Recent Work: Moral Particularism

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1. Introduction

Hailed by some as an insightful and welcome break from the dominant (or at least once dominant) ‘generalist’ approaches to moral philosophy, and dodged by critics as untenable or, more modestly, as constituting neither a new nor a unique approach to moral philosophy, moral particularism is a view about both the nature of moral reasons and the role of (or, in more extreme cases, the very existence of) moral principles. In this review article, I shall offer a general description of the position, while noting the centrality of the work by Jonathan Dancy. From there, I organize important recent work on the topic into three (conceptual) categories: the relevance of holism, the place of generality, and the importance of moral sensibility. I will close by discussing a contribution to the conversation about moral particularism that draws on models in cognitive science.

2. Moral particularism: a description

As Vojko Strahovnik puts it in his introduction to the edited collection Challenging Moral Particularism, we can think of particularist positions as embodying a ‘negative attitude’ toward moral principles (2008: 1). And as Simon Kirchin puts it, moral particularism’s central claim is that ‘what can be a reason that helps to make one action right need not be a reason that always helps to make actions right’ (2007: 9). As Kirchin goes on to say, particularists tell us that valency – the valency of a feature refers to the ‘moral contribution’ the feature makes to the moral nature of the relevant situation – can be variable. Notice that we have two sorts of claims here: one relates to moral principles, the other to moral reasons. Particularism as an overall position generally involves commitments about both sorts of claims: moral principles do not exist (or are unnecessary), and moral reasons function holistically.

A, if not the, central contemporary figure here is Jonathan Dancy. Dancy published Moral Reasons in 1993, in which he argued for a strong version of moral particularism. On this strong version, there are no moral principles; a set of rules governing all moral cases does not exist (Stangl 2006: 203, note 5; Gleeson 2007: 363). Dancy himself explains particularism by saying that in
its strongest guise, particularism holds that there are no defensible moral principles, that ‘moral thought does not consist in the application of moral principles to cases’ (Dancy 2009: 1). His recent Ethics Without Principles presents a less radical moral particularism. According to this weaker version, principles are not necessarily non-existent, but moral thought and practice does not require such principles (Stangl 2006: 203, note 5; Gleeson 2007: 363; Dancy 2004: 7; Dancy 2009: 1; Strahovnik 2008: 1). Furthermore, the moral expert would need far more than an understanding of such principles, were they to exist, in order to appreciate the dictates of morality.

So, particularism is a position about the status of moral principles. But it is also a position about the nature of moral reasons: on the particularist view, reasons function holistically. This notion of reasons holism will be addressed under the first of three concept headings below.

3. Three concept categories

a. Holism
The holism of reasons maintains that ‘a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another’ (Dancy 2004: 7). Put slightly differently, the idea is that a reason can make an action right under one set of circumstances without always making an action right in all circumstances (Väyrynen 2006: 711; Hooker 2008: 13–14; Dancy 2009: 4–5; Kirchin 2007: 1; Gleeson 2007: 364). Whether a feature of a situation is morally relevant will be dependent on other features of the situation. The move, then, from holism about reasons to moral particularism is almost taken for granted by those of the likes of Dancy, and one can see why it might be: if there are no properties that consistently make an action right, there seems to be no base upon which to build general moral principles.1 But this move does not go uncontested.

Pekka Väyrynen, for example, sets out to defeat arguments from holism to particularism. Väyrynen actually takes holism on board – he wants to be able to accommodate it – but, motivated to be able to say something more systematic about morality than he thinks particularism would allow him to, attempts to fit holism into a generalist framework. His approach is to temper generalism to holism, which he does by developing an account of ‘hedged’ principles. What do such principles look like? To start, Väyrynen rejects the (generalist) assumption that principles should aim to identify features that are invariably right making and wrong making. Add his ‘basis thesis’ (‘For any consideration C that is a moral reason to φ, the normative fact that C is a moral reason to φ requires a basis that explains why C is a

1 As Väyrynen quotes Dancy, ‘if there is a holism of reasons...the prospects for substantial moral principles look bleak’ (2006: 710). See Väyrynen 2006: 710 and Gleeson 2007: 34 for descriptions of the arguments from holism to particularism.
moral reason to φ) (2006: 722), from which his arguments for his generalism proceed, and we have a generalism that tolerates exceptions. The structure of hedged principles is sufficiently complex, we are told, as to instantiate ‘the designated relation’ between a property (F) and a moral property (M). For example, when it comes to promise-keeping, ‘sustaining a beneficial social institution’ would be the designated relation between promising and pro tanto rightness. So the following principle regarding promise-keeping is ‘hedged’ by reference to a designated relation:

‘Necessarily, any act that one has promised to do is pro tanto right in virtue of one’s having promised to do it, provided the act instantiates the designated relation for promising and pro tanto rightness.’

More abstractly, the general model of hedged moral principles looks like this:

‘Necessarily, any x that is F is M is virtue of x’s being F, provided x instantiates the designated relation for F and M.’ (2006: 726)

Such a picture of moral principles explains holism (a feature a hedged principle picks out as giving a type of moral reason may fail in certain situations to give that type of reason), but keeps a hold of generalism (the ‘normative basis’ of any moral reason entails a ‘true’ moral principle, a principle that aims to ‘identify features in virtue of which things have their moral properties’) (2006: 726).

Joseph Raz assumes a slightly different take on the relation between holism and particularism. As he sees it, particularism is totally independent of holism. Dancy makes a mistake in thinking that particularism presupposes holism (2006: 119). As Raz has it, particularism is totally independent of holism. Holism, argues Raz, turns on ‘the identity criteria’ of what makes for a normative reason. All it would mean if holism were true is that positions about moral reasons are in fact positions about moral reasons and their enablers. This substitution of moral reasons and their enablers for moral reasons is an easy one, and is inconsequential as far as the particularism question is concerned: the truth of holism makes no difference to the wider issue of whether particularism is true. According to Raz, in order for holism to be shown to support particularism, the existence of facts about reasons (and their enablers) would have to be challenged: Dancy’s particularism does not do this.

b. The place for generality

As Margaret Little and Mark Lance define particularism, it is the view that moral generalizations play no crucial role in moral understanding (2008: 53). As they have stated in their series of articles on this topic, they support what they (now) call moral contextualism, and reject particularism so defined.
What is the difference between contextualism and particularism? The latter banishes explanatory generalization, as a result of the (faulty, Lance and Little hold) assumption that ‘generalizations must be exceptionless if they are to do genuine and fundamental theoretical work’ (2008: 54). Exceptions are irreducibly present, says the particularist, and so room cannot be made for generalization. Enter Lance and Little’s wedge between their ‘contextualism’ and Dancy’s particularism: generalizations need not, they argue, be exceptionless. Generalizations can be defeasible – shot through with holes, they put it – and yet still be fundamentally explanatory.

Lance and Little’s account of defeasible generalizations aims to show that such generalizations can indeed play explanatory roles without being reducible to, or in any way beholden to, exceptionless generalizations. Explanation, by its very nature, is deeply connected to generalization of some sort, but it is a mistake to think that generalizations must be exceptionless if they are to do explanatory work. While admiring what they call the deep contextualism of Dancy’s position, Lance and Little seem to think that it falls short when it comes to providing the foundations for the explanation of moral action choices: as they write, ‘there is a key difference between explanation and discernment’ (2008: 60). There is an important difference, they maintain, between offering up reasons for a conclusion, and providing one’s audience with enough of a story such that its members can draw out those reasons on their own. The former demands commitment to some sort of generalization, according to Lance and Little; defeasible generalizations are taken to fit the bill. The beauty of the Lance and Little picture, at least according to them, is that explanation’s connection to generality is preserved (ties between reasons, explanations, and generalizations are kept intact), while the priority of the richness of context is maintained.

A key concept for Lance and Little is that of ‘privileged conditions’; defeasible generalizations, such as ‘Other things being equal, fish eggs turn into fish’, ‘In standard conditions, lying is wrong-making’, appeal to such conditions. Such generalizations are not statistical claims – notice, for instance, how rarely fish eggs actually do turn into fish – but they do mark out some important connection between, say, fish eggs and fish. That connection gets at what is particularly telling about fish eggs – about what happens to them under ideal conditions, about their relation to the origins of fish. The connection between fish eggs and fish is, to use Lance and Little’s expression, a connection that is ‘particularly telling’ about fish eggs. The generalization marks the nature of fish eggs; ‘In standard conditions, lying is wrong-making’, marks the nature of lying, even if we can recognize that there are many (non-standard, or non-privileged) conditions under which lying is (or could reasonably be taken to be) morally permissible and even called for. While privileged conditions cannot be specified in advance with respect to
any domain, the person well-versed in fish eggs, or the moral world, will have an implicit understanding of what counts as a privileged or deviant condition, as it arises. Little and Lance have quite a lot to say about the privileged/non-privileged relation (2008: 65). To bring this back to the matter of moral explanation – something, recall, that Lance and Little are intent to preserve within their contextualism – maintaining some handle on generalization allows one, and a moral perspective such as contextualism, to keep a grip on reason and explanation. The idea seems to be that defeasible generalizations provide some baseline against which to set our moral evaluations: we do not have to be hamstrung by inflexible moral principles, yet we can get and give more than that the morally discerning eye will see what to do in any given situation.

Nikola Kompa, however, worries about such appeals to defeasible generalizations, while being committed to a contextualist picture. Kompa claims that we can be committed to epistemic holism (what counts in one context for a given belief, might count in another context against it), without having to deny the existence of moral principles. Epistemic holism can be separated from epistemic particularism (there are no defensible epistemic principles) – similarly, keeping with the parallels he sets out between moral particularism and contextualism in epistemology, moral particularism can be separated from reasons holism. Kompa argues that we should keep a hold of holism, but reject particularism: unlike Lance and Little, though, the principles we move to from epistemic holism should not take the form of defeasible generalizations. These principles might turn out to be very complex or even completely beyond detailed specification.

One reason for his rejection of defeasible generalizations is that, on his view, they are not sufficient for justification. One reason for his saying that: on the defeasible generalizations view, one is entitled to trust appearance (‘There is a cat in front of me’), only in privileged conditions. How does one know that conditions are privileged? One could say: in lack of any countervailing evidence, one is entitled to take conditions to be privileged. But this, Kompa holds, is obviously insufficient, so appeals to defeasible generalizations are of little help with the sceptic.

Rebecca Stangl looks at particularists’ attempts to give some role to certain kinds of generalities, and argues that such attempts are unsuccessful. Stangl looks at two categories of such appeals to what she calls ‘non-substantive accounts of moral generalities’ – the heuristic account, and the default reasons accounts – and argues that each account fails. Stangl attributes these two versions of appeals to moral generalities to Jonathan Dancy. Here, I will focus on her treatment of the default reasons account.

Dancy comes close to recognizing that some features of the world have a default moral relevance (e.g. in the absence of a suitable justification, killing
is wrong). While in *Moral Reasons*, Dancy does not allow threshold constraints (as opposed to absolute restraints, which he naturally also does not allow) (2006: 217), the Dancy of *Ethics Without Principles* goes against this disallowing of threshold constraints by suggesting that we can extend the default account of reasons ‘beyond those types of actions against which there is an absolute constraint’ (2006: 218). Stangl harbours serious reservations: if (Dancy’s) radical particularism is true, it is hard to see how a default reason could be deduced from what we see in a particular case. Can Dancy look to Little’s account of defeasible generalities here? As Stangl has it, the answer is no – Little’s account does not stand up well enough to scrutiny.

Stangl takes a claim that Little makes on behalf of particularism: moral particularism can countenance what Little calls ‘presumptive moral principles connecting the non-moral world with moral properties. Such principles would tell us that the presence of a non-moral property indicates the presence of a moral property’. It appears as though Dancy could draw on Little in explaining how one can come to understand default reasons upon experiencing particular situations. The suggestion would be that Dancy could claim that such moral principles are something like the presumptive, or default, principles that Little defends. Not so fast, warns Stangl: this essential extension of Dancy’s account is, arguably, fatal for Dancy.

To look at one reason for this: Dancy’s exclusive concentration on the epistemological (over the metaphysical) precludes, argues Stangl, the countenancing of such presumptive moral principles. It is not just that we come to see that, e.g., stabbing tends to indicate the presence of cruelty: we must extend the model to explain that we come to see, over a period of experience, that the cruelness of an act tends to indicate that it is wrong. After witnessing an incident of bullying, to take Stangl’s example, we are confident that intentional humiliation of someone weaker is presumptively wrong-making. But this claim cannot be true on Dancy’s particularism: Dancy’s particularism is consistent with adopting presumptive reasons because they are supposed to be epistemic guides, not metaphysical ones. We cannot, on Dancy’s view, take ourselves to be learning that we get any insight into the moral nature of a property itself. On Dancy’s particularism, a property does not have a moral nature, not even the nature of usually contributing a certain moral cast to situations and actions. But this is just what would need to be true if we are to be able to see, in a particular case, the presumptive moral relevance of a particular feature of a situation. To get this knowledge from a particular case, there must be something about the property itself that is general, which we are able to observe here and now. Says Stangl: this is just what particularism denies. It therefore would be impossible to learn that there is a strong presumption against, for example, bullying someone. It is
not easy to see, then, how a default reason could be deduced from what we see in a particular case.

c. The role of moral sensibility
Perhaps the most interesting (recent) critical response to Dancy comes from Andrew Gleeson, who argues that Dancy has miscast the conflict between, as Gleeson puts it, moral integrity and moral principles. Even if we accept the notion that moral reasons vary with context, this assumption should not shape the particularist debate. Gleeson himself champions the authority of particular cases over principles, but not because reasons holism is true. Rather, he rejects principles because what is crucial is attention to the details of each individual case. Deciding how to act through rule consultation constitutes failure here: when it comes to morality, the very idea of following a moral rule is problematic. The important issue, according to Gleeson, is not whether there are principles that codify moral phenomena, but how it is that we react to moral phenomena. The mainstream debate, as exemplified by Dancy, has misconstrued the issue, rather than clarified it.

The real problem regarding rules in morality – and this is not the problem that Dancy is focused upon – is that either moral rule following has no role to play (because we already know what to do, moral reactions do all the work themselves), or one lapses into a blind rule-fetishism that is totally empty of any moral understanding or true responsiveness. Gleeson says that he wants to free particularism from its preoccupation with the codifiability of morality, a focus Gleeson labels a metaphysical distraction. This distraction ‘de facto encourages the assumption that if there were a set of adequate rules, there would be no loss in following them if we could’ (2007: 374). Something noteworthy about Gleeson’s position is that, in fact, much has been made of Dancy’s emphasis on sensibility (see for example Raz 2006: 199; Lance and Little 2008: 53 and 58; Kompa 2004: 315). By and large, though, the take on Dancy’s emphasis on sensibility has been that he overemphasizes it, to the detriment of his overall position. This is an important contrast to Gleeson’s urging that Dancy diverts our attention away from sensibility.

4. The relevance of cognitive science
Nancy Salay’s defence of particularism draws from the field of cognitive science. Particularism has come under fire on the ground that it is a cognitively implausible theory. For example, Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith (in their ‘Ethical Particularism and Patterns’,) urge that moral particularism is implausible since it appears to entail the view that the skill of deriving (holistic) reasons from the particularities of a situation – a crucial skill, on particularism – is not rooted in the ability to recognize and represent patterns in the world. On this sort of criticism, either particularism is false because it is possible to identify a pattern that underlies
rightness and wrongness, or particularism in the end boils down to a version of moral intuitionism.

Dancy’s response (on Salay’s depiction) – a response that Salay revises, and then stands by – involves a rejection of the first horn of the dilemma (there is no underlying pattern that unites all right actions), an acceptance of the second (intuitionism is actually acceptable, so long as ‘natural’ (read non-moral) properties are required for understanding non-natural moral properties) (2008: 390). But what Salay zeroes in on is Dancy’s invocation of the connectionist machine in Dancy’s describing how ‘patternless’ concepts are possible and providing an example of a system that can gain a skill (e.g. judging right and wrong) without needing to be able to recognize patterns. Without getting into the nitty gritty of how connectionist networks operate – Salay does lay this out in some detail herself – let me just say that when a connectionist network ‘converges’ (i.e. its outputs consistently and correctly track its inputs), it is taken to have gained competence. Dancy is mistaken, though, according to Salay, in offering connectionist networks as examples of networks that can make judgements without reference to some underwriting pattern. The connectionist network example simply cannot be used the way Dancy uses it.

A main problem, as Salay has it, is that Dancy does not offer it as a model of reasoning that can show us how competence can be gained in a domain (here morality) without global patterns. What Dancy should have appealed to, rather than his connectionist network, is the cognitive model of case-based reasoning (CBR). In CBR, past experiences do indeed inform how future decisions should be made, but they do so by relying on what Salay calls local (and opposed to global) generalizations. It is this distinction, between the local and the global, that ought to matter to Dancy. With both local and global generalizations – global generalizations are the ones required by generalist moral principles – ‘similarity assessments’, which pick out a similarity criterion upon which to base the local or global generalization, are important.

According to CBR, the thought is that much reasoning can be achieved through case comparison. The same goes, in fact, for rule-based reasoning (RBR): Salay admits this. The important difference, though, is that where the RBR model indicates that the similarity criteria are chosen ahead of time, far in advance of whatever moral decision (because there is some kind of pattern that can be captured by early rules), the CBR model indicates that such criteria are chosen at the time of the judgement itself. This difference in the timing of the selection of similarity criteria is a manifestation of a deep theoretical divide between the two models. What Dancy wants to say to the aforementioned criticism is that even doing away with the requirement that some unifying pattern must be recognized, the recognition of local patterns can result in competence. As a matter of fact, the particularist does (or at least should?) acknowledge generalizations, as Salay has it, but such
generalizations apply only to cases being compared – this is why the relevant similarity criteria can be chosen only at the time of the judgement itself, as opposed to ahead of time. The recognition of local as opposed to global patterns can result in competence, and this is what the CBR model allows us to see. This, according to Salay, should vindicate particularism.

References


