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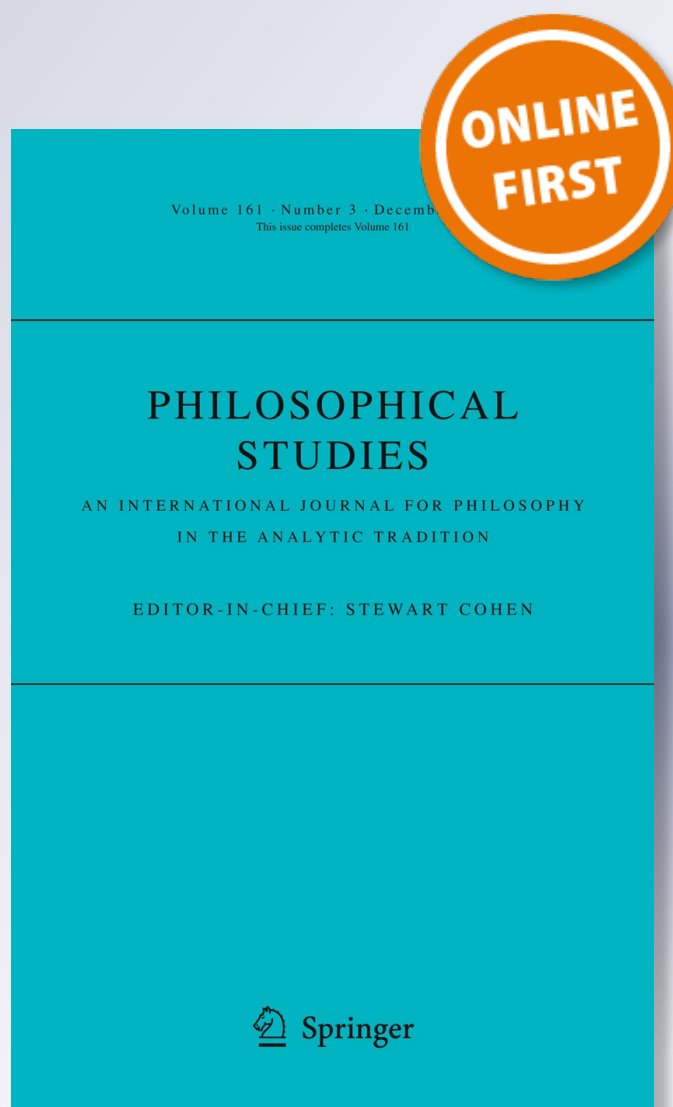Volume 161 · Number 3 · Decemb
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Abstract   Moral particularism, on some interpretations, is committed to a shapeless thesis: the moral is shapeless with respect to the natural. (Call this version of moral particularism 'shapeless moral particularism'). In more detail, the shapeless thesis is that the actions a moral concept or predicate can be correctly applied to have no natural commonality (or shape) amongst them. Jackson et al. (Ethical particularism and patterns, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000) argue, however, that the shapeless thesis violates the platitude 'predication supervenes on nature'—predicates or concepts apply because of how things are, and therefore ought to be rejected. I defend shapeless moral particularism by arguing that Jackson et al's contention is less compelling than it firstly appears. My defense is limited in the sense that it does not prove shapeless moral particularism to be right and it leaves open the possibility that shapeless moral particularism might attract criticisms different from the ones advanced by Jackson et al. But at the very least, I hope to say enough to undermine Jackson et al's powerful attack against it. The plan of this paper is as follows. Section 1 glosses the view of moral particularism and why it is taken to be essentially committed to the shapeless thesis. Section 2 examines a Wittgensteinian argument for the shapeless thesis. I shall argue that the Canberrans' counter-arguments against it on grounds of disjunctive commonality and conceptual competence do not succeed. Section 3 explicates Canberrans' predication supervenience argument against the shapeless thesis. Section 4 offers my criticisms of the Canberrans' predication supervenience argument. In view of the above discussions, in Sect. 5, I conclude that there is no compelling argument (from the Canberrans) to believe that the shapeless thesis fails (as I have argued in Sect. 4). In fact, there is some good reason for us to believe it (as I have argued in Sect. 2). If so, I contend

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that moral particularism, when construed as essentially committed to the shapeless thesis, still remains as a live option.

1 Moral particularism and shapelessness

Moral particularism is understood in various ways (Audi 2008; Little and Lance 2005; McKeever and Ridge 2006; Sinnott-Armstrong 2000; Smith 2011; Väyrynen 2006). Some construe it as a metaphysical doctrine that there are no true moral principles (Dancy 1983, 1993, 2009; Little 2000; Tsu 2011, Tsu (forthcoming)). Others construe it as the view that moral principles play no essential role in moral thinking (Dancy 2004). Still others construe it as a practical doctrine that moral principles are useless for action guidance (McNaughton 1988; Väyrynen 2008). For the purposes of this paper, I will follow Jackson et al. (2000) (henceforth the Canberrans as they all worked in Canberra in Australia) in taking moral particularism to be essentially committed to a *shapeless thesis*: the moral is shapeless with respect to the natural.[1] Call this version of moral particularism 'shapeless moral particularism'.[2] Now, let me clarify what shapeless moral particularism is essentially committed to—the shapeless thesis, and why (the Canberrans think) it is so committed.[3]

To begin with, the clarification of the shapeless thesis. The Canberrans take 'shape' to mean, pace Blackburn (1992), 'commonality'. What the shapeless thesis amounts to is this: the actions a moral concept can be correctly applied to have no natural 'shape' or commonality amongst them.[4] To illustrate, take the moral concept 'wrong' for example. The actions the moral concept 'wrong' can be correctly applied to are the wrong ones. They might well include various actions with natural

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[1] This construal of moral particularism is also adopted by Setiya (2007, pp. 4–5). Dancy (2004, p. 110, footnote 6) contends, however, that this is not how (his) moral particularism is supposed to be understood; Dancy's reason is this: moral particularism is not merely the view that the moral is shapeless with respect to the natural; if the moral can be reduced entirely to the natural, moral particularism holds that still there is no shape amongst one set of natural properties that connects them to another set of natural properties. Two replies can be made here. First, it is not clear there is a standard way moral particularism is supposed to be understood, as it has been understood in various ways by various philosophers. Second, even if there is a standard way how it is supposed to be understood, the shapeless reading is not thus invalidated. It provides a new version of moral particularism that is worth exploring in its own right.

[2] For reasons of brevity, I will sometimes call it 'particularism' or 'moral particularism' for short, and those who champion this doctrine 'the particularists' or 'the moral particularists', unless contexts dictate otherwise.

[3] It has to be stressed that, as I said in the beginning of this section, moral particularism is understood in various ways; here, I am merely presenting the Canberrans' take on it. I am not committed to their reading myself. But I follow their reading for the purposes of this paper.

[4] For ease of exposition, I will sometimes speak loosely about moral concepts having no (natural) shape, although strictly speaking, it is the actions they can be correctly applied to that have no (natural) shape.

properties such as those of killing, lying, and harming, etc.[5] According to the shapeless thesis, these actions, while all being wrong, have no 'natural shape' (such as that of reducing happiness, for instance). Or in brief, the wrong actions have no common natural properties. The same can be said for other actions a moral concept can be correctly applied to, such as right actions, treacherous actions or pious actions, and so on.

Particularists are committed to the shapeless thesis because they are also committed to the *uncodifiability thesis*, viz., that morality cannot be codified into a true and coherent set of natural-moral principles. (Berker 2007; Crisp 2000; Holton 2002; Kirchin 2010; Lang 2001; Little 2000; Noble 1989; Nussbaum 1990; Tsu 2010) By natural-moral principles, the particularists mean principles that connect the natural with the moral, principles such as 'lying is unjust' or 'maximizing happiness is right'.

Now, before I comment on how the shapeless thesis is motivated by the uncodifiability thesis, let us explain why the particularists espouse the uncodifiability thesis. This is because the particularists, in pursuance with their well-recognized anti-principle penchant, are generally greatly dissatisfied with a conventional picture of morality where morality consists of a true and coherent set of natural-moral principles. This picture of morality is widely shared by the so-called principlists. Monist principlists, e.g. the utilitarians, contend that morality essentially boils down to one grand overarching natural-moral principle, e.g. the principle of utility. The moral status of an action is determined by whether it conforms to this single overarching principle.

Pluralist principlists, on the other hand, contend that morality is essentially constituted by a plethora of natural-moral principles in addition to the principle of utility. And the moral status of an action depends on how they interact with each other. Take the principle of promise-keeping and the principle of maximizing happiness for instance. Most of the times, perhaps the moral significance of the former 'outweighs' that of the latter. Sometimes, however, it is the reverse, as in a case where you have to break a luncheon promise to help a victim of a car accident you happen to witness on your way to the luncheon.

Particularists, in contrast with both pluralists and monists, contend that morality cannot be codified into any natural-moral principle at all. For the particularists, the moral status of an action is thus not determined by any natural-moral principle; rather, the particularists argue that it is determined by the action's morally relevant features in a particular context. For instance, whether promise-keeping is right at all is not determined by any natural-moral principle about promise-keeping but depends on the morally relevant features in a particular context, such as who the promisor and the promisee are and what the content of the promise is. If the content of the promise is immoral, keeping the promise may not be right at all.[6]

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[5] The meaning of 'the natural' is notoriously difficult to elucidate. See Ridge (2008). For the purposes of this paper, I take it to mean 'the non-moral'. And 'the moral' will encompass both the morally thin, e.g. properties of rightness and wrongness, and the morally thick, e.g. properties of treacherousness and piety. A caution that is to be noted here is that 'the non-moral' is not to be understood so broadly as to include the supernatural.

[6] Or to put it in prevalent terminology, it is not *right-making* at all. See Dancy (2004), Little (2000), Little and Lance (2005, 2008), McKeever & Ridge (2006), and Timmons (2002).

Now, let us return to the explanation of the connection between the shapeless and the uncodifiability thesis. As we have seen, the uncodifiability thesis is that morality cannot be codified into any natural-moral principle at all. The uncodifiability entails the shapeless thesis. For if, contra the shapeless thesis, the actions that a moral concept can be correctly applied to *do* have common natural properties, the uncodifiability thesis will be thus falsified. For instance, consider the actions that satisfy the predicate 'morally right'. If right actions have some common natural properties, e.g. the property of maximizing happiness, then surely morality can be codified into natural-moral principles that connect the common natural properties with moral properties, say, a principle of utility (which says that maximizing happiness is right), and the uncodifiability thesis is thus falsified. So, if particularism is committed to uncodifiability, as we take it, it is committed to shapelessness as well.

2 Shapelessness and its justifications

For particularists, shapelessness is motivated by uncodifiability. However, motivation is not equivalent to justification. So far, we have only seen why the particularists espouse the shapeless thesis. However, we have not seen any *justification* for the shapelessness thesis. Here, naturally, our next question is: What supports the shapeless view, the view that the moral is shapeless with respect to the natural? In more detail: What, if anything, justifies the thesis that the actions to which a moral concept can be correctly applied have no common natural properties? To answer this question, we must consider the Wittgensteinian ideas that motivate it and the Canberrans' critique of those ideas.

2.1 Wittgenstein on family resemblance concept and shapelessness

To justify the shapelessness thesis, one Wittgensteinian line of reasoning naturally suggests itself: moral concepts are family resemblance concepts—the actions to which they can be correctly applied merely have 'family resemblance' but do not have anything in common. To further illustrate the meaning of 'family resemblance concept', take a typical family resemblance concept 'game' for instance. According to Wittgenstein (1963), the concept 'game' can be correctly applied to all sorts of games, ranging from tennis games, baseball games to board games. These games, as Wittgenstein has vividly illustrated in his *Philosophical Investigations*, have nothing in common (except, of course, their all being games). They are merely united by a network of overlapping similarities or by what he calls 'family resemblances'.

Suppose that G1, G2, G3, and G4 are all instances of games. According to Wittgenstein, G1 and G2 may resemble each other in that they have a common property F1, so may G2 and G3 because they have another common property F2, and so may G3 and G4 because they have still another common property F3. However, G1, G2, G3 and G4 have no property that is common to them all. They all fall under the extension of the concept 'game' because of their overlapping similarities.

So, if moral concepts are family resemblance concepts just like the concept 'game', the actions to which moral concepts can be correctly applied have no common properties (except, of course, their all being right actions or wrong ones)[7]; they are also united merely by a network of overlapping similarities. To be more specific, if those actions have no common properties whatsoever (except their all being right actions or wrong ones),[8] then it follows that they have no common *natural* properties.

2.2 Canberrans' challenge: disjunctive commonality

The Canberrans do not object to the idea that moral concepts are family resemblance concepts, as this is widely accepted. Or so we may assume. They object instead to the idea that family resemblance concepts have no commonality or shape. In fact, the Canberrans (p. 83) contend, contra Wittgenstein, that the items to which family resemblance concepts can be correctly applied still have some sort of commonality (except a somewhat unorthodox one), a commonality which the Canberrans call by the name of 'disjunctive commonality'.

Consider the game example we mentioned in the last paragraph again. Wittgenstein believed that G1, G2, G3 and G4 have nothing in common (except their all being games). Suppose that G1, G2, G3 and G4 are all the games there are, the Canberrans argue, however, that they still have a disjunctive commonality, the commonality of having (F1 or F2 or F3). That is, according to the Canberrans, all the Gs share the disjunctive commonality of having (F1 or F2 or F3).

The Canberrans argue that *the idea of family resemblance concepts cannot support the shapeless thesis*. And the reason is this: The shapeless thesis contends that the items to which moral concepts can be correctly applied have no natural commonality, whereas the items to which family resemblance concepts can be correctly applied still have some sort of natural commonality, albeit a disjunctive sort. So moral concepts, even if they are family resemblance concepts, still have a shape. The point about family resemblance cannot be utilized to justify the shapeless thesis.

Some might object that the Canberrans' idea of disjunctive commonality is too trivial to count as a 'real' commonality. To return to the game example, if the idea of disjunctive commonality were to count as a 'real' commonality, and suppose that G1, G2, G3 and G4 are all the games there are, surely all the games would have the following commonality, the commonality of being G1, G2, G3 or G4. When Wittgenstein talked about the concept of game being a family resemblance concept and the items to which it can be correctly applied having no commonality, he certainly wouldn't have denied that they share the disjunctive common property of being G1, G2, G3 or G4. If so, this seems to show that the idea of disjunctive

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[7] I am focusing on the actions to which moral concepts such as 'right' or 'wrong' can be correctly applied. But the same point can be generalized to apply to all other actions to which other moral concepts can be correctly applied.

[8] For ease of exposition, I shall henceforth drop this cumbersome qualifier, unless contexts dictate otherwise.

commonality is too trivial to count as a 'real' commonality anyone is interested in denying.

To be charitable to the Canberrans, while the above line of reasoning might well be correct, we can distinguish the sort of disjunctive commonality the Canberrans have in mind from the trivial sort of disjunctive commonality. To return to the game example, the sort of disjunctive commonality the Canberrans have in mind might not be the sort at the ground level; it might *not* be the disjunctive commonality of being G1, G2, G3 or G4 that the Canberrans contend to unify all the instances of games. But rather, it might well be a disjunctive commonality at a higher level, the disjunctive commonality of having (F1 or F2, or F3), let's say.

If so, apparently not everyone will agree that there is a disjunctive commonality like this. It is not clear at all whether Wittgenstein would endorse the idea that all the games share such a disjunctive commonality. So, the 'too trivial' objection against the idea of disjunctive commonality can be assuaged when Canberrans' point is charitably interpreted.[9] As to how to justify the claim that there is indeed a non-trivial disjunctive commonality, it is a question awaiting an answer from the Canberrans. To this question I will now turn.

2.3 Disjunctive commonality and conceptual competence

The Canberrans contend that there must be a non-trivial disjunctive commonality or shape uniting the members of a family resemblance concept, for if there were not, then, there would be no explanation for our conceptual competence with the use of the family resemblance concept, or our competence with moral concept for that matter.[10] In fact, the Canberrans believe that this is not just true of family resemblance concepts, but of any other kinds of concepts as well. For we are finite creatures, with finite learning processes, and therefore cannot possibly acquire a concept by acquainting ourselves with all the occasions to which it can be correctly

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[9] Some might contend that if games share the disjunctive commonality of (F1 or F2 or F3), they certainly share, by disjunction insertion, the following pickwickian disjunctive commonality: (F1 or F2 or F3 or picking one's nose). However, this is certainly not the sort of disjunctive commonality the Canberrans have in mind when their idea of disjunctive commonality is, again, charitably interpreted. Even if it is the sort they have in mind (Jackson et al. 2000, p. 95), I do not think that it *ought* to be, for it is not the sort of shape any moral principlists engaged in the codifiability project are interested in defending.

[10] Here, the Canberrans assume that we are indeed competent with the use of moral concepts. However, it might well be objected, based on recent work on experimental ethics (e.g. Knobe and Nichols 2008a, b; Knobe 2008; Nichols 2007), that we are in fact pretty bad with our moral concepts. We may not know what our moral concepts are; we may not even have clear moral concepts, just motley dispositions to a range of incoherent moral judgments. Roughly, two sorts of replies can be made here. First, the experimental results are subject to various interpretations; they may not show conclusively that we are in fact incompetent with moral concepts. (I owe this point to the reviewer.) Second, even if they do, it is not entirely clear that this is a point that is particularly germane to the debate between the Canberrans and the shapeless theorists. For the Canberrans might well concede that we are not competent with moral concepts, while still insisting, without any incoherence, that moral concepts are not shapeless. Moreover, it is worth noting that the shapeless theorists need not and do not place their bets on the truth of the controversial claim that we are not competent with moral concepts to deflect Canberrans' attack on the shapeless thesis. Instead, they agree with the Canberrans that we are indeed competent with moral concepts but argue that this fact does not show that our moral concepts are shaped. I will elaborate on this from Sect. 2.3.2 to 2.3.4.

applied. Hence, the Canberrans contend that the best explanation for our conceptual competence is that there must be a commonality that we latch onto amongst the members of a concept (or a disjunctive one in the case of family resemblance concepts).

To put it somewhat differently, conceptual competence, according to the Canberrans (p. 83), means that we have the ability to correctly apply the concept to new items that fall under its extension. To illustrate with Canberrans' own example, "the fact that, given a large enough diet of examples, we can say of some new case whether or not it is, say, a game (or perhaps, that it is indeterminate whether it is or not) shows that [we are competent with the concept of a game]." Our conceptual competence is best explained, according to the Canberrans, by the fact that there is a commonality we can latch onto; our ability to project shows that we have acquired the commonality, even though it can be enormously complex.

Four challenges can be raised against the Canberrans' account of conceptual competence and its ramifications. They are as follows.

2.3.1 Garfield's learnability challenge

First, an explanation of how we can acquire the commonality if it is enormously complex is lacking in Canberrans' account. In fact, it might well be plausibly argued that if there were indeed some commonality we can latch onto, it had to be short and clear enough to be learned, due to our cognitive constraints (Garfield 2000).[11] However, the Canberrans have not reported any evidence demonstrating that the commonality is indeed short and clear. In fact, there is good evidence to believe that it is not, especially in the case of family resemblance concepts. For hardly anyone has produced, or even attempted at producing, a convincing commonality, disjunctive or otherwise, that unites the members of a family resemblance concept, say, the concept of a game. The Canberrans themselves certainly have not tried to produce it.

If the commonality were short and clear, it would be quite puzzling why there has not been a persuasive formulation of it, since the best way to vindicate the existence of a commonality is to *display* it. Here, the Canberrans might well contend that the fact that there is a commonality does not mean that we are able to articulate it. The fact of our conceptual competence, i.e. our ability to project, is sufficient to show that there must be a commonality we latch onto. If this is Canberrans' contention, the Canberrans still owe us an account of *how* we latch onto the unarticulable, and perhaps very complex, commonality. Before such an account is produced, we are justified in remaining skeptical about Canberrans' contention.

2.3.2 Dancy and Rosch's prototype theory challenge

Second, the Canberrans contend that our conceptual competence, i.e. our ability to project, shows that there is a commonality we have latched onto. However, this contention seems to run counter to Rosch's relevant studies about concept acquisition

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[11] I thank the reviewer for making this point.

(Dancy 1999). I will not pursue Rosch's theory in any detail here. Suffice to point out that, according to Rosch (1975), for most of our concepts, there is no non-trivial commonality to latch onto, be it disjunctive or not. So we do not become competent with a concept by latching onto commonality. Instead, what we latch onto are the so-called prototypical properties, properties that are only had by the typical (rather than all) examples of a concept.

To put it somewhat differently, our ability to project, on Rosch's theory, does not show that there is a commonality that is shared by all members of a concept we have latched onto. Instead, it merely shows that we have latched onto the prototypical properties that are merely had by the typical members. This is borne out by the experimental results that the response time is relatively less when the subjects of Rosch's experiments are asked to identify the typical examples of a concept, whereas more response time is needed in atypical cases. For instance, the subjects typically spend relatively less time in identifying robins as birds whereas more time is needed in identifying penguins as birds. (By contrast, the Canberrans' commonality account of conceptual competence seems to neglect the difference in subjects' response time, as it does not seem to make a distinction between our conceptual competence in typical and atypical cases; our conceptual competence in both cases is explained un-discriminatorily by our latching onto a commonality in Canberrans' account.) Here, Rosch's theory provides, to say the very least, a prima facie coherent explanation of our conceptual competence. Perhaps it can be challenged. But we have not seen any argument from the Canberrans to rule it out as a plausible one.

2.3.3 Horty's default challenge

Third, the Canberrans' account of conceptual competence does not seem to square well with the latest studies of default reasoning. As a first approximation, Horty (2007, 2012) explains our conceptual competence as competent with 'defaults' (or defeasible generalizations) about a concept. For instance, our competence with the concept 'bird' means that we are equipped with the defaults about the concept, for instance, that birds fly. To illustrate, suppose we are told that Tweety is a bird, we can infer from this that Tweety flies. Why? Because we are competent with the default about the concept 'bird' that birds fly. Yet, these defaults are *defeasible* generalizations. The default about birds is defeated by the fact that penguins are birds, yet they do not fly. So, suppose we are told further that Tweety is a penguin, then we may well revise our previous belief that Tweety flies, in the light of this newly acquired piece of information. The latest studies of default reasoning suggest that our conceptual competence is not reduced to grasp of any commonality amongst birds, as there might well be none; rather, it is about grasping the defeasible defaults about the concept 'bird', i.e. knowing when they are defeated (Geffner 1992). And any plausible theory of conceptual competence should be able to accommodate this fact.

The Canberrans' commonality account of conceptual competence does not seem to leave enough space for defaults, however. To begin with, it does not have the theoretical apparatus to claim that birds fly by default. On Canberrans' commonality

account, the creatures to which the concept 'bird' can be correctly applied share some sort of commonality. This commonality, on Canberrans' commonality account, cannot be the feature of being able to fly at any rate, for although there are birds that fly, there are also birds that don't (such as penguins or ostriches). So suppose that the Canberrans are told that Tweety is a bird, lacking the notion of a defeasible default, they are not able to infer from their commonality account that Tweety flies. This seems to be a bad result for the Canberrans, for reasoning with defaults is a commonplace.

At this juncture, it might be countered that the commonality the Canberrans advocate might well be defeasible in nature. If so, the Canberrans might well contend that the common feature of being able to fly birds share is defeasible such that when they get told that Tweety is a bird, they might well be entitled to claim that Tweety flies, just as the default theorists. However, while the idea of a defeasible commonality might well be reasonable in itself, it is not one that is available to the Canberrans, given their anti-shapelessness position. For if the Canberrans were to claim that the commonality is defeasible in the sense that some items to which a concept can be correctly applied may not share the commonality, this would amount to admitting that there is really no 'shape' amongst the items to which a concept can be correctly applied. So, by admitting that the commonality is defeasible, the Canberrans would give up the whole game to the shapeless moral particularists.

Finally, before we leave this sub-section, it is important to note that, again, perhaps the default account of conceptual competence might well be challenged. Perhaps it is inferior to Canberrans' commonality account in some regard. But at the very least, it seems to have some prima facie plausibility to it. And we have not seen the Canberrans provide any convincing argument to rule it out as a plausible account. Before they do so, we are justified in remaining skeptical about Canberrans' commonality account.

2.3.4 McDowellian response-dependent challenge

Finally, the Canberrans' account of conceptual competence is susceptible to the challenge of a McDowellian response-dependent view of moral concepts. In outlines, it runs as follows: It might well be the case that the Canberrans get the *location* of the shape or commonality wrong. There might never be any shape in the various actions to which a moral concept can be correctly applied. Rather, their shape comes from *us*; it is response-dependent.[12] We respond to the various morally wrong actions, let's say, in the same way by applying the same concept to them all, despite the fact that there might be no shape in them. Our conceptual competence with a moral concept is explained not by there being any shape or commonality amongst the things to which the moral concept applies and our latching onto that shape when we learn the concept, but by there being some particular way people carve up moral reality and our knowing the point why people carve it up in that way,

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[12] The Canberrans in fact anticipated this objection (pp. 91–93). I don't think their reply to this objection is successful, however, for reasons I will elaborate below.

viz. why they classify certain actions as being, let's say, pious and others as treacherous.

Although McDowell himself has never objected directly to the Canberrans, arguments on these grounds are not far from what he (2002, essay 10, pp. 198–218) says in "Non-cognitivism and Rule-following". In that article, McDowell argues that moral terms, despite their supervening on the natural terms, are response-dependent in that there might be nothing in common in the natural things to which they apply. Here is what he (p. 202) says:

> [H]owever long a list we give of items to which a supervening term applies, described in terms of the level supervened upon, there may be no way, expressible at the level supervened upon, of grouping just such items together.

Hence, McDowell claims that "there need be no possibility of mastering, in a way that would enable one to go on to new cases, a term that is to function at the level supervened upon." If we want to go on to new cases, what we have to do instead is "to group together exactly the items to which competent users would apply the supervening term." That is to say, the extension of a supervening term, (or a moral term in our case), depends entirely upon what sort of things we, as competent users, would apply the term to. To paraphrase for our purposes, if we, as competent users of a moral concept, would apply it to various actions such as N1, N2, N3, etc., then they are what the concept can refer to and there need not be any commonality in the various Ns.

One might wonder how McDowell explains our conceptual competence with a moral concept though. For according to the Canberrans' account, there is really no explaining for it without there being a commonality or a shape in the various Ns that we latch onto. McDowell, by contrast, contends that our conceptual competence essentially consists in our sharing the same 'form of life'. It is, he (pp. 206–207) quotes Stanley Cavell approvingly,

> a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life".

So, being competent with a concept requires one to share the same form of life with other competent users of the concept in the same linguistic community. People having a different form of life might well lack the sort of vision required for them to see why an utterance is an assertion rather than an explanation or an appeal or why Chaplin's show is humorous to the locals. To further illustrate, let me use the concept of piety for example. A Chinese person would regard a senior adult dressed up in colorful costumes dancing in front of his aged parents as performing an action of filial piety while a non-Chinese person might not have the slightest idea of why the concept of piety can be applied to it. The non-Chinese person is not competent with the use of the concept 'piety' in Chinese society. Having a different "form of life", he lacks the sort of vision that is required to see the senior adult's action as one of filial piety.

If McDowell is right, becoming competent with a moral concept does not consist so much in the acquisition of a shape in the various Ns to which the moral concept can be applied as in the acquisition of the perspective from which the locals see things. The non-Chinese person might well have seen the same senior adult performing the same sort of actions several times and spotted the commonality amongst the various performances, yet still does not have the slightest idea with regard to why what he has witnessed is an action of filial piety. "Form of life" is what makes all the difference.[13]

Equipped with a better understanding of a McDowellian sort of response-dependent objection, we can now proceed to consider whether it poses a serious threat to Canberrans' account of conceptual competence. At first blush, the answer may seem to be 'no' and the Canberrans can seem to have a reply to this. They may well acknowledge that to be fully competent with the use of a moral concept in a particular linguistic community, one has to understand the cultural baggage the moral concept carries with it to apply it correctly. They may well also acknowledge that a foreigner who lacks relevant cultural vision that is required for competence with a moral concept in that community are unable to see things in the same moral way as the locals do; to learn how the moral concept is used in that community, he has to mix himself with the locals, 'whirl in the same organism', so to speak.

Acknowledging these facts, however, is consistent with maintaining that there is a shape in the various Ns. In fact, we should note that McDowell can allow there being a shape in the various Ns too. He only makes the weaker claim that there *need not* be any. He is not committed to the stronger claim that there *cannot be* any. However, the important thing for us to note here is this: The Canberrans' view differs from McDowell's in that they make an even more stronger claim that there *has to be* a shape in the various Ns, given our conceptual competence with a moral concept. Yet, they have not produced any evidence for this claim, as is indicated by Garfield's challenge in Sect. 2.3.1. In fact, as I have argued in Sects. 2.3.2 and 2.3.3, there is even evidence against it. So, given that McDowellians have provided at least a prima facie coherent account of our conceptual competence without appealing to the existence of shape or commonality, there is even more evidence for us to doubt the credibility of Canberrans' account.

3 Canberrans' reply: predication supervenes on nature

As we have seen in Sect. 2, the Canberrans have not produced any compelling reason for us to believe that there is any shape or commonality underlying the members of a family resemblance concept. The fact of our conceptual competence, as I have argued, does not show that there must be a commonality, disjunctive or not, onto which we latch. Such being the case, there do not appear to be any compelling reasons to think that there are disjunctive commonalities or shapes underlying our moral concepts qua family resemblance concepts.

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[13] Cf. Lang (2001)

In reply, the Canberrans might well contend that the four challenges we mentioned in Sect. 2 did not get at the heart of the matter. For, admittedly, none of them, along with Wittgenstein's point about family resemblance, can rule out conclusively the possibility that there is still some sort of commonality, disjunctive or otherwise, underlying our moral concepts. The fact that there is no compelling reason for us to believe that there is a commonality does not fully guarantee that there is none. In fact, the Canberrans contend that there is a decisive reason for us to believe that there must be some sort of commonality underlying our moral concepts or predicates.

The reason is this: If there were not any commonality, as the shapeless thesis maintains, then this would be a glaring violation of the platitude "predication supervenes on nature", the Canberrans (p. 87, p. 93) contend. Therefore, the Canberrans contend that the shapeless thesis ought to be rejected. How the shapeless thesis constitutes a violation of the platitude of course requires further clarification. Two questions naturally call for answers. First, what does the platitude mean exactly? Second, why is the shapeless thesis a violation of the platitude? Let me take up these questions in turn.

To begin with, what does the platitude "predication supervenes on nature" mean exactly? It means, according to the Canberrans, that "predicates apply because of how things are". In the case of moral predicates or concepts, they apply because of how things are at the natural level. To further illustrate, if two things are similar in their natural aspects, the same moral predicate will presumably apply to both of them, unless a good reason is given for not doing so. This is why, according to the Canberrans, "defenders of abortion are challenged to explain why they oppose infanticide; those who oppose contraception on the grounds that it is unnatural are asked to explain why they do not oppose the wearing of spectacles." (p. 94)

We hence see that, according to the Canberrans, that similarities or differences in our application of moral predicates must be explained in virtue of similarities or differences in how things are at the natural level. Without paying any heed to this, our application of moral concepts would become entirely arbitrary (which is clearly absurd). So if the shapeless thesis is a violation of the platitude, it has to be rejected. Now, I will turn to the second question: Why is the shapeless thesis a violation of the platitude?

According to the Canberrans, if, as the shapeless thesis maintains, there were no shape in the various actions to which we correctly apply our moral concepts, then the supporters of the shapeless thesis would have to maintain that what we are responding to is merely "a mess" at bottom—those actions we call right are only randomly related to each other; they don't have anything in common at the natural level.[14] However, this seems incredible. If they are so different from each other at the natural level, the Canberrans contend, it seems incredible that we apply the same

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[14] Strictly speaking, the Canberrans' attack here is somewhat slanderous. The claim that the right actions don't have any natural commonality does not necessarily mean that what we are responding to is merely "a mess". The claim that the right actions don't have any natural commonality is compatible with the claim that there might still be some orderliness amongst them. For messiness and orderliness can come in degrees. Having said so, the Canberrans' attack still seems to carry some force, for there is still some degree of 'messiness' involved in what we respond to.

moral concept or predicate to them so consistently and only to them for that matter. This seems incredible because we accept the platitude that moral predicates apply because of how things are at the natural level. By allowing the same moral concept or predicate to apply to what is essentially a "mess" at the natural level, the shapeless thesis certainly violates the platitude. Since we all accept the platitude, the Canberrans contend, we therefore ought to reject the shapeless thesis on pains of inconsistency.

4 Rejoinder to the Canberrans' reply

First, the Canberrans contend that the fact that we apply the same moral concept or predicate consistently shows that our moral concepts cannot be shapeless; if they were shapeless, then it would seem incredible that we should apply the same moral concept or predicate to them so consistently and only to them for that matter. So the Canberrans conclude that the things they can be correctly apply to must have some sort of commonality. But here is the challenge: What does it mean to say that we apply the same concept *consistently*? If it means following a rule when we apply a concept,[15] then there will be the familiar problem of rule-following (Kripke 1982). For I can certainly follow a 'grue' rule consistently, despite the fact that the colors the concept 'grue' applies to are completely different.[16] To give a more realistic example, jadeite and nephrite can be very different from each other; they differ in their structure, in their chemical compounds, and can even differ in their colors, sizes and shapes.[17] Nevertheless, we apply the same concept 'jade' to them consistently and only to them for that matter. Although this might well call for an explanation, evolutionary or sociological, it is nevertheless a fact that we do apply the same concept consistently to objects that are very different from each other at the natural level.

Second, the first challenge mentioned above has shown that "predicates apply because of how things are" may not be really a platitude as the Canberrans claim it to be, for the things to which same predicates can be correctly applied are not always 'shapey'. They may well be very different from each other. Now, it might be objected on Canberrans' behalf that those things, though sharing no unifying shape, still have a *disjunctive* shape. For instance, although jadeite and nephrite have no unifying shape, they still share the disjunctive shape of being either jadeite or nephrite. However, as I have argued in Sect. 2.2, this is a trivial sort of shape no one is interested in denying. The principlists certainly will not score any point against the shapeless moral particularists by proving that all actions of stealing and killing

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[15] If this is not what it means, the Canberrans bear the burden of telling us what exactly they mean by 'applying the same concept consistently'.

[16] The grue rule runs like this: 'grue' applies to anything that looks green if examined today and before, and to anything that looks blue if examined after today.

[17] Admittedly, some jadeites and nephrites can look similar. But there are jadeites and nephrites that look completely different. Anyone who doubts this is suggested to go to a minerals museum to see for themselves. Of course, how similar or different jadeites and nephrites will look will be relative to, inter alia, 'the metric of similarity' one adopts. I will elaborate on this soon in what follows.

share the disjunctive shape of being either stealing or killing. For this sort of shape does not 'codify' morality in any robust sense. Even if there is a disjunctive shape of this sort, the shapeless moral particularists' shapelessness claim is not thus undermined.

Third, even if "predication supervenes on nature" is a platitude, it is not clear that the shapeless thesis really violates it. Let me explain. To begin with, the platitude comprises two sub-theses:

(i) If a and b are similar in natural aspects, the same predicate applies, unless a good reason is given for why it does not.
(ii) If a and b are dissimilar in natural aspects, the same predicate does not apply, unless a good reason is given for why it does.

The Canberrans think that the shapeless thesis violates this platitude, because they think that the shapeless thesis allows the same predicate to be applied to things that are highly dissimilar in natural aspects without a good reason and hence violates (ii). Here, I don't want to enter into debates about whether sharing the same 'form of life' with the locals, as I presented in Sect. 2.3.4, provides one with a *good* reason to apply the same moral predicate to naturally dissimilar things. It may well do. If it does, then the shapeless thesis does not really violate (ii).

There is a further problem for the Canberrans here. Their objection presupposes some metric of similarity. Without one, the platitude is vacuous. The question to ask here is: What is the 'metric of similarity' adopted by the Canberrans? Jadeite and nephrite might well be regarded as naturally dissimilar under one metric of similarity but quite similar under another. The shapeless thesis, by allowing the same predicate 'jade' to be applied to both jadeite and nephrite, might well respect the platitude that the same predicate can only be applied to naturally similar objects, if a certain metric of similarity is adopted. So before a clear metric of similarity is produced and *justified*, I don't think that the platitude constitutes a serious threat against the shapeless thesis.

5 Conclusion

Particularism is committed to a shapeless thesis, the view that the moral is shapeless with respect to the natural. It is committed to this thesis because it is also committed to the uncodifiability thesis, the view that morality cannot be codified into natural-moral principles. Yet, the uncodifiability thesis merely provides motivation, but not justification for the shapeless thesis.

The shapeless thesis can be justified using a Wittgensteinian view of moral concepts as family resemblance concepts. Against this, the Canberrans contend that the Wittgensteinian view is not quite up to its supposedly justificatory role, as family resemblance concepts still have a shape, albeit a disjunctive one. To support this contention, the Canberrans appeal to our conceptual competence and argue that the best explanation for this fact is that there must be a commonality or shape underlying the concept for us to latch onto. And the commonality or shape is a disjunctive one in the case of family resemblance concepts.

As we have seen, however, the Canberrans' account of conceptual competence faces serious challenges from different fronts: learnability, prototypes, defaults, and response-dependence. And there does not appear to be any compelling reason to believe that the Canberrans' account is true. So the shapeless thesis seems to remain unscathed so far. But then the Canberrans argue that there is a decisive reason against it; that is, it violates the platitude "predication supervenes on nature"— "predicates apply because of how things are".

As we have seen, however, there are at least three problems with Canberrans' predication supervenience argument. First, the Canberrans' claim that the fact of our applying the predicate *consistently* shows that there must be a commonality in the items to which it can be correctly applied would run up against Kripke's rule-following considerations. Second, even if the Canberrans can reply to the rule-following considerations by contending that there is still a specific *disjunctive* commonality, it may not be the right sort of commonality the principlists are after that can codify morality. It is thus not one that should concern the shapeless moral particularists. Third, even if the platitude *is* a platitude, it is not clear whether the shapeless thesis violates it, before any justified account of the metric of similarity is produced.

To sum up our discussions, when moral particularism is understood as being committed to the shapeless thesis, it is too early to give up on it, to say the very least, for the reasons advocated by the Canberrans. In fact, there is some positive support for it derived from the Wittgensteinian view of moral concepts. Of course, saying all this is not to deny that shapeless moral particularism might attract criticisms different from the ones advanced by the Canberrans. But until they come up, it still remains as a live option.

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