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# Moral Generalism: Enjoy in Moderation\*

*Pekka Väyrynen*

## I. INTRODUCTION

One important strand in moral particularism concerns moral practice. Moral reasoning, it maintains, ought not to rely on moral principles because such reliance distorts moral judgment and so provides poor moral guidance. Another important strand concerns the structure of the moral domain. The traditional generalist conception of moral theory goes wrong, particularists maintain, in seeing moral theorizing as a project of articulating and defending substantive principles concerning the rightness and wrongness of actions, the value of states of affairs, the fairness of social arrangements, and so on. Depending on which particularist you talk to, this is either because there are no true moral principles, or because there is no good reason to think there are any, or because, even if there are true moral principles, actions and other objects of moral assessment don't depend for their moral status on there being any.<sup>1</sup> In this article I challenge the second strand in particularism

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1. For discussions that focus primarily on the second strand in particularism, see Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 60–108, “The Particularist’s Progress,” in *Moral Particularism*, ed. Brad Hooker and Margaret Little (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 130–56, and *Ethics without Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004); Russ Shafer-Landau, “Moral Rules,” *Ethics* 107 (1997): 584–611; Roger Crisp, “Particularizing Particularism,” in Hooker and Little, *Moral Particularism*, 23–47, 32–42; T. H. Irwin, “Ethics as an Inexact Science: Aristotle’s Ambitions for Moral Theory,” in Hooker and Little, *Moral Particularism*, 100–129; Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith, “Ethical Particularism and Patterns,” in Hooker and Little, *Moral Particularism*, 79–99; Margaret Olivia Little, “Moral Generalities Revisited,” in Hooker and Little, *Moral Particularism*, 276–304; David McNaughton and Piers Rawling, “Unprincipled Ethics,” in Hooker and Little, *Moral Particularism*, 256–75; Richard Holton, “Principles and Particularisms,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl., 76 (2002): 191–209; Robert Audi,

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by defending a novel generalist account of the structure of the moral domain which is able to accommodate much of what is dear to particularists short of their particularism. The viability of particularist accounts of moral guidance I leave for another occasion.<sup>2</sup>

In the most sustained defense of particularism so far, Jonathan Dancy defines particularism as the negation of the generalist view that “the very possibility of moral thought and judgement depends on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles.”<sup>3</sup> This naturally suggests that generalism and particularism are views in moral psychology about the relation between moral thought and moral principles, generalism holding that no one would be capable of making moral judgments unless they (or someone) had some appropriate moral principles. But Dancy also casts the debate in metaphysical terms with no psychological overtones, as when he writes that “particularism is a view in moral metaphysics . . . about the ways in which actions get to be right and wrong,” which involves denying that the way moral reasons behave depends in any way on “the sorts of general truths about how reasons behave that might be expressed by moral principles.”<sup>4</sup> The form of generalism I defend here is a metaphysical view concerning particular moral facts or truths.<sup>5</sup> Notice that generalism in moral metaphysics carries no commitment to the claim that people can make particular moral judgments in the first place only by basing them on moral principles.<sup>6</sup>

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*The Good in the Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 70–73; Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge, “What Does Holism Have to Do with Particularism?” *Ratio* 18 (2005): 93–103; and Mark Lance and Margaret Olivia Little, “Defending Moral Particularism,” in *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, ed. James Dreier (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 305–21. For discussions that focus primarily on the first strand in particularism, see David McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 190–93; Joseph Raz, “The Truth in Particularism,” in his *Engaging Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 218–46; Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Varieties of Particularism,” *Metaphilosophy* 30 (1999): 1–12, 9–11; and Crisp, “Particularizing Particularism,” 25–32. Formulations of the two strands vary from particularist to particularist and suggest various substrands. For a helpful discussion of the various possibilities, see Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge, *Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 3–21. The term ‘particularism’ can also be used as a label for a plethora of other kinds of views that I ignore here. See Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 69–70.

2. I defend a generalist account of moral guidance against the first strand in particularism in my “Usable Moral Principles,” in *Challenging Moral Particularism*, ed. Mark Lance, Matjaz Potrc, and Vojko Strahovnik (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

3. Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 7.

4. *Ibid.*, 140 and 7–8, respectively.

5. For my present purposes, the language of moral properties, facts, and truths may be construed minimalistically.

6. For empirical objections to this claim, see Gerald Dworkin, “Unprincipled Ethics,” in *Moral Concepts*, Midwest Studies in Philosophy, ed. Peter French, Theodore Uehling, and Howard Wettstein, vol. 20 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 224–39.

If some people were bad at thinking in terms of moral principles, this would do nothing to undermine the metaphysical claim that particular moral facts or truths depend on the existence of true moral principles.

Of course, we can state generalism in moral metaphysics in a way that is continuous with Dancy's statement, as the view that the possibility of sound moral judgment depends on the existence of a suitable (or, perhaps better, comprehensive) set of true moral principles. By "sound moral judgment" I mean correct judgment of moral fact in general, but in this article I largely focus, as particularists do, on moral facts about reasons for and against actions and attitudes, for right and wrong actions' being right and wrong, and so on. I take a set *S* of true moral principles to be "comprehensive" if, for any moral truth *M*, a principle or a set of principles in *S* is required for *M* to hold.<sup>7</sup> To illustrate, suppose I ought to repay my debt to David. If the above sufficient condition is met, my having a moral reason to repay my debt requires that there be some true moral principle (presumably one that somehow has to do with repaying one's debts). If generalism is true, there is a comprehensive set of principles that "cover the ground" in this sense.<sup>8</sup>

Generalism so understood rules out any form of particularism in moral metaphysics. Notice, in particular, that it rules out even the weakest form of particularism, which allows for the existence of true moral principles and merely denies that moral reasons in any way depend on this.<sup>9</sup> That view is still a form of particularism: merely there being true moral principles to which sound moral judgments conform doesn't show that those principles are required for the objects of those judgments (moral reasons, duties, and so on) to be in place. Without further argument to the contrary, we wouldn't seem to have much of a reason to suppose that morality has any real need for true moral principles, even if some exist.

In what follows, I supply such an argument, using particularism as

7. This sufficient condition concerns moral metaphysics. A more demanding generalist strategy would be to argue that knowledge of particular moral truths presupposes the availability of true moral principles. See McKeever and Ridge, *Principled Ethics*, 113–21.

8. See Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 82. If merely some sufficiently high proportion of moral reasons depended on the existence of true moral principles, this might seem to support some hybrid of generalism and particularism; it would seem like a wrong sort of criterion for generalism. Dancy would, however, recommend the particularist conclusion that although some moral reasons can be captured in true principles, their status as reasons in no way depends on this (*ibid.*, 81). He seems to think that there would be little reason to suppose that some moral reasons depend on the existence of true moral principles if not all reasons did so, and there seems to be something right about this. If so, a hybrid view lacks motivation. Given this dialectic, if one can show (as I aim to do) that some moral reasons genuinely require the existence of true moral principles, that should give us some reason to suppose that all do.

9. See Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 81–84.

a foil for developing a novel, moderate form of generalism. Section II discusses “the holism of reasons,” which most particularists present as the main support for particularism. Put bluntly, my strategy is to hijack holism into a generalist framework. Section III presents a positive argument for generalism that appeals to a novel account of moral principles as a kind of “hedged” principles. This account offers an alternative explanation of holism and so undercuts much of the motivation for particularism but supports generalism. Section IV defends moderate generalism against objections. Section V exploits the resources of the view to defeat three arguments from holism to particularism.

## II. HOLISM ABOUT REASONS

Particularists typically present the holism of reasons as an especially powerful way of defending particularism. Jonathan Dancy, for example, writes that “if there is a holism of reasons . . . the prospects for substantial moral principles look bleak.”<sup>10</sup> Holism is a doctrine about normative reasons in general. A normative reason is often characterized as a consideration that “favors” the belief, attitude, or action for which it is a reason (where ‘consideration’ stands for the kind of thing that can be a reason and the talk of favoring is meant to paraphrase rather than analyze the talk of reasons).<sup>11</sup> A reason may be “contributory” rather than “decisive.” For a consideration to be a contributory reason for an action is for it to favor the action without necessarily determining what one ought to do overall. Further considerations may strengthen the overall case for the action, either by intensifying the reason or giving other reasons for the action. Opposing reasons don’t necessarily destroy a contributory reason for an action, but they may make the overall case against the action stronger than the overall case in its favor. What one ought to do overall is often said to be determined by the “balance” of contributory reasons.<sup>12</sup>

I begin by stating reasons holism and explaining its putative con-

10. Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, 66. See also Dancy, “Particularist’s Progress,” 135; and Little, “Moral Generalities Revisited,” 279, 284.

11. See T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 17; and Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 29. Most writers treat considerations as something like facts or true propositions, and in my view sensibly so.

12. These prefatory remarks aren’t meant to take a stand on issues about just how various factors combine to determine what one ought to do overall. For example, I take no stand on whether “the presence of one feature can affect the weight of another” (Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 105), or on whether reasons (once their weights are determined) determine what one ought to do overall by combining in some additive way, or on how the balancing metaphor is to be cashed out. I can afford silence on this front because the arguments to come move primarily at the contributory level. For a prominent discussion of some of these complications, see Shelly Kagan, “The Additive Fallacy,” *Ethics* 99 (1988): 5–31.

nection to particularism. Since I discuss arguments from holism to particularism in detail only after offering my own positive view, a word about my general strategy is in order. There are two ways to resist arguments from holism to particularism. One is to argue against holism. The other is to argue that holism, even if true, fails to support particularism. While many generalists follow the first strategy, my own strategy is the second. It doesn't therefore matter for my present purposes whether holism is true or not, and so in what follows I can simply grant to holists certain claims which would require extensive discussion if I were arguing for or against holism.

#### A. *What Is Reasons Holism?*

Reasons holism treats normative reasons as irreducibly context dependent in a certain way. Dancy defines holism as the view that “a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another.”<sup>13</sup> Holism is typically illustrated by “valence switch” examples. That I borrowed a book from you can be a reason for me to return it but is no reason at all to do so if you stole the book from the library. That something would bring me pleasure is in many contexts a reason for doing it, but it may be no reason at all, or even a reason against the act, in certain other contexts, such as when the pleasure would be sadistic.<sup>14</sup> (Valence switches therefore come in two varieties: neutralization and reversal.) According to holism, so defined, any reason is potentially open to a valence switch. The intended contrast is with “reasons atomism,” the view that “a feature that is a reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity, in any other”; reasons are invariable in that their polarity cannot vary across contexts.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, atomism so defined rules out the view that some reasons are variable but depend for their status as reasons on invariable reasons.<sup>16</sup> Since such a view preserves the spirit of atomism, atomism is better defined as the view that all reasons are invariable in an extended sense: either they are invariable or, if they are variable, they depend for whatever valence they have on invariable reasons. Even with this re-

13. Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 7. I think he means ‘feature’ to be an umbrella term for properties and relations and for various entities in which these can figure, such as aspects of situations, events, and states of affairs.

14. See Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, 60–61. Like examples are ubiquitous in the literature.

15. Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 7.

16. The distinction between dependent and nondependent, or “derivative” and “basic,” reasons is complicated in ways that I cannot discuss here but require care in applying the distinction. For example, it is unclear when we have two reasons for action such that one depends on the other, rather than one fact that is a reason for action and another fact that realizes the fact that is the reason and/or is a reason to believe that that fact is a reason.

finement, however, room still remains for the hybrid view that some but not all reasons are invariable in this extended sense.

Remember, though, that holism is meant to be a view about normative reasons in general. We do better to define holism as the view that all reasons are variable qua reasons, in the sense that no necessary connection exists between the property of being a reason of a certain kind and the property of always being the same kind of reason.<sup>17</sup> We can then define atomism as the view that a necessary connection between being a reason and always being the same kind of reason does exist: any reason must, qua a reason, always either be the same kind of reason or depend for its being the reason it is on a reason that always is the same kind of reason.<sup>18</sup>

Holism and atomism so defined both allow for both variable and invariable reasons. Atomism allows for variable reasons so long as they depend on invariable reasons. Holism allows not merely for contingently invariant reasons but also for invariable reasons, since just because a consideration may vary qua a reason doesn't mean that it does or must. It allows, for example, the possibility that things like cruelty or inflicting pain or distress on unwilling victims just for one's own enjoyment count against an action in any world, so long as they are invariable reasons not because they are reasons but because of some such thing as their particular contents.<sup>19</sup> So explained, invariable reasons pose no threat to the claim that no reason, just in virtue of being a reason, is necessarily immune to valence switches. Holists who grant the possibility of invar-

17. Dancy adds the qualification "qua a reason" to holism in recent work. See Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 77. The definition in the text suggests that holism, by itself, doesn't purport to give an analysis (or full account of the property of being a reason (or what something's having that property consists in), but merely to constrain such accounts in certain ways. Some think that no such analysis is available because reasons are the basic normative units that determine all other normative properties and/or because the favoring relation admits no further analysis (compare n. 37 below). But these claims don't follow from holism alone.

18. The revised definitions are mutually exclusive but still not exhaustive. They still leave room for a hybrid view which posits one property of being a reason which is necessarily connected to the property of always being the same kind of reason and another which isn't. But even apart from considerations of theoretical unity, there are good reasons to avoid positing two fundamentally different reason relations in this way. The principal motivation to have reasons differ in their nature as reasons in this kind of fundamental way would be to save the claim that some reasons are invariable (in the above extended sense) even if others aren't. But we can capture this possibility without accepting the hybrid view (see below).

19. Compare Dancy, "Particularist's Progress," 136–37, and *Ethics without Principles*, 77. This account has initial plausibility: if being a reason is an extrinsic property of considerations (as the cases of instrumental and variable reasons would seem to suggest), it would seem preferable to explain the invariability of whatever invariable reasons there may be by reference to their particular contents (or other necessary or intrinsic properties).

iable reasons can still consistently deny any necessary connection between being a reason of a certain type and being an invariable reason.

*B. Why Bother with Holism?*

Our revised definition of atomism neutralizes examples of variable reasons that are typically used to illustrate holism. Valence switch examples won't by themselves show that no such necessary connection exists as atomism posits between the properties of being a reason and being an invariable reason. For all that those examples show, there might be either an invariable reason, on which the variable reason depends, or an invariable reason of which the variable feature is only a part.<sup>20</sup>

Holism can be defended on more theoretical grounds, however. One argument is that holism is better equipped than atomism to provide a unified view of the nature of normative reasons which covers theoretical, prudential, instrumental, moral, and aesthetic reasons, on the grounds that some of these reasons are clearly holistic.<sup>21</sup> Another is that holism fits with certain intuitive distinctions better than atomism does.<sup>22</sup> Whether these arguments establish holism doesn't, again, matter for my purposes. But, to motivate my argument strategy, I should explain why holism might seem intuitive enough to be worth accommodating in a generalist framework.

Consider the case of "The Promise":<sup>23</sup>

- (1) *S* promised to  $\phi$ .
- (2) *S*'s promise to  $\phi$  wasn't extracted by fraud or manipulation.
- (3) *S* wasn't literally insane when she promised to  $\phi$ .
- (4)  $\phi$ -ing isn't itself immoral.
- (5) So, there is a (moral) reason for *S* to  $\phi$ .

I take it as an assumption of the example that each of 1–4 is relevant to whether 5 holds. If 5 holds, then there should be something that is a reason which favors *S*'s  $\phi$ -ing. Some would regard 1 as that something. It seems at least plausible that *S* would have had no reason at all to keep her promise had it been extracted by fraud or manipulation, or

20. For the first reply, see Crisp, "Particularizing Particularism," 37; and McNaughton and Rawling, "Unprincipled Ethics," 266–67. For the second, see Raz, "Truth in Particularism," 228 n. 22, 236; and Brad Hooker, "Dancy on How Reasons Are Related to Oughts," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, suppl., 41 (2003): 114–20, 119. These replies are purely defensive: they give no positive reason to think that there must be invariable reasons behind any variable reason, but only that there might be.

21. See Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 74–77.

22. *Ibid.*, 38–45.

23. I adapt this case from Dancy (*ibid.*, 38). Using natural variants of the case would affect nothing of substance in what follows. As is customary, I will simplify by referring to the propositions 1, 2, etc., when I mean the facts they state.



given while literally insane. But if 1 is a reason in this context, but no reason at all in the absence of 2 or 3, then 1 is a variable reason.<sup>24</sup> Atomists typically respond to claims like this by expanding the content of reasons: the reason to  $\phi$  is a complex fact, which has as its parts 1–3 plus whatever else is required to make it invariable.<sup>25</sup> Holists argue that this response leads to counterintuitive claims about the content of normative reasons.

The first step in the argument distinguishes between a feature of a situation that plays a certain role and a feature whose presence (or absence) is required for the first feature to play its role but which doesn't itself play that role. To illustrate, consider the distinction between a cause of an effect and that without which the cause wouldn't be a cause of that effect. We think that what makes plants grow is their having adequate nutrition, water, and light, and that these things make plants grow only in the absence of pests, frost, natural disasters, and the like, but that the absence of the latter isn't part of what makes plants grow.

The next step observes that atomism rejects the application of this general distinction to reasons. According to atomism, something can be part of a reason which favors the action it is a reason for only by being part of an invariable reason or, in the derivative case of variable reasons, by depending on an invariable reason. So if atomism were right, there would seemingly have to be no features whose presence (or absence) is required for something to be part of a reason which favors the action it is a reason for but which aren't themselves parts of the reason in question.

The last step says that not all conditions relevant to whether something is a reason of a certain type need be relevant by being parts of the reason.<sup>26</sup> That I wouldn't have had a reason to return to you the book you lent me had you stolen it doesn't mean that the absence of this and other defeaters is itself part of the reason why I should return it. Regarding "The Promise," the claim that 3 is necessary in order for

24. Holism allows that reasons can be complex facts. Owing to the relevance of 3, we get a variable reason even if we think that the reason which favors  $S$ 's  $\phi$ -ing isn't that  $S$  promised to  $\phi$  but that  $S$  freely promised—i.e., something like the combination of 1 and 2. See Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 39.

25. See Raz, "Truth in Particularism," 236; Sinnott-Armstrong, "Varieties of Particularism," 3–4; and Hooker, "How Reasons Are Related," 119–20.

26. The distinction isn't meant to be exhaustive. A consideration may also be relevant by "intensifying" (or else "diminishing") the favoring or counting against done by something else. To borrow an example from Dancy, suppose someone needs help when I am the only person around. One might well think that her needing help favors helping her, that my being the only person around doesn't favor helping her, but that my being the only person around makes a difference anyway by making the reason to help her—namely, that she needs help—stronger than it would have been had there been others around. See Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 42.

I not to be prevented from favoring  $\phi$ -ing turns 3 into part of the reason to  $\phi$  only if we can draw no distinction between reasons which favor the actions they are reasons for and conditions for something's being a reason which aren't themselves parts of the reason. Holists say that conditions such as 3, and maybe 2, are better described as conditions whose presence is "suitable," and whose absence would be "unsuitable," for 1 to be a reason to  $\phi$  than they are described as parts of the reason.<sup>27</sup>

Further grounds may exist for finding the distinction between reasons and suitable conditions intuitive and important. It may help us to capture general conditions for the presence of reasons. For example, suppose that there being a normative reason for one to do something requires that one satisfy some counterfactual motivational condition, such as the "internalism requirement" defended by Bernard Williams and others.<sup>28</sup> It would seem better to treat this as a condition for a consideration to count as a normative reason than as part of each individual reason's content.<sup>29</sup> The distinction may also help us to distinguish between different kinds of reasons. Consider, for example, institutional theories according to which considerations of distributive justice apply only when certain kinds of social institutions exist. Such a view might imply that when people are starving and we have resources to feed them, but institutions for distributing food to them don't exist, it might be morally bad but not unjust to let them starve. We might then treat the existence of certain institutions as part of the reasons of justice to help the starving. But it would seem more plausible to think that their existence is a suitable condition in whose absence no reason which

27. I deploy these notions in developing my positive account in Sec. III, but I won't make much of the distinction between them. The presence of an unsuitable condition is the absence of a suitable condition by another name, or at least necessarily coincident. (A fuller discussion would do well to investigate differences between different kinds of suitable conditions.) Dancy invokes "enabling" and "disabling" conditions for similar theoretical purposes, although he also registers some concerns about his terminology. See Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 39–40 and 92, respectively. Although nothing essential hangs on this, I prefer the term 'suitable' because it is coherent to think, for example, that being taken in by fraud is an unsuitable condition for promising to give a reason without thereby thinking that not being taken in by deception enables promising to give a reason. (Issues about "positive" and "negative" facts arise here, however.)

28. See Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 101–13.

29. Thanks to Stephen Darwall for pointing out to me that he has drawn a similar conclusion from a broadly internalist condition for the presence of a reason. See Stephen L. Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 118, 208. As a condition for any normative reason, this kind of suitable condition would be global rather than local to specific reasons. Relying on the controversial principle that 'is a reason' implies 'can' (or 'could have'), Dancy suggests that the agent's capacity to act is a global suitable condition. See Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 40.

we may have for not letting people starve is a reason of distributive justice, but at most a reason of some other kind.

In sum, holists claim that there is an important and intuitive distinction between two ways of being normatively relevant: being a reason and being a condition whose presence or absence is suitable or unsuitable for something else to be a reason. The distinction between reasons and suitable conditions is nonetheless controversial.<sup>30</sup> Atomists claim that it would be an error to let the distinction influence our thinking about reasons. Remember, though, that my argument strategy allows me simply to grant to holists the importance of the distinction between reasons and suitable conditions. If the distinction does influence our thinking, rejecting holism is intuitively costly. The relevant intuitions might be confused or wrong, of course. But, no matter what our intuitions are, atomism is false if it isn't an error to think that considerations may, *qua* reasons, depend for their being the reasons they are on the presence of suitable conditions that aren't themselves parts of those reasons.

*C. What Is Holism Supposed to Have to Do with Particularism?*

Reasons holism has nothing special to do with moral reasons, but particularism is usually presented as "a local consequence" of holism in the moral domain.<sup>31</sup> While the details of these arguments vary depending on which strand in particularism is being defended, they all maintain that holism can be used to question the existence of, or at least any theoretical need for, moral principles. Just how holism is supposed to have this consequence is a bit complicated, however.

Generalists and particularists agree that nothing is barely right but, rather, is right in virtue of having some other, "right-making" properties. When particularists deny any theoretical need for moral principles, they have in mind substantive principles: manageable generalizations that assert some sort of nontrivial, and arguably necessary, connection between moral features and some other features in virtue of which things have those moral features. Substantive principles purport to articulate which considerations count as good or bad making, right or wrong making, and so on, and hence purport to be explanatory of the moral status of the things they concern. For example, a substantive principle that killing persons is wrong would identify killing a person as a feature

30. See esp. Joseph Raz, "The Trouble with Particularism (Dancy's Version)," *Mind* 115 (2006): 99–120. See also Hooker, "How Reasons Are Related," 119–20.

31. See Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 190; and Little, "Moral Generalities Revisited," 281, 284. Particularism, like holism, may in the end turn out to be about reasons generally, or at least not simply about moral reasons. To keep things manageable, I bracket this complication in what follows.

that would be explanatory of wrongness.<sup>32</sup> More precisely, particularists extend their negative attitude to “contributory” moral principles. Understood as a contributory principle, the principle that killing persons is wrong identifies an act as pro tanto wrong—wrong insofar as it is a killing—even if the act is overall right in virtue of its other features.<sup>33</sup>

Given this focus of particularism, presenting holism as support for it might appear curious. Holism as we so far have it is the holism of the “favoring relation” in which features of the situation stand to action (or belief) when they are reasons for doing (or believing) it. But generalism and particularism are about relations such as the “right-making relation” in which features of the situation stand to an action when they make it right. Any argument from holism to particularism should proceed from the holism of the right-making relation. But the favoring relation and the right-making relation would seem to be two distinct normative relations. As Dancy himself notes, even if “most features which stand in the favoring relation to an action are also right-makers,” this would do “nothing to show that if one relation is holistic, so must the other be.”<sup>34</sup> Like Dancy, however, I have yet to see any persuasive reason to think that the domain of reasons for action and belief diverges from the domain of moral metaphysics in such a way that even if the former is holistic, the latter is nevertheless atomistic.<sup>35</sup> So it seems that if the reasons for doing something are variable qua reasons, then so must be the reasons for its being right. Henceforth I use the term ‘moral reasons’ to refer not only to moral reasons for actions and attitudes but also to right- and wrong-making reasons.

32. It is worth mentioning one type of necessary moral generalizations that don’t qualify as substantive moral principles. The supervenience of the moral on the nonmoral guarantees the existence of infinitely long disjunctions of all the possible nonmoral ways the world might be in which a given item of evaluation has a given moral property, such that each disjunct is (minimally) sufficient for instantiating that moral property. But although these “supervenience functions” capture the extensions of moral concepts in all possible worlds, the complicated sets of properties that they mention are too disjointed and “indiscriminate” (i.e., they contain too much irrelevant information) to count as explanatory. Since this point is already made persuasively enough in the literature, I won’t defend it here. See Dancy, “Defending Particularism,” *Metaphilosophy* 30 (1999): 25–32, 26, and *Ethics without Principles*, 86–88; Little, “Moral Generalities Revisited,” 285–87; and McKeever and Ridge, *Principled Ethics*, 7–8. I am, however, tempted to add to these arguments that, understood in the standard way as a relation of necessary covariance, supervenience is a purely modal nonsymmetric relation. This means that the supervenience relation itself is already of a wrong sort to count as an explanatory relation.

33. Whether there are any true principles concerning the overall rightness or wrongness of actions is a family dispute among generalists. Particularists treat W. D. Ross and other pluralists, who defend only contributory principles and deny the existence of true overall principles, as generalists.

34. Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 79; see also 33.

35. See *ibid.*, 80.

Arguments from holism to particularism turn, in different ways, on a putative lack of fit between the kind of context dependence of reasons that holism affirms and the kind of dependence of moral reasons on substantial moral principles that generalism affirms. Holism would seem to support particularism if we assumed, as particularists and generalists alike have tended to, that generalists are committed to the atomistic thesis that a genuine contributory principle purports to identify features that are invariably right making and wrong making.<sup>36</sup> Generalists who accept this assumption have no choice but to argue against holism. The form of generalism I wish to defend rejects precisely this assumption.

### III. FROM MORAL REASONS TO MORAL PRINCIPLES

The task of the generalist, given the foregoing, is to develop an account of moral principles which she can use to accommodate and explain reasons holism. I begin by defending a general thesis about moral reasons that I call the “basis thesis” and then argue that certain applications of that thesis suggest an account of moral principles that supports generalism but can explain holism.

#### A. *The Basis Thesis*

It is surely no accident that some considerations but not others count as moral reasons. Suppose I claim that the fact that Baldrick is my friend and has a penchant for turnips is a moral reason for giving him this magnificent turnip that I possess, despite the fact that giving it to starving strangers would result in a greater benefit. Asking me to explain why that fact is the kind of reason I claim it to be would be of a piece with

36. At least the following generalists accept this sort of thesis: W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930), 19, 29; R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 41–42; Shafer-Landau, “Moral Rules,” 586; Raz, “Truth in Particularism,” 220–30; Sinnott-Armstrong, “Varieties of Particularism,” 4; Brad Hooker, “Moral Particularism: Wrong and Bad,” in Hooker and Little, *Moral Particularism*, 1–22, 10; Crisp, “Particularizing Particularism,” 37–40; Philip Stratton-Lake, *Kant, Duty, and Moral Worth* (London: Routledge, 2000), 128–30; and Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 71–73. (I mention some recent generalists who are exceptions in n. 68.) Many generalists accept the thesis because they take moral principles to traffic in morally relevant features but overlook the distinctions that holism draws among different forms of relevance. See R. M. Hare, “Relevance,” in his *Essays in Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 191–211, 193; Raz, “Truth in Particularism,” 230, 236; Shafer-Landau, “Moral Rules,” 586. Others draw alternative distinctions. See Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 72–73. Finally, some argue as if the existence of some invariable moral reasons entailed generalism. See Shafer-Landau, “Moral Rules,” 586; Hooker, “Wrong and Bad,” 10; and Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 71. But particularism allows that there may be some invariable moral reasons and that the true general propositions stating those facts count as moral principles. Even if the existence of invariable moral reasons automatically generates corresponding principles, the occasional appearance of such reasons would fail to show that moral reasons require the existence of a comprehensive set of true moral principles. See Dancy, “Particularist’s Progress,” 136.

the business of giving reasons. When something is (i.e., has the relational property of being) a moral reason of a certain type, we normally think we can explain this, and it seems integral to moral justification that we should be unsatisfied if we cannot. If so, then when some fact is a moral reason of a certain type, there should be something because of which it is such a reason. Thus we seem to recognize a tripartite distinction between a fact that is a reason of a certain type, the fact that it is a reason of that type, and the source and explanation of its having that kind of normative significance.

To illustrate, suppose there is a moral reason for giving the turnip to Baldrick. (We could alternatively run the illustration in terms of right-making reasons.) Then, first, there should be something that is the reason. Here we are supposing that the reason is the fact, call it *B*, that Baldrick is my friend and has a penchant for turnips. Second, *B* is to be distinguished from the further, normative claim that *B* is (i.e., has the relational property of being) a moral reason for giving the turnip to Baldrick. Third, we may legitimately ask of this second claim why it is true. It seems that there should be something that explains why *B* is a reason to give him the turnip if I am to be entitled to hold that *B* is such a reason. In particular, our explanation of why *B* is a moral reason for giving the turnip to Baldrick should somehow track what I call the “basis” of the reason: some normatively significant condition (property, relation, or the like) in virtue of whose presence *B* is the kind of moral reason it is. For unless the explanation tracks such a condition, it provides no basis for attributing the property of being a moral reason to *B* and so fails to explain the normative fact that *B* is a moral reason for giving the turnip to Baldrick.

If the explanatory demand for the basis of a reason is intuitively compelling in many cases, is it not at least plausible that any moral reason has a normative basis which explains why it is a reason? Call this claim the “basis thesis,” or BT:

- (BT) For any consideration *C* that is a moral reason to  $\phi$ , the normative fact that *C* is a moral reason to  $\phi$  requires a basis that explains why *C* is a moral reason to  $\phi$ .

I don’t pretend that I can prove that BT holds for absolutely all moral reasons, but then again proof is a rare good in philosophy. The intuitive case for BT strikes me as strong enough, however, to make BT plausible. Furthermore, BT states an explanatory demand that we routinely accept in the case of various types of nonmoral reasons. We tend to think that when some consideration *C* gives a reason to believe *p*, there is some epistemically favored relation such that *C*’s standing in it to believing *p* makes *C* a reason to believe *p*. We would seem to be epistemically defective if we thought otherwise and yet believed *p*. Epistemologists

differ over what count as the relevant epistemically favored relations, but some candidates include probability raising, truth indication, reliability, justification, and warrant. And when *C* provides a prudential reason for doing something, this is because of some connection between *C* and the agent's well-being. We accept the explanatory demand also in the case of instrumental reasons. BT is just a natural extension of this demand from nonmoral to moral reasons.<sup>37</sup>

Atomism and holism both provide support for BT. Both hold that nonmoral and moral reasons have a unified nature qua reasons. If the explanatory demand in BT is legitimate in the case of nonmoral reasons, then it should be legitimate also in the case of moral reasons, irrespective of whether nonmoral reasons are atomistic or holistic. If anything, holism strengthens the case for BT: if something is a moral reason of a certain type in some situations but not in others, surely there should be an explanation of why it is a reason when it is and why it isn't a reason when it isn't. Unsurprisingly, then, BT itself is perfectly compatible with both generalism and particularism.<sup>38</sup> Generalists and particularists need only differ over the substantive issue of what the bases of moral reasons are like. BT itself can be common ground that may help to make the debate between generalists and particularists more tractable.

BT allows that what explains why some consideration is a reason of a certain type needn't be distinct in various senses from the consideration itself. First, BT is compatible with the possibility that what explains why a consideration is a reason of a certain type may sometimes not be distinct from the consideration's particular content. For example, if the fact that something would be cruel is a reason not to do it, what

37. One might think that if the concept of a reason is conceptually primitive (Scanlon, *What We Owe*, 17) or if the favoring relation is metaphysically primitive, then reasons needn't in general have a basis. But neither point is, by itself, an objection to BT. The claim that a relation or a concept is primitive doesn't show that the fact that the relation holds or the concept applies in a particular instance has no explanation.

38. Dancy seems sympathetic to BT. That something is a moral reason of a certain type is a particular moral truth, and Dancy grants that "every particular moral truth will need and have an explanation" (*Moral Reasons*, 106). He suggests that whether a consideration is a reason for doing something is tied to whether doing it would achieve something of value, which seems like the kind of thing that could serve as the basis of a reason (*Ethics without Principles*, 75). Dancy insists, however, that explanations of particular moral truths are "stubbornly particular" and have "no need to be generalized" (*Moral Reasons*, 104, 106). (For a particularist criticism of Dancy on this score, see Little, "Moral Generalities Revisited," 299–300.) Dancy also suggests that particular moral facts might be explained solely by the particular congeries of circumstances, at least provided our description of the latter has the right kind of narrative structure (*Moral Reasons*, 112–14). The suggestion is hard to assess because Dancy's development of it remains hardly more than impressionistic. This strikes me as generally true of the extant particularist accounts of the bases of moral reasons.

explains this might well be the content of the concept “cruelty.” Second, BT is compatible with the possibility that what explains why a consideration is a reason of a certain type may sometimes not be metaphysically distinct from the consideration. For example, suppose that some true synthetic identity claims, on the model of “Heat is molecular kinetic energy,” are available in ethics. Perhaps the property of being cruel is identical with some such property as inflicting pain or distress on unwilling victims just for one’s own enjoyment. In that case the fact that an action would inflict pain or distress on an unwilling victim just for one’s own enjoyment would be a moral fact (that the action would be cruel) under a nonmoral description or mode of presentation. Then what explains why that fact is a reason against the action might well be the particular nature of that fact. For if the predicate ‘inflicts pain or distress on an unwilling victim just for one’s own enjoyment’ referred to a negative moral property, then it would seem plausible that the fact that an action would be of this kind is a reason not to do it because to refrain from doing it would be to avoid instantiating that negative moral property. The basis of the reason would be “built into” the reason as a matter of synthetic metaphysical truth.<sup>39</sup> But it can still explain why the reason is the reason it is.<sup>40</sup>

Some people might worry that BT is vulnerable to an infinite regress. They might suspect that any explanation as to why a consideration is a reason to  $\phi$  will be related to a further reason for  $\phi$ -ing, but that, by BT, that further reason will need an explanation, and so on ad infinitum. For my part, I find it unclear why the kind of explanation that BT demands should have to proceed by way of a reason at all, since I find it unclear why we should think of all explanations as reasons by

39. A point of clarification worth noting here is that BT is compatible with various reductionisms about moral facts and properties. For example, suppose the fact that  $\phi$ -ing would promote overall happiness is a moral reason to  $\phi$ . BT allows for the reductive utilitarian explanation that this is because for there to be a moral reason to  $\phi$  just is for  $\phi$ -ing to promote overall happiness. (This looks like an acceptable kind of explanatory claim, but it raises some delicate issues about the role of identity statements in explanations, which I cannot discuss here.)

40. Another point of clarification worth noting here is that BT is compatible with a wide range of views in moral epistemology. I cannot discuss the issue fully here. But consider forms of moral intuitionism according to which there are self-evident pro tanto duties that are knowable via a priori reflection. See Ross, *The Right and the Good*, chap. 2. If it is self-evident that some fact counts as a moral reason, then we might worry that this truth has no explanation of the kind that BT demands. (Thanks to Terence Irwin and Michael Ridge for raising a worry like this.) Self-evidence is, however, an epistemic property of propositions. All it means for a proposition to be self-evident is for it to be a truth such that, in virtue of having an adequate understanding of it, one is in a position to know it. See Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 48–49. Since a proposition that can be known in this way might be knowable in some other way as well (e.g., by testimony or explanatory inference), the self-evidence of a proposition doesn’t show that its truth has no explanation.



another name. But even if it did, the point that what explains why a consideration is a reason of a certain type needn't be distinct from the consideration itself rescues BT from infinite regress. As that point shows, BT doesn't entail that any explanation as to why something is a reason will be related to a further reason (let alone that *A* can explain *B* only if there is an explanation as to why *A* explains *B*).

*B. The Basis Argument for Generalism*

My argument for generalism proceeds from the core idea of BT that any moral reason requires a basis that explains it. This "basis argument" runs as follows:

- (G1) Any moral reason requires a normative basis that explains it.
- (G2) The normative basis of any moral reason requires the existence of a (set of) true moral principle(s).
- (C1) Therefore, moral reasons depend for their existence on the existence of a comprehensive set of moral principles.
- (G3) The possibility of sound moral judgment depends on the existence of moral reasons.
- (C2) Therefore, the possibility of sound moral judgment depends on the existence of a comprehensive set of moral principles.

Again, I focus on judgments to the effect that a consideration is a moral reason (of a certain type). G3 is acceptable here, for were it false these judgments would be false. Since BT is compatible with particularism, G1 by itself allows that the normative bases of moral reasons might not have anything to do with moral principles of any kind. They might instead have to do, as some particularists claim, just with the particular congeries of circumstances; other options might exist as well. To defend G2, I first present some examples that suggest an account of what the bases of moral reasons are generally like. I then argue that the account and examples support a novel kind of hedged moral principles that tolerate exceptions, and that a generalization of this model of hedged principles entails G2 but also explains why holism, if true, is true. While I don't pretend that I can prove that absolutely every moral reason requires the existence of a true moral principle, the general model of hedged principles that I offer supports G2 by providing what is to my knowledge the best extant account of what the bases of moral reasons are like.

Consider again "The Promise." Given BT, something explains why promising to do something gives a moral reason to do it. What exactly one regards as the basis of that reason will depend on one's substantive moral theory. Utilitarian and contractualist theories supply familiar candidates: keeping a promise (i) sustains a social institution which has cooperative and other benefits to people and (ii) gives due weight to

the expectations that a promise creates concerning one's future behavior.<sup>41</sup> These views agree that the reason to fulfill the promise has a basis that is the source of the kind of normative significance that the reason has. According to each view, promising gives a reason insofar as, and because, fulfilling the promise would be a certain appropriate kind of response to something of moral significance: it would (i) help sustain a beneficial social institution or (ii) meet the expectations one has created. So each view offers an explanation (credible or not) of why promising gives moral reasons.

Notice that views i and ii also imply a view of what the basis of the reason to fulfill one's promises is like. Both give the basis a relational structure: it is constituted by something that is (claimed to be) of moral significance plus a certain kind of response to that thing. In the case of any given reason, the nature of each constituent is a substantive moral question.<sup>42</sup> Even if we agree that promises give reasons because the institution of promising has social utility, we may disagree about whether we have any reason to keep a promise when by keeping it we would allow ten promises to be broken and so would fail to promote promise keeping. But we would agree that promising gives a reason only insofar as keeping the promise would be an appropriate kind of response (on whose nature we happen to disagree) to a value or ideal that we share.

Both view i and view ii allow that the reason to fulfill a promise is variable. Suppose that Mark, by subtle emotional manipulation, gets Hannah to promise that she won't badmouth him no matter how he treats her. If making such a promise gave Hannah a reason to keep it, then those who act immorally in manipulating others could exploit the institution of promising to create reasons (and, sometimes, obligations) for their victims.<sup>43</sup> This would be morally objectionable in itself and in making regret and reparation for breaking a manipulated promise morally appropriate. More to my point, fulfilling a manipulated promise in cases of this sort would hardly be what the promisor owes to the promisee on the basis of the expectations that her promise created. If promising gave a reason to fulfill the promise even when the promise was extracted by manipulation, it would be legitimate to exploit an institution which

41. I use these views for illustration only. Option i comes from Holly Smith, "The Paradox of Promising," *Philosophical Review* 106 (1997): 153–96, 181–82. Option ii comes from Scanlon, *What We Owe*, 296. The illustration would be easy to supplement with virtue-ethical and other substantive moral theories.

42. According to one way of distinguishing consequentialism from nonconsequentialism, consequentialism requires us to promote values even when doing so requires not honoring them. See Philip Pettit, "Consequentialism," in *Blackwell Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 230–40.

43. I owe this point to David McNaughton and Piers Rawling. See McNaughton and Rawling, "Unprincipled Ethics," 270.

should have social utility and benefits to people, as well as the practice of committing oneself to expectations one has created about one's future conduct, for purposes that would tend to undermine the institution or practice. So, neither view i nor view ii provides a basis why promising should give any reason at all to fulfill the promise in certain cases of manipulated promises. (Similar points could be made about certain promises extracted by fraud or trickery.) Each view allows that the fact that Hannah's promise was extracted by manipulation may be an unsuitable condition for the promise to give Hannah a reason to fulfill it.<sup>44</sup>

We have seen that promising gives a reason for fulfilling the promise when, and because, fulfilling it would be an appropriate kind of response to some appropriate kind of moral ideal. But now notice likewise that the fact that a promise was extracted by manipulation is an unsuitable condition for promising to give a reason to fulfill the promise when, and because, fulfilling the promise under that condition would fail to be an appropriate kind of response to the relevant moral ideal. Thus we can appeal to one and the same normative basis to explain the normative fact that promising gives a reason to fulfill the promise and the normative fact that being extracted by manipulation is an unsuitable condition for promising to give a reason to fulfill the promise. Given BT, this shared structure is unsurprising. Since being an unsuitable condition is a way of being morally relevant, the kind of explanatory demand that we find in BT extends naturally also to the question of why some conditions but not others are unsuitable. Those of us who find gripping the question of why something is a reason can enlist the shared structure of reasons and unsuitable conditions to hijack holism into a generalist framework.

### *C. A Model of Hedged Moral Principles*

Many of us take some principle to the effect that promises ought to be kept to be true. If the above discussion of promising is on the right track, then the truth of the principle should tolerate certain exceptions even when it is understood as a contributory principle to the effect that promising to  $\phi$  gives the agent some moral reason to  $\phi$ . It should tolerate

44. I say "may" because my points here don't require that manipulation invariably count as an unsuitable condition for promising to give a reason. Conditions that are unsuitable in certain cases may not be so in others due to the presence of "meta-defeaters," such as features in whose presence keeping a manipulated promise would be an appropriate response to something of moral significance after all. Perhaps, for example, coerced promises can have some moral weight in contexts where coercion is just. See McNaughton and Rawling, "Unprincipled Ethics," 270. In such cases, keeping a coerced promise may well sustain an institution that has social utility and benefits to people (or whatever one takes as the relevant basis). Something similar might be true of cases where parents manipulate their children to make promises by offering bribes or rewards.

certain promises, such as certain manipulated promises, which give the agent no moral reason at all to keep them because the conditions are unsuitable for them to do so. The principle can tolerate these exceptions only if it has a more complex structure than it seems on the surface to have. For the exceptions would refute the simple universal generalization that all promises ought *pro tanto* to be kept. But when ordinary agents make moral judgments, many of them seem quite sensitive to the possibility that what is a moral reason in one context may be neutral in others. They also seem, to varying degrees, sensitive to the presence or absence of unsuitable conditions. Their sensitivity to these complexities in the behavior of moral reasons suggests that they already treat commonsense moral principles as having a more complex structure than our ordinary verbal formulations of those principles (such as “Keep your promises”) let on.

One way to make moral principles reflect this complexity of structure would be to have them mention the (un)suitable conditions. We could do this in one of two ways. We could either tack an “unless” clause onto a given principle, and try to spell out the unsuitable conditions associated with it, or else add the caveat that the conditions are suitable, which quantifies over the suitable conditions instead of spelling them out. Both options are problematic. One reason why the latter option is problematic is that it gives us no idea about what conditions count as unsuitable or how we could come to apply thus-qualified principles reliably. One reason why the former option is problematic is that we might not generally be able to state the unsuitable conditions associated with a given principle in a finite and manageable form.<sup>45</sup> It would be better not to have to assume that we can do so. A more natural way for generalists to accommodate BT would, in any case, be to build a reference to the bases of moral reasons into moral principles. Since neither the caveat that the conditions are suitable nor a list of unsuitable conditions makes reference to normative bases, accommodating BT requires such a reference somewhere anyway. But then a separate reference to (un)suitable conditions would be redundant, since we have seen that the explanatory demand that we find in BT extends naturally to them. A reference to normative bases alone suffices to reflect the shared structure of reasons and unsuitable conditions. This approach will pay off with important explanatory gains.

To build a reference to the bases of moral reasons into principles,

45. See also Sec. V.B. As stated here, these objections are obviously not decisive. I mention them primarily to motivate my own approach. I develop the objections more fully, and argue that the list account is unsatisfactory and unnecessary, in other work. See Pekka Väyrynen, “A Theory of Hedged Moral Principles” (unpublished manuscript, available at <http://www.philosophy.ucdavis.edu/pekkav/research/hedged.pdf>).

I need a way of describing a given normative basis which is neutral on the substantive question of what that basis is. Recall that the bases of reasons seem to have a relational structure. Let “the designated relation” for a property  $F$  and a moral property  $M$  (such as being right or being wrong) be that relation  $R$ , whatever it is, such that  $x$ 's being  $F$  is a reason for (or, contributes to)  $x$ 's being  $M$  when, and because,  $x$  instantiates  $R$ .<sup>46</sup> In general,  $R$  is a relation such as promoting or honoring some moral ideal (value, right, etc.) that is capable of explaining the reasons provided by  $F$ . (Sometimes  $R$  is a monadic relational property.) For example, if we think that promising to  $\phi$  is a moral reason to  $\phi$  because of the utility of the institution of promising and how it can be of benefit to people, then we will regard something like “sustaining a beneficial social institution” as the designated relation for promising and pro tanto rightness.

Just which relation the designated relation is in the case of a given moral reason, and whether one exists at all, are subjects of substantive moral dispute between consequentialists of various stripes, contract and rights theorists, virtue theorists, and others. But the following moral principle is neutral with respect to such disputes:

- (P) 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.

Principle P is an instance of a kind of principle that is hedged by reference to the designated relation. For any given choice of ' $F$ ' and ' $M$ ', we can speak of 'the designated relation for  $F$  and  $M$ '. So there always seems to be available a moral principle (be it true or false) that affirms the existence of the designated relation for  $F$  and  $M$  and selects it as the basis of the reason that something's being  $F$  gives for its being  $M$ , like so:

- (HP) Necessarily, any  $x$  that is  $F$  is  $M$  in virtue of  $x$ 's being  $F$ , provided  $x$  instantiates the designated relation for  $F$  and  $M$ .<sup>47</sup>

HP sets out a general model of “hedged” moral principles.<sup>48</sup> The case of promising motivates this way of hedging principles and shows that it elegantly captures the shared structure of reasons and unsuitable con-

46. Thanks to Bernard Nickel for inspiring the term ‘the designated relation’.

47. I cannot here discuss issues about how best to analyze the logical form of principles of the form HP or the proviso they contain (e.g., whether to interpret it as an operator on sentences or propositions, or as something else).

48. The core ideas of this account of moral principles allow for both cognitivist and noncognitivist interpretations. They are also silent about whether the designated relations should be understood in a moral realist way and if so, whether they are natural or non-natural relations.

ditions. For a given choice of ‘*F*’ and ‘*M*’ such that *R* is the designated relation for *F* and *M*, the corresponding hedged principle entails not only that *x*’s being *F* counts as a moral reason for *x*’s being *M* when, and because, *x* instantiates *R* but also that conditions are unsuitable for *x*’s being *F* to contribute to *x*’s being *M* when, and because, *x* fails to instantiate *R*.<sup>49</sup>

Hedged principles count as substantive moral principles, since they purport to identify features in virtue of which things have their moral properties. They may be either contributory or overall principles, depending on whether the predicate ‘*M*’ is used to ascribe pro tanto or overall moral status. In either case they purport to identify reasons that are “contextually unanimous” but not thereby exceptionless. A moral reason is contextually unanimous if it must have the same polarity whenever it falls into the principle’s domain of applicability.<sup>50</sup> The domains of hedged principles are the extensions of their designated relations. So when the designated relation exists for a given choice of ‘*F*’ and ‘*M*’, something’s being *F* must provide a reason for its being *M* whenever it instantiates the designated relation (hence the ‘necessarily’ in HP). What follows from a given hedged principle is not that the connection between the relevant *F* and *M* is exceptionless (although it might be), but only that it is invariant under a certain range of hypothetical changes that is determined by reference to the relevant designated relation.<sup>51</sup>

This model of moral principles explains holism: a feature that a

49. Since the designated relations invoke moral properties, my proposal has certain affinities with David McNaughton and Piers Rawling’s proposal that “non-moral features can enter weak moral principles, but only with evaluative riders attached,” so that there are moral principles “with implicit conditions” that “spell out complex evaluative features that always (morally) count one way” (McNaughton and Rawling, “Unprincipled Ethics,” 268, 271). I am sympathetic to much of their view and have followed their discussion of promising on certain key points (see nn. 43 and 44). I cannot here fully spell out how my proposal differs from theirs, but interested readers can easily confirm that their proposal carries certain commitments that my structural proposal avoids regarding such questions as what the relevant “evaluative riders” are like and whether “thick” evaluative features have invariable valence (see n. 62).

50. I borrow the label ‘contextual unanimity’ from John Dupré, who so dubs a structurally similar requirement of probabilistic causality. See John Dupré, “Probabilistic Causality Emancipated,” in *Causation and Causal Theories*, Midwest Studies in Philosophy, ed. Peter French, Theodore Uehling, and Howard Wettstein, vol. 9 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 169–75.

51. The clause ‘provided *x* instantiates the designated relation for *F* and *M*’ serves a function similar to a ceteris paribus clause, but more informatively so (I hope). The clause doesn’t generally introduce a further principle, let alone an exceptionless one. Mark Lance and Margaret Little have independently developed an account of “defeasible moral generalizations” that have a similar structure but determine the range of hypothetical changes under which the connection between the given *F* and *M* is invariant by reference to “privileged conditions” instead. See Lance and Little, “Defending Moral Particularism.”

hedged principle identifies as giving moral reasons of a certain type may fail in some contexts to give a reason of that type, and this happens when, and because, the relevant designated relation fails to be instantiated.<sup>52</sup> But the model captures generalism: the normative basis of any moral reason requires the existence of a true moral principle. For if we generalize from the preceding discussion, then the normative basis of any given moral reason is the relevant designated relation, (the existence of) which entails a (true) principle of the form HP. The model also answers to the kind of explanatory demand that we find in BT in the case of both moral reasons and unsuitable conditions: hedged principles not merely help specify which considerations count as reasons and unsuitable conditions but also explain, by appeal to whether the relevant designated relations are instantiated, why those things that count as reasons and unsuitable conditions are morally relevant in the ways that they are.

Our task was to support premise G2 in the basis argument for generalism. If moral reasons flow from principles in the way outlined above, then the model of moral principles set out in HP gives us G2.<sup>53</sup> For it will entail that moral reasons depend on the existence of a comprehensive set of true hedged principles, owing to their having normative bases of the kind to which hedged principles refer. Since hedged principles also explain holism, the result is a moderate form of moral generalism. Those of us who wish to accommodate holism, but think that there is something more systematic to be said about moral reasons than particularists allow, should welcome this result.

#### IV. IN DEFENSE OF MODERATE GENERALISM

The model of hedged principles set out above supports generalism to the extent that moral reasons depend on the existence of true hedged moral principles. This generalist claim has three separable elements, each of which needs defense. The first is the “coverage claim” that for any moral reason there is a (set of) hedged principle(s) that (directly

52. Since principles of the form HP are silent about what happens when their proviso fails, they also allow for the possibility that reasons may reverse their polarity, providing opposite reasons. For if a feature that sometimes provides one type of reason ever provides an opposite type of reason, the latter reason may well be explicable by its instantiating some other designated relation. Principles of the form HP also allow for the possibility that one and the same feature may function both as a reason for and as a reason against in the same case. See Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, 62. For there is no structural reason why a feature couldn't instantiate more than one designated relation in the same case.

53. Not all moral reasons need directly fit this model. If they did, we might have a complex hierarchy of hedged principles. But there needn't be a distinct hedged principle for each feature that is capable of providing moral reasons. It might be that only some moral reasons are identified as such by moral principles and the rest depend on the ones that are so identified. G2 allows for this possibility.

or indirectly) identifies the consideration in question as a moral reason of the relevant type.<sup>54</sup> The second is the “truth claim” that for any moral reason for which the coverage claim holds, the principles in question are true. The third is the “dependence claim” that for any moral reason for which the truth claim holds, the reason (or at least its having a normative basis) depends on the existence of the principles in question.

The coverage, truth, and dependence claims all need defense because one may object to each. Against the coverage claim, one might argue that hedged principles aren’t available to cover every moral reason. Against the truth claim, one might argue that even if hedged principles are available to cover any reason, any set of principles which covers all moral reasons contains some that are false. Against the dependence claim, one might argue that even if that isn’t so, moral reasons don’t depend on the existence of the principles in question. (This last objection most closely reflects our definition of particularism.) I begin by responding to objections to the coverage and truth claims. I then defend the dependence claim indirectly by using hedged principles to defeat three arguments from holism to particularism.<sup>55</sup>

#### *A. The Coverage Claim*

Do all moral reasons fit the model of hedged moral principles on offer? While I don’t pretend that I can prove the coverage claim, I think it is credible. But so far I have shown only that it applies to moral reasons generated by promises. One might worry that the voluntary nature of those reasons makes them a special case that doesn’t generalize. To address this worry, let me present further instances of the coverage claim which illustrate a general reason for accepting that claim.

To take a hard case for the coverage claim, consider an immigrant single mother who works for you and is selecting a school for her gifted son.<sup>56</sup> Suppose that her English isn’t good enough for her to find out, on her own, enough about the available options to make a well-informed decision for her son but that you are in a position to help her. And suppose that the son’s best interests give you a reason to help her. There are various courses of action for which the fact that they would promote the son’s interests might be thought to give no reason. For example,

54. The indirect case would be those moral reasons that depend on other moral reasons which moral principles identify as such.

55. In other work, I defend the dependence claim directly by arguing that hedged principles play a robust explanatory role with respect to why things have the moral properties they do, why the features they identify as providing moral reasons do so (when they do), and why the unsuitable conditions are unsuitable. See Väyrynen, “Hedged Principles.”

56. I am reasonably sure that I have encountered the sort of case I am about to describe somewhere, but unfortunately I have been unable to relocate the source. My thanks and apologies to whoever it was.



marching to the principal's office in the school that best suits the son and signing him up for next fall would be intrusive and condescending to the mother. Given that she is her son's guardian, these conditions might be unsuitable for the son's interests to give you a reason to enroll him in the school in these ways. Conditions that are suitable for the son's interests to give you a reason for certain courses of action would seem to include conditions such as that the ways you assist the mother support her confidence in and respect for herself. You might supply her with information about different schools, scholarship options, and the like, help her to process and start acting upon the information, serve as an interpreter with school officials, and so on.

We might wonder how general principles could capture these kinds of complexities in the particular situations we face in our moral lives. But candidates for the basis of the reasons which the son's interests give you for acting in these ways do suggest themselves. One such candidate would be the relation of respecting the dignity of persons. If certain ways of assisting would help enhance the son's rational capacities while also supporting the mother's autonomy and self-respect, whereas other ways would ill befit the mother's dignity as a person, dignity would seem to be the sort of thing that is capable of answering to the explanatory demand in BT.<sup>57</sup> Respecting the dignity of persons is then a candidate for the designated relation for assisting people's interests and pro tanto rightness. Thus a hedged principle to the effect that assisting people's interests is pro tanto right, be it true or false, is available for consideration.

We find the similar structure in many other cases. Consider Hume's discussion of "circumstances of justice," which rests the applicability of principles of justice on the mutual acceptance of a general system of rules and laws which is mutually advantageous.<sup>58</sup> To explain why the circumstances of justice are morally relevant, we presumably must invoke some basis in virtue of which the absence of those circumstances is an unsuitable condition for principles of justice to apply. The dominant strand in the contractualist tradition, for example, takes promoting in-

57. It is tangential to my present point if this candidate is too simplistic fully to account for the case. A fuller discussion might do greater justice to the complexities of moral life by, among other things, illustrating ways in which various moral ideals that can figure in the normative bases of moral reasons may interact. One discussion that may be usefully read in this light is Philippa Foot's discussion of how justice and friendship affect the demands of benevolence. See Philippa Foot, "Utilitarianism and the Virtues," *Mind* 94 (1985): 196–209.

58. See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Niddich (1739–40; Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), III.ii.2, and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (1751; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), sec. 3 and app. 3. See also John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 126–30.

dividual or mutual advantage as such a basis. So hedged principles of justice are available for consideration. Or consider principles whose applicability depends on contingent physical and biological facts about humans, such as that we are vulnerable to bodily attack. As H. L. A. Hart points out, we could have acquired the sort of physical structure that makes exoskeletons virtually immune from attack by other members of their species.<sup>59</sup> Were we invulnerable to bodily attack, there would be no basis why the fact that an act would constitute a bodily attack on another human being should be a moral reason against it. Under such circumstances, attacking people wouldn't be among the things that infringe their right to life or bodily integrity, violate their autonomy, and so on. These are among the candidates for the designated relation to which a hedged principle against attacking others would refer.

These examples suggest a general reason for accepting the coverage claim. Normative ethicists' accounts of rightness and wrongness appeal to ideals such as well-being, justice, the virtues, or the rights of persons or their dignity or capacity to lead self-governed meaningful lives and designate certain responses, such as promoting or honoring, as appropriate to these ideals. To pick an example more or less at random, when we wonder why promoting well-being matters, we might conclude that it matters because persons merit concern and respect and promoting well-being is one way of enacting concern for persons.<sup>60</sup> Or we might conclude that it matters because it promotes intrinsically good states of affairs. Either way, hedged principles concerning the promotion of well-being are available. But now notice that combining any ideal with any way of responding to one generates a relation that has the structure of the kind of relations that I call the designated relations. If normative ethicists' tools already include the constituent elements of such relations, then hedged moral principles fit well with the way that normative ethicists argue about moral questions. We can then reasonably suppose that a set of hedged principles will be available to cover every moral reason.<sup>61</sup>

Atomist generalists might worry that hedged principles are a bad fit for them because my examples are largely cast as involving variable reasons. But they needn't worry. Moderate generalism that appeals to hedged principles holds that all moral reasons have a certain kind of basis, not that they are all variable qua reasons. A principle of the form HP can be true even if the instances of the relevant *F* invariably instan-

59. See H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 190.

60. See Christian Coons, "What Makes States of Affairs Good" (unpublished manuscript, University of California, Davis).

61. Also recall, from n. 8, that the hybrid view that only some moral reasons require the existence of moral principles is dialectically ill-motivated.

tiate the relevant designated relation. For any such *F*, the conditions will always be suitable for *F* to provide a reason for *M*. This possibility remains open because the content of hedged principles involves no reference to suitable conditions or the possibility of their failure to obtain. Whether a given principle identifies a variable reason depends on the nature of the relevant designated relation.

Many atomist generalists also have positive reason to welcome my account. An example would be the view that such “thick” moral facts as that an act is just or kind must always be reasons for doing it and that an act is unjust or cruel must always be reasons against doing it, and the periphery of variable reasons depends on the invariable core constituted by such reasons.<sup>62</sup> Such a view retains a theoretical need for principles that are capable of covering variable reasons. For a set of principles that identifies justice, courage, generosity, and so on, as necessarily right making, and cruelty, cowardice, greed, and so on, as necessarily wrong making, would be incomplete. As the atomist admits, not all reasons are like that; some are variable. Examples might be the reasons that make actions cowardly, kind, and so on. These atomists have reason to welcome an account that can supplement principles that affirm substantive connections between the virtues and rightness with principles that identify features in virtue of which actions exhibit particular virtues.

### *B. The Truth Claim*

Even if we have seen some hedged principles that are plausibly true, why think that the truth claim should hold in full generality? One worry observes that ‘the designated relation’ is a definite description. The standard (“Russellian”) semantics of sentences in which definite descriptions occur imply that a principle of the form HP is true only if there exists a unique designated relation (a unique relation *R* such that

62. Roger Crisp expresses such a view in terms of the virtues. See Crisp, “Particularizing Particularism,” 39–40. David McNaughton and Piers Rawling express such a view in terms of thick evaluative features that provide invariable “primary reasons.” See McNaughton and Rawling, “Unprincipled Ethics,” 257–59, 273. Hedged principles are compatible with such views but don’t require them. Hence I can set certain vexed issues about virtues and thick evaluative features to one side. One such issue is whether some thick features have variable valence. Some holists argue that an unjust response might be just what is called for in certain circumstances, such as situations apt to arise in ordinary family life. See Christine Swanton, “A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action,” *Ethics* 112 (2001): 32–52, 48. See also Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 84, 121–22. (For my own part, I am not convinced that in such a situation an unjust act is called for qua unjust, rather than that it is favored qua just but stronger opposing reasons favor an unjust act.) Another such issue is whether the virtues or thick evaluative features themselves constitute moral reasons (e.g., whether the fact that an act would be generous is a reason to do it), or whether it is the “virtue-making” features that do so.

$x$ 's being  $F$  is a reason for  $x$ 's being  $M$  when, and because,  $x$  instantiates  $R$ ). We can now imagine a two-premise objection. For a given choice of ' $F$ ' and ' $M$ ', even if instances of  $F$  give reasons for their bearers' being  $M$  in virtue of instantiating a designated relation for  $F$  and  $M$  such as I have described, there is no good reason to suppose that the relation must be the same whenever an instance of  $F$  gives a reason for its bearer's being  $M$ . But, if no unique designated relation for  $F$  and  $M$  exists, then the corresponding hedged principle is at best false. Therefore, there is no good reason to suppose that a comprehensive set of true hedged principles exists.

One response to this "nonuniqueness objection," as we might call it, is to drop the uniqueness clause from our semantics of definite descriptions.<sup>63</sup> Then a hedged principle can be true even if it doesn't denote a unique designated relation. Another response is to point out that a semantics of definite descriptions that includes a uniqueness clause can plausibly imply only that the truth of a principle of the form HP requires nothing more than the existence of a unique designated relation within some restricted class of relations. This is because Russellians will in any case have to restrict the interpretation of definite descriptions in some fashion to avoid counterexamples. Since the resulting uniqueness conditions are likely to be weak and highly nuanced, it is simply unclear why hedged principles cannot succeed in picking out relevantly unique designated relations.<sup>64</sup>

These responses might not, however, fully address the worry motivating the first premise of the nonuniqueness objection. Consider moral claims of the form 6:

- (6) The fact that  $o$  is  $F$  is a reason for  $o$ 's being  $M$ .

Whatever our semantics of descriptions, a claim of the form 6 might hold in some cases because  $o$  instantiates relation  $R_1$ , in other cases because  $o$  instantiates relation  $R_2$ , and so on. To illustrate, one might think that killing a person is a wrong-making reason sometimes because it frustrates the victim's prudential interests, sometimes because it destroys the kind of intrinsic good that the individual person is, and some-

63. For one recent case against uniqueness, see Zoltán Gendler Szabó, "Descriptions and Uniqueness," *Philosophical Studies* 101 (2000): 29–57, and "The Loss of Uniqueness," *Mind* 114 (2005): 1185–1222.

64. To see just how careful we have to be in explicating the relevant uniqueness conditions, consider sentences like the following: "If someone buys a sage plant here, she always buys eight others along with it" (uttered at a plant store, and where "it" = "the unique sage plant that each person bought"), and "If a bishop meets another bishop, the bishop blesses the other bishop." See Irene Heim, "E-Type Pronouns and Donkey Anaphora," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 13 (1990): 137–78. Thanks to Michael Glanzberg for referring me to these examples.

times because it violates her dignity. Whether the truth of a hedged principle requires the existence of a unique designated relation or not, one might think that the spirit of generalism would be under threat if hedged principles assigned to moral reasons normative bases that are normatively disjoint in this kind of way. Moderate generalism might in that case seem to be no more than particularism in disguise.

Moderate generalists have at least two possible replies to this worry. To illustrate, suppose that our moral concern for killing involves concern not to frustrate people's prudential interests, destroy the kind of intrinsic goods that persons are, or violate their dignity. The first reply grants the controversial claim that the basis for the wrong-making force of killing in a particular instance is itself fundamentally context dependent in the way suggested by the above motivation for the nonuniqueness objection.<sup>65</sup> Thus, killing might be a wrong-making reason sometimes because it would frustrate the victim's prudential interests, but sometimes because it would violate her dignity. But, this first reply maintains, these two designated relations for killing and wrongness generate two distinct principles of the form HP, each of which identifies killing as a feature in virtue of which actions can be wrong. Both could be true. But the resulting proliferation of principles would be unobjectionable, since the two principles would reflect distinct moral concerns about killing and have distinct application conditions.<sup>66</sup> The second reply denies what the first one grants. It maintains, instead, that at most one of these principles could be true. The basis for the wrong-making force of killing is the same whenever killing is wrong making, and any other moral concern is relevant in some way other than by making killing a wrong-making feature. For example, we might say that when killing a person is wrong making that is because it violates her dignity, but that when killing her also frustrates her prudential interests, this intensifies the reason.<sup>67</sup>

More surely needs to be said to develop these replies. But already as they stand, they suggest that moderate generalists who appeal to

65. I don't find this claim compelling myself. I only maintain that moderate generalists can go quite a way toward accommodating it.

66. Were the two principles both true and applicable in a given case, they would overdetermine the relevant instance of 6.

67. Obviously each of these replies could also exploit such phenomena as contextual restriction and context shift to argue that the context in which a sentence expressing a hedged principle is uttered typically establishes a unique contextually salient designated relation as the focus of moral concern. (This option is open irrespective of whether we think that uniqueness is a truth-conditional feature of sentences in which definite descriptions occur or something that their utterances typically generate by pragmatic presupposition or implicature.) For reasons of space, I have to leave it as an exercise for the interested readers to work out examples and figure out how the two replies would analyze those examples.

hedged principles can avoid assigning normatively disjoint bases to moral reasons. They can address the worries that motivate the non-uniqueness objection to the truth claim. Positive arguments for the truth claim, short of actually specifying a comprehensive set of true moral principles, are likely to come from arguments for the dependence claim.

## V. DEFEATING ARGUMENTS FROM HOLISM TO PARTICULARISM

In presenting particularism as a local consequence of holism in the moral domain, particularists assume that holism offers an especially powerful way of defending their view. I finish by arguing that moderate generalists who appeal to hedged principles can defeat three arguments from holism to particularism. If the case to come is successful, it constitutes an important indirect argument against particularism. It will also constitute an indirect defense of the dependence claim that moral reasons depend on the existence of a comprehensive set of true moral principles.

### A. *The Incompatibility Argument*

The most familiar argument from holism to particularism is the “incompatibility argument.” It says that reasons holism is true and that if holism is true, then generalism is false (i.e., the two are incompatible), and so generalism is false. Until recently, discussions of particularism tended to focus on the first premise and neglect the second.<sup>68</sup> Particularists tended to focus on developing holism and take its incompatibility with generalism for granted. But the second premise is false. Since hedged principles can explain holism but give us generalism, holism is silent about whether moral reasons depend on the existence of true moral principles.

I am not the only one to square holism and generalism. But in a family dispute I would argue that the appeal to hedged principles gives moderate generalism explanatory advantages over other forms of generalism. Consider, for example, the following kind of principle from Brad Hooker:

68. Other recent writers have independently challenged the incompatibility premise. For a particularly crisp statement of the challenge, see McKeever and Ridge, “What Does Holism Have.” I challenge the premise also in Pekka Väyrynen, “Particularism and Default Reasons,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 7 (2004): 53–79. (My current presentation of moderate generalism amends and supersedes the sketch given in that article.) Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith suggest that holism is compatible with a form of “expected value utilitarianism.” See Jackson, Pettit, and Smith, “Ethical Particularism and Patterns,” 97–99. For a similar point, see Holton, “Principles and Particularisms,” 197 n. 12. Responding to the challenge is one of the main aims of Dancy’s *Ethics without Principles*.

- (7) That an act would constitute lying is a moral consideration against doing it (except perhaps when there is a mutual agreement to try to deceive one another, as in games of bluff).<sup>69</sup>

Hooker doesn't appear to notice that principles like 7 presuppose holism. They do, though, since principle 7 makes reference to contextual factors whose presence is said to constitute unsuitable conditions. But, of course, to presuppose holism isn't yet to explain it. By contrast, hedged principles don't presuppose holism but nonetheless explain it. Moreover, the mere truth of a principle like 7 wouldn't yet explain why certain conditions but not others fall into the list of exceptions.<sup>70</sup> By contrast, the reference that hedged principles make to the designated relations enables them to explain why certain conditions but not others count as unsuitable. Finally, even if there were true principles like 7 which cover all moral reasons, this wouldn't yet show that all moral reasons depend on them. If the appeal to hedged principles supports the dependence claim, that is certainly an advantage.

#### *B. The Indefiniteness Argument*

If the incompatibility argument fails, particularists are entitled to claim at most that holism supports particularism indirectly. According to the "indefiniteness argument," holism raises the epistemic possibility that we cannot state the conditions for the presence of reasons in finite and useful terms, which raises the worry that holism-tolerating generalism cannot deliver sufficiently definite general truths of the kind it requires concerning moral reasons and unsuitable conditions.

This argument should worry a view like Hooker's. Capturing the contextual factors that generate exceptions by listing them works only if the list of potential exception types is manageably short. For moral principles should be capable of functioning as objects of moral cognition, and only manageably complex generalizations can do so. But attempting exhaustively to list the exception types to moral principles seems like an unpromising general strategy, for reasons that are familiar from debates about *ceteris paribus* and other nonstrict generalizations outside ethics.

One possible reply is to transform principles like 7 into claims of the form 8:

69. See Brad Hooker, "Intuitions and Moral Theorizing," in *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations*, ed. Philip Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 161–83, 178; see also 176.

70. I would make a similar point about the examples that Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge give of holistic utilitarian and Kantian principles and about Richard Holton's *That's It* principles. See McKeever and Ridge, "What Does Holism Have," and Holton, "Principles and Particularisms."

- (8) That an act would be *F* is a reason for its being *M*, unless some feature of the situation prevents *F* from providing such a reason.

Claims of this form don't presuppose that the potential unsuitable conditions form a manageably short list. The problem with such claims is that they merely quantify over the features of situations whose presence would constitute unsuitable conditions. We can reasonably ask whether any fairly definite and informative general account is available of what count as potentially unsuitable conditions and what it is for them to count as unsuitable in a particular context.<sup>71</sup> The explanatory demand that we find in BT would seem to call for such an account. But claims of the form 8 seem not to supply one.

My own response to the indefiniteness argument is that it is invalid. Moderate generalists can grant that, given holism, we might be unable to state the potential unsuitable conditions in a manageable list. But the argument's conclusion doesn't follow. Moderate generalism yields fairly definite general truths about what conditions count as unsuitable with respect to the right-making features. Principles of the form HP imply that a feature of a situation is unsuitable for *x*'s being *F* to be a reason for *x*'s being *M* when, and because, *x* fails to instantiate the designated relation for *F* and *M*. This is a general condition on features of situations, the satisfaction of which makes the presence of the feature an unsuitable condition, but which doesn't presuppose that the potential unsuitable conditions themselves form a manageably short list. Yet whenever the designated relation for a given choice of '*F*' and '*M*' exists, there is (ordinary indeterminacy aside) a definite truth as to whether conditions are unsuitable in a particular situation.<sup>72</sup>

Although I regard this response to the indefiniteness argument as satisfactory, it raises a number of complications that go beyond the scope

71. Dancy raises the worry whether generalists can give a definite and informative account of what it is for a feature to function as a reason in a particular context. See Dancy, "Defending Particularism," 27. The worry described in the text can be developed fairly naturally into Dancy's worry.

72. A different reply is that the indefiniteness argument begs the question. The thought is that the argument assumes that the conditions for the presence of reasons cannot be "codified" in finite and useful nonmoral terms, but the claim that the kind of context dependence of moral reasons that holism asserts cannot be so codified just is a form of particularism. See Jackson, Pettit, and Smith, "Ethical Particularism and Patterns"; and McKeever and Ridge, "What Does Holism Have." To be sure, if uncodifiability entails particularism (I register some doubts about this in n. 74), and if the indefiniteness argument presupposes uncodifiability, then the argument begs the question against generalism. But the argument presupposes not uncodifiability itself but only its epistemic possibility. This is enough to give the argument some weight. For holism-tolerating generalists grant that holism raises the epistemic possibility that the number of potential unsuitable conditions is unmanageably large. Hence they can find no ground in holism for arguing that the number of potential unsuitable conditions is manageable.



of this article. For example, hedged principles seem to imply that a reliable ability to judge that a given feature of a situation counts as unsuitable requires at least some grasp of the relevant designated relation plus sensitivity and judgment. We know that relying on moral principles requires sensitivity and judgment anyway, but generalists need an epistemology of moral judgment to vindicate the point. My own approach would be to explicate how even a partial grasp of the moral ideals that figure in the relevant designated relations can contribute to a reliable ability to detect the presence of moral reasons and potential unsuitable conditions. What would this require, however? Must we, for example, be able to state the designated relations exclusively in manageable nonnormative terms? Especially if not, how might we come to grasp those relations and understand and apply hedged principles? These are important questions, but unfortunately I cannot address them here.<sup>73</sup> Suffice it to say that although hedged principles are compatible with the possibility that their application conditions can be stated exclusively in manageable nonnormative terms, I would deny that generalism rests on this possibility. The latter requires certain assumptions concerning the conceptual resources available to us which generalism, as I understand it, doesn't. Generalism is primarily a doctrine in moral metaphysics, not a doctrine concerning our conceptual resources.<sup>74</sup> Thus the generalist's account of how we might come to understand and apply moral principles can reasonably require that we have some grasp of some moral concepts and ideals to begin with.

### *C. The Cosmic Accident Argument*

The "cosmic accident argument" for particularism contends that, given holism, it would be a cosmic accident if truths about how moral reasons

73. I attempt to address these questions in other work. See Väyrynen, "Hedged Principles," and "Usable Moral Principles."

74. This point inclines me to reject the assumption, mentioned in n. 72, that uncodifiability entails particularism. I say "inclines" because I have yet to see a clear statement of what would count as a codification of morality. Discussions of the issue tend to jumble the idea of stating the application conditions for moral predicates exclusively in finite and helpful nonmoral terms with the idea of representing moral properties themselves in such terms, shift between talking about moral terms and talking about normative terms generally, and use the expression 'nonmoral terms' interchangeably with 'naturalistic terms' and 'descriptive terms'. See John McDowell, *Meaning, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 57–58, 201–2; and esp. Little, "Moral Generalities Revisited," 279–86, esp. 280. These many notions of codification aren't equivalent. But whichever we select as the relevant one, the claim that morality is codifiable seems to presuppose the availability of conceptual resources for expressing moral properties or the application conditions for moral concepts exclusively in finite and helpful nonmoral terms. Since generalism doesn't, by itself, presuppose their availability, it appears not to require the codifiability of morality.

behave could be captured in a set of holistic principles, and so apart from atomism there is no need for moral principles. Dancy states the argument in the form of a challenge:

Given the holism of reasons, it would be a sort of cosmic accident if it were to turn out that [any workable moral scheme] could be captured in a set of holistic contributory principles. . . . It would be an accident because, given the holism of reasons, there is no discernible need for a complete set of reasons to be like this. If our (or any other) morality turned out to be that way, there could be no possible explanation of that fact. It would be pure serendipity. . . . This claim is a challenge to the opposition to come up with a picture of moral thought and judgment which, though it respects the truth of reasons-holism, still *requires* (rather than merely makes possible) a provision of principles that cover the ground.<sup>75</sup>

I take Dancy's central claim to be that, were the participants in a set of moral practices to discover that there is no set of true holistic principles that covers all moral reasons, this would have no effect on their practices. This claim isn't quite to the point, however, since the metaphysical strand in particularism is better taken to concern what sound moral judgment requires. If the appeal to hedged principles can be shown to generate a picture of sound moral judgment that meets the relevant aspect of Dancy's challenge, it undermines the cosmic accident argument and indeed gives some support to the generalist's dependence claim.

I can perhaps best make my case through an example. Suppose, for argument's sake, that "luck egalitarians" are right to hold that some people's being worse off than others is a reason to privilege them in the distribution of benefits, but only insofar as those at the bottom are worse off through no fault or choice of their own. Some would hold that people's being worse off through some fault or choice of their own is an unsuitable condition for the fact that they are worse off to be a (noninstrumental) reason for reducing inequality, rather than that it merely outweighs the reason that their being worse off gives for reducing the inequality. For luck egalitarians hold that when the worse-off are worse off through their own fault or choice, their unequal position relative to others is deserved and in that respect unobjectionable. They "care about *undeserved, nonvoluntary*, inequalities, which they regard as

75. Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 82. In a similar vein, Margaret Little claims that holism shows not that "moral principles . . . capable of codifying the moral landscape . . . are impossible, but that we have no reason to expect any: any we might come across would be, as it were, serendipitous" (Little, "Moral Generalities Revisited," 277).

bad, or objectionable, because unfair."<sup>76</sup> In the language of BT, this is to say that (noninstrumental) reasons for reducing inequality have their normative basis in the relation of promoting comparative fairness. A luck egalitarian principle of the form HP is then available.

If the hedged luck egalitarian principle were false, then something that luck egalitarians regard as a precondition of sound moral judgment on matters of equality would fail to obtain. The conditions under which luck egalitarians think we have (noninstrumental) moral reason to reduce inequality indicate that, in their view, such reasons have a normative basis that explains why some people's being worse off than others is a reason to reduce inequality, when it is such a reason, or else why conditions are unsuitable for it to be such a reason. If there were no designated relation whose instantiation explains why the fact in question is a reason to reduce inequality, then this fact wouldn't be a reason to reduce inequality even when some people are worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own. What explains why the fact that some people are worse off than others functions here as a (non-instrumental) reason for reducing inequality is the instantiation of the relevant designated relation here, and not how that fact functions elsewhere. Nevertheless, the hedged luck egalitarian principle entails that that fact is the reason it is only if it also is a reason for reducing inequality under a certain range of circumstances (roughly, whenever reducing inequality would promote comparative fairness), and in that indirect way its status as a reason here depends on how it functions elsewhere.<sup>77</sup> Thus, if there are (noninstrumental) reasons for reducing inequality and they have the kind of normative basis that luck egalitarians think they do, then there are truths about how those reasons behave that require the existence of a true hedged principle.

We can now see how moderate generalism confutes the allegation of cosmic accident. The case of luck egalitarianism illustrates the moderate generalist account of the existence and behavior of moral reasons. My earlier discussion indicates how the illustration generalizes. The resulting account respects reasons holism, as Dancy's challenge requests, but provides a picture of why sound moral judgment, which requires the existence of moral reasons, should require the existence of a comprehensive set of true hedged moral principles. Notice that when such a set of moral principles does exist, the outward appearances of the relevant practices of moral judgment could be more or less what the particularist takes them to be. Yet moderate generalism offers a picture

76. Larry Temkin, "Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection," in *The Ideal of Equality*, ed. Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 126–61, 129.

77. Here I mean to contrast my view with Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 78.

of sound moral judgment which supports the dependence claim and, in indicating why the moral domain should have a generalist structure, meets the relevant aspects of Dancy's challenge of cosmic accident.

If the incompatibility, indefiniteness, and cosmic accident arguments for particularism all fail against moderate generalism, then it is false advertising to present particularism as a consequence of holism in the moral domain. The onus looks to be on particularists to develop other arguments for their view and against generalism.

## VI. CONCLUSION

I have argued that we can appeal to a novel kind of hedged moral principles to provide a generalist account of moral reasons that can explain reasons holism and thereby undercut much of the motivation for particularism. Neither my model of hedged principles nor the support it provides for moderate generalism depends on whether I have managed to state true moral principles in the course of my discussion. While many of the hedged principles I have used as illustrations are plausibly true, what matters is whether a comprehensive set of true moral principles exists. Just what that set of principles might be is a question for substantive moral theory which my structural account leaves open. But insofar as I have managed to defend the idea that there is one, I can conclude with the generalist claim that sound moral judgment depends, due to its dependence on the existence of moral reasons, on the existence of a comprehensive set of true moral principles.

I find moderate generalism attractive not only because its appeal to hedged principles has considerable explanatory payoffs (only some of which I have extracted here) but also because that appeal fits with the practice of normative ethicists. Their project is not merely to specify right- and wrong-making features, good- and bad-making features, and so on, but also to figure out what is fundamentally right or wrong, or good or bad, about things having those features. I have in effect suggested that we treat the latter as the attempt to identify the normative bases of right- and wrong-making reasons (etc.) and that a certain attractive account of what those bases are like helps to vindicate the generalist conception of moral theory as the project of stating and defending principles concerning the rightness and wrongness of actions and other general moral principles. We should feel free to prefer moral generalism over particularism, provided we have the forbearance to enjoy it in the kind of moderation I have recommended.