And since we have no reason to accept the ‘cosmic accident’ thesis, they conclude: “Holism about reasons provides no positive support for particularism. Holism neither implies that there are no [exceptionless] principles nor that any principles there might be would be ‘cosmic accidents.’” (45)

³² For example, in his (2000), Dancy claimed that particularism is “merely one expression” of holism in the theory of reasons.

³³ See, for example, Dancy (1993, 2000, 2003, 2004).

³⁴ See M&R (2005b, 2006).

³⁵ For similar theses see Little (2000) and Stratton-Lake (2000) pp. 128–130.

Nevertheless, once we understand particularism as a research program, we can see that the question of whether holism is compatible with the existence of principles, or whether holism entails that the availability of exceptionless moral principles is extremely unlikely is *tangential* to the particularism–generalism debate. The relevant question, I claim, is whether holism contributes to a particularist account of morality.

To see this, consider again the case of The Planet Vulcan. Suppose that the theory of relativity is compatible with the existence of a mass orbiting between Mercury and The Sun. Suppose, further, that the theory of relativity doesn't entail that it is *unlikely* that some intra-Mercurial mass exists. Nonetheless, it would be odd to argue that since the theory of relativity doesn't imply that Vulcan does not exist, or doesn't entail that its existence is unlikely, it offers no support for the non-Newtonian research program. The theory of relativity provides a good explanation of the motion of Mercury without assuming that there is a yet-to-be-found intra-Mercurial mass. Therefore, the theory of relativity undermines the motivation to search for Vulcan, since it solves the puzzle that was the impetus for positing the existence of Vulcan in the first place.

Analogously, even though holism is compatible with the existence of exceptionless principles, and even if holism doesn't make the existence of such principles unlikely, it can provide support for the particularist research program. If holism makes possible a plausible non-principle-based account of morality, it undermines the motivation to search for exceptionless principles in much the same way that the theory of relativity undermines the motivation to search for Vulcan. So far, philosophers have failed to formulate exceptionless explanatory principles. It seems that the quest for such principles is motivated by the thought that such principles are necessary for an adequate account of morality. However, if an adequate non-principle-based account of morality were available, then we would no longer have reason to assume that such principles exist, and thereby we might no longer have reason to try to find and formulate exceptionless principles. Therefore, if holism in the theory of reasons contributes to the development of a successful particularist account of morality, then *pace* Raz and M&R, holism does provide positive support for the particularist research program regardless of whether it is compatible with the existence of exceptionless principles, and regardless of whether the 'cosmic accident' thesis is true.

I suspect that holism in the theory of reasons will play an important role in a particularist account of morality. Dancy's pioneering work on this topic is commendable. Nevertheless, holism is still in its early stages and the specifics of the theory need to be worked out in much more detail before we can determine whether a particularist account of morality based on holism in the theory of reasons is superior to its generalist competitors.³⁶ So a *positive heuristic* of the particularist research program is to develop and defend a comprehensive account of holism.

Another—perhaps complementary—path particularists could pursue is to develop a particularist-friendly virtue ethics. It is noteworthy that in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes no reference to exceptionless moral principles.³⁷ Since generalists insist that one must appeal to exceptionless moral principles in order to explain the rightness/wrongness of actions, there seem to be three interpretative strategies available to generalists who attempt to understand Aristotle's project in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: they can try to

³⁶ For a recent criticism of Dancy's holism, see Raz (2006).

³⁷ Irwin (2000) claims that Aristotle asserts several exceptionless generalizations such as "one ought always to be willing to face great danger if some important cause is at stake, and one ought never to be willing to face it for some trivial reason." (111) However, I doubt that terms like "great danger", "important cause" and "trivial reason" can be cashed out without appealing to the judgment of the man of practical wisdom.

identify an exceptionless principle to attribute to Aristotle; or they can argue that Aristotle wasn't interested in explaining the normative status of actions; or alternatively, they can claim that Aristotle was just hopelessly confused and that his whole project was misguided.

To the best of my knowledge no one pursues the third option. However, the two former interpretative strategies can be easily identified in the work of some neo-Aristotelians and contemporary virtue ethicists. For example, some philosophers propose a virtue-based criterion of moral rightness of the following form:

(VE) An act is right if and only if a fully virtuous agent would perform it in the circumstances.³⁸

Others claim that Aristotle was not interested in solving moral quandaries or in identifying a criterion for the rightness/wrongness of actions; instead he was interested in providing a regimen for a good life or in questions concerning the nature of good moral character.³⁹

With the particularist research program in mind, though, a new interpretative strategy becomes available: we can try to interpret Aristotle as offering a particularist account of morality—that is, we can interpret him as giving an explanation of the normative status of actions which is not based on the availability of exceptionless moral principles.⁴⁰ Indeed, several passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are as close to an explicit endorsement of the particularist research program as one may hope to find in a two-thousand-year-old text. For example, Aristotle writes:

In a discussion of [what is noble, just or good] ...we must be satisfied to indicate the truth with a rough and general sketch: when the subject and the basis of a discussion consist of matters that hold good only as a general rule, but not always, the conclusions reached must be of the same order...For the well-schooled man is one who searches for that degree of precision in each kind of study which the nature of the subject at hand admits. (1094b19-26, Ostwald trans.)⁴¹

So another *positive heuristic* of the particularist research program is to develop and defend a particularist reading of Aristotle, or to try to construct a neo-Aristotelian particularist-friendly virtue ethics, including, among other things, an account of moral education and moral development that is compatible with particularism.⁴²

6 Objections and Replies

Objection Particularist Explanations of Morality are Defective. Particularist explanations can, at best, provide a *partial* explanation of morality but not a *complete* explanation. A complete explanation must be grounded in an exceptionless moral principle. To pursue the particularist research program is simply to announce that we cannot provide an adequate answer to the question 'what makes some acts right and others wrong?' To endorse

³⁸ See, for example, Oakley (1996); Hursthouse (1999); and Swanton (2001).

³⁹ See, for example, Pincoffs (1971); and Taylor (1988).

⁴⁰ Although several particularists find inspiration and support in Aristotle, no one has yet offered a detailed particularist reading of Aristotle's ethics.

⁴¹ See also 1097a8-14, 1101a25, 1104a5-10, 1107a29-33, 1109b18-22, 1110b8, 1126a31-1126b5, 1137b13-23, 1137b27-30, 1143a33, and 1143b3-4

⁴² For an account of moral development friendly to particularism see Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1990).

particularism, then, is simply to “admit defeat.” What’s more, if we pursue the generalist research program and all explanatory principles we come up with turn out to have exceptions, we can simply accept whatever account we end up with as a particularist account of morality. So there is no reason to pursue the particularist research program.⁴³

Reply That an adequate explanation must be grounded in an exceptionless moral principle is precisely the claim that particularists deny. As we have seen, the core of the particularist research program is that morality, including the rightness and wrongness of actions, can be explained without appealing to exceptionless principles. Opponents of particularism cannot simply cite their commitment to the generalist research program as an objection to particularism. In the context of the particularism–generalism debate, a generalist who simply asserts that we cannot explain morality without exceptionless moral principles is comparable to an advocate of the Newtonian research program who declares that we cannot explain the motion of Mercury without Newton’s law of gravitation.

Perhaps the thought is that there are independent arguments for the conclusion that an adequate explanation must be grounded in an exceptionless principle. The proposal, perhaps, is that we can use results from the philosophical literature on the nature of explanation in order to settle the particularism–generalism debate. To explain a phenomenon, the objector might argue, is to subsume it under a general statement. John Ladd (1952), for example, claims that an explanation “is an ordering of phenomena under general law...To the question “Why?,” explanations answer by a subsumption under a general statement.” (499) So if we are to explain anything in morality we must find exceptionless moral principles.

Although the *covering law* model of explanation was—and still is—extremely influential in the literature on explanation, it is certainly not the only available theory of explanation. And several alternative theories of explanation are compatible with the particularist project. For example, *dispositionalism*—the view that dispositions, rather than laws are the fundamental units of explanation—is one possible alternative to the covering law model.⁴⁴ According to this view, we should understand the claim that ‘lying is wrong’, for example, as the claim that acts of lying have the *disposition* to be wrong; under “suitable” conditions acts of lying manifest this disposition, but they need not do so under *all* circumstances. On this view, then, explanations may appeal to generalizations, but these generalizations need not be exceptionless. And since particularists, as I argue in this paper, want to explain morality without appealing to exceptionless moral principles, they may appeal to some version of dispositionalism.

But since dispositionalism is a controversial thesis, it is worth pointing out that there are other avenues open to particularists. In the 40’s, 50’s, and 60’s there has been a lively debate concerning the nature of historical explanation. William Dray (1957), for example, argued that since we currently cannot formulate strict historical laws, and since some historical explanations are adequate, then it must be the case that at least some kind of explanation need not appeal to laws, or to exceptionless generalizations. Woodward (2002) reaches a similar conclusion by focusing on the special sciences. Woodward notes that explanations in the special sciences often appeal to *ceteris paribus* law statements. But since, according to Woodward, there are no *ceteris paribus* laws, we must conclude that explanation need not appeal to laws or to exceptionless generalizations at all.

⁴³ Thanks to Pete Graham and Gabriel Greenberg for pressing me on this point.

⁴⁴ See Robinson (2006). Note, however, that my understanding of the disagreement between particularists and generalists is very different from Robinson’s.

Dray and Woodward propose radically different accounts of explanation that do not appeal to exceptionless generalizations offered by. Dray (1954:27) opts for a narrative account of explanation. “An historical explanation,” he writes, “may thus amount to telling the story of what actually happened, and telling it in such a way that the various transitions...raise no eyebrows.” Woodward (2002:320), in contrast, asserts that “the core idea in explanation is that an explanans should cite variables or factors that make a difference for the explanandum...for this condition to be satisfied it is neither necessary nor sufficient that the explanans provide a nomically sufficient condition for the explanandum.” It is beyond the scope of this paper to present and discuss the details of these proposals. Suffice it to say that these proposals represent alternative models of explanation that are not based on the availability of exceptionless generalizations and thus are friendly to particularism.⁴⁵

The question whether an adequate explanation must terminate in an exceptionless principle is, at least at present, an open question. And since the literature on the nature of explanation does not provide us with a non-controversial account of explanation, we cannot appeal to results in the theory of explanation in order to resolve the particularism/generalism controversy. Moreover, ‘explanation’ is a semantically flexible word, and there are surely contexts in which we give and receive adequate explanations that do not appeal to exceptionless generalizations. So even if opponents of particularism wish to draw on results from the theory of explanation, it would not suffice to show that there is some sense of ‘explanation’ that demands exceptionless moral principles; generalists will also have to argue that this is the only admissible sense of ‘explanation’ relevant to moral theorizing. We should note that if this could be established, then if, as I claim, we do not yet have exceptionless moral principles available to us, then it follows that we have never given nor received—and indeed, we have never even consciously grasped—an adequate explanation of the rightness/wrongness of any action. And this seems like an implausible consequence for any account of morality.

I do not claim that a detailed particularist-friendly theory of explanation is currently available, although Dancy and Lance & Little have made a few interesting advancements in this direction already.⁴⁶ Yet the lack of a full-fledged particularist theory of explanation does not favor the generalist research program since there are well known difficulties for the accounts of explanation generalists make use of.⁴⁷ Moreover, particularists can provide an explanation of morality without first developing an appropriate theory of explanation. If I am right in claiming that we can interpret Aristotle’s *Ethics* as a particularist account of morality, then this is precisely what Aristotle does. Once a particularist account of morality is offered, we can evaluate its strength and weaknesses and compare it to competing principle-based explanations. We should keep in mind, though, that the standards of adequacy we ought to employ are not independent of the research program we are pursuing.

Finally, It is important to keep in mind that a particularist account of morality is not simply a failed generalist account. A generalist, who admits that the best explanatory principles she is able to come up with all have exceptions, has not thereby provided a particularist explanation of morality. A particularist account must explain, among other things, why all attempts to come up with exceptionless principles have failed. Holism in the theory of reasons and the ‘cosmic accident’ thesis may prove to be useful for this task.

⁴⁵ For other theories of explanation that are compatible with particularism see, for example, Scriven (1959) and van Fraassen (1980)

⁴⁶ See, for example, Dancy (2004) esp. pp. 45–49, and Lance and Little (2004, 2007)

⁴⁷ Philosophers pursuing the generalist research program do not explicitly state which theory of explanation they endorse. However, the model of explanation they seem to employ is some version of Hempel’s *covering law* model. For a discussion of some famous counterexamples to Hempel’s model see Salmon (1989).

I suspect that some readers may still find the “admitting defeat” charge compelling. I believe that the reason it seems so compelling is that we have grown accustomed to thinking about the goal of moral theorizing in terms of identifying and formulating exceptionless principles. But if, as I suggest, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* can be read as a particularist-friendly account of morality, then we have a more direct way to debunk the “admitting defeat” charge. There are few, if any, moral theories that are more ambitious and more instructive than Aristotle’s moral philosophy. Therefore, if we can sensibly count Aristotle as a particularist, we can show that far from admitting defeat, the particularist research program is a flourishing line of ethical inquiry with an unimpeachable pedigree.

Objection The Defense of a Particularist Research Program Proposed in this Paper Defends too much. Everything argued for in this paper in defense of a particularist research program can be used, *mutatis mutandis*, to defend other research programs, including research programs that no one should take seriously. For example, consider the ‘ch-ist’ research program. *Ch-ism* is a research program characterized by the core hypothesis that morality, including the rightness and wrongness of actions, can be explained by using only sentences that start with the letters ‘ch’. Since *ch-ism* is a research program, it is neither true nor false, and it should be evaluated for its success. Moreover, the motivation to pursue *ch-ism* cannot be undermined simply by citing one unobjectionable principle that does not start with the letters ‘ch’; in order to undermine *ch-ism* one would have to present a non-‘ch’-starting-principle-based moral theory that provides an adequate account of morality. But since no such theories are currently available, *ch-ism* remains unscathed. Moreover, *ch-ists* can offer the following positive heuristic: try to formulate explanations of morality that begin with the letters ‘ch’. Obviously, no one should seriously consider pursuing the *ch-ist* research program. Yet the arguments put forward in this paper lead to the conclusion that *ch-ism* should be taken seriously. Therefore, there must be something wrong with the arguments presented in this paper—if they prove anything they prove too much.⁴⁸

Reply In defending a particularist research program I have not argued that the generalist research program should be abandoned. Indeed, I have presented no arguments against pursuing a generalist research program, or any other conceivable research program for that matter. The main goal of this paper is to fend off a familiar and prominent line of objections to particularism that purports to show that the particularist project is founded on a simple mistake—that particularist are committed to a thesis which is demonstrably false and/or entirely unmotivated. I think that these objections fail for reasons discussed in the previous sections. Moreover, I think that these objections are equally ineffective as objections to *ch-ism*; the fact that we can formulate one or a few unobjectionable moral principles such as (SP) or (TBF) is clearly not the reason why we should not pursue *ch-ism*. The reason we shouldn’t pursue *ch-ism* is that it is an uninteresting project and we have no reason to believe that it will produce any worthwhile results. The fact that the aforementioned objections fail to undermine *ch-ism* does not demonstrate that my defense of particularism defends too much, but instead it indicates that these objections are completely misguided.

Someone might, perhaps, think that particularism, like *ch-ism*, is uninteresting and that we have no reason to think that it will lead to any worthwhile results. However, to the best of my knowledge no one has yet argued that particularism is uninteresting, and it seems to me that the particularist research program has already generated worthwhile results—

⁴⁸ Thanks to Kelby Mason for pressing me on this point.

namely, holism in the theory of reasons; even those who reject holism admit that it is an interesting and worthwhile contribution to the study of the nature of reasons. Yet more, if it is reasonable to suspect that we can sensibly interpret Aristotle as offering a particularist account of morality, then we may have good reason to think that particularism will lead to further interesting and important philosophical results. Surely there are many important differences between particularism and *ch-ism* and it should be clear that particularists, like generalists, have the resources to explain why—unlike particularism and generalism—*ch-ism* is not worthy of pursuit.

7 Conclusion

Moral philosophy in the past few hundred years has been dominated by generalism. Philosophers have assumed—without argument—that a successful explanation of morality must be grounded in exceptionless principles. Perhaps the commitment to generalism was influenced by the remarkable progress in the sciences spawned by the scientific revolution. Perhaps the thought was that a successful explanation of morality should be modeled on explanations in the sciences, and that moral philosophers should seek exceptionless moral principles that would play a similar explanatory role to the role played by laws of nature in the sciences. Yet despite the fact that many outstanding philosophers have spent their careers trying to find and formulate exceptionless explanatory moral principles, such principles have not yet been found.

It would be a mistake to argue from the persistent failure to formulate satisfactory principles, to their non-existence. After all, it was Le Verrier's unwavering commitment to the Newtonian research program in the face of persistent failures that led to his celebrated discovery of The Planet Neptune. However, it was his unwavering commitment to the Newtonian research program that led him on a wild goose chase in search of The Planet Vulcan.

Despite the surge of interest in particularism in recent years, we must not forget that particularism is a budding research program—it promises an account of morality, but it has not yet delivered a full-fledged theory. At present, then, it would be rash to endorse particularism. However, we should also keep in mind that generalism is only a promise of a theory as well. A full-fledged generalist theory will consist of a principle, or a set of principles, that provides an adequate account of morality. At present, no such principle has been found. So it is equally rash to endorse generalism for the very same reasons it is rash to endorse particularism, and consequently, the claim that particularism is only a promise of a theory has no dialectical force in the context of the particularism—generalism debate.

We cannot yet determine whether the particularist research program will produce a better account of morality than competing principle-based theories. Nevertheless, the persistent failure to formulate exceptionless explanatory principles should motivate us to explore new routes and particularism shows enough promise to warrant further exploration.

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