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# Reasons and Moral Principles\*

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## 1. Introduction

“Stealing is wrong.” “Keep your promises.” “It’s better if one dies than if five die.” “It’s wrong to treat others as mere means to your own ends.” “You shouldn’t treat others in ways that you wouldn’t like to be treated.” General moral claims like these are commonplace. Often we call them “principles”.<sup>1</sup> This paper concerns the role of principles in morality and their relationship to *normative reasons* (considerations that justify, in different ways, actions, states of affairs, events, and attitudes) and *explanatory reasons* (considerations that explain, in different ways, various features of such things, including their moral features).<sup>2</sup> We traffic in normative reasons when we say, for instance, that there are reasons to wear ear plugs in rock concerts or that if a policy would further squeeze the least well-off, that is a reason against it. (The notion of a normative reason for something is often paraphrased as a consideration that “counts in favor” of it.<sup>3</sup>) We traffic in explanatory reasons when we say, for instance, that the driver’s

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<sup>1</sup>I’ll use double quotes in the many loose ways that quotation marks can be used, such as scare quotes, mentioning a terminological expression, and mentioning and using an expression in the same breath.

<sup>2</sup>For more on this distinction, see Olson, ‘The Metaphysics of Reasons’, in this volume. I’ll bracket questions about *motivating reasons* which we might cite to make sense of people’s decisions and actions; for discussion, see McNaughton and Rawling, ‘Motivating Reasons and Normative Reasons’, and Wiland, ‘Psychologism and Anti-Psychologism about Motivating Reasons’, both in this volume.

<sup>3</sup>See e.g. Scanlon (1998: 17) and Dancy (2004: 7).

being drunk was a (or the) reason why the car crash occurred or that the fact that a policy would further squeeze the least well-off is a reason why it would be wrong.

The relationship between moral principles and reasons is multifaceted. One dimension of this relationship concerns the rational authority of morality. Do people have normative reasons to follow moral principles irrespective of their idiosyncratic ends and concerns or do such reasons depend on whether one's ends and concerns are suitably related to moral principles? Even if we all had some normative reason to follow moral principles, we might also have countervailing non-moral reasons, and unless moral considerations are overriding, these other reasons may sometimes be stronger. I mention these questions only to distinguish them from the questions I'll address below.

When agents have normative reasons to act as they morally ought to, do these reasons somehow depend on moral principles? Do explanatory reasons concerning why certain actions are right and others wrong similarly depend on principles? Or are the normative or explanatory reasons found in morality independent of any suitable provision of principles?<sup>4</sup> These questions are the topic of the generalism-particularism debate in ethics. *Moral particularism* isn't a single sharply defined position, but a family of views, united by an opposition to giving moral principles some fundamental role in morality. As such, particularism challenges the project of ambitious moral theory in the traditional style of Kant, Mill, Sidgwick, Ross, and virtually every other major figure in the history of moral philosophy.<sup>5</sup> *Moral generalism* is, likewise, a family of views, united by the thought that moral principles do play some fundamental role.

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<sup>4</sup>It is controversial just how normative moral reasons are related to the class of explanatory reasons that play a role in explaining moral facts or truths. Perhaps normative reasons for something just are reasons that explain why one ought to do it. Alternatively the notions might come apart. Perhaps a consideration can morally justify a course of action without explaining its rightness or wrongness. Or perhaps it can explain why an action is right or wrong without playing certain roles that normative moral reasons might be thought to play, such as guiding cognitively limited agents or helping to determine the moral worth of actions. For simplicity, I'll assume that normative and explanatory reasons are sufficiently similarly related to moral principles in the respects I'll discuss.

<sup>5</sup>The case of Aristotle is more controversial; see e.g. McDowell (1979), Irwin (2000), and Leibowitz (2013).

The generalism-particularism debate pertains equally to reasons, values, rights, duties, and the like. Parallel issues arise not only regarding morality but also aesthetics, rationality, and other areas of normative or evaluative thought and talk. In what follows, I'll focus on moral reasons and principles.<sup>6</sup> I'll first characterize moral principles by distinguishing two different sorts of claims that a moral principle might make and two central roles which moral principles have traditionally been asked to play in moral theory. I'll then distinguish three different forms which opposition to any of these kinds of principles can take. I'll then survey debates about whether principles play these roles, paying particular attention to arguments that involve claims about reasons. I'll also briefly mention some broader implications of these arguments for both moral theory and the theory of reasons and point to questions that merit further work.

## 2. Moral Principles: Contributory vs. Overall

Moral particularists deny that principles play a fundamental role in morality. What this amounts to depends on what a moral principle is. Some central structural features of moral principles are relatively clear. For something to count as a principle, it must involve some kind of generality. (I'll discuss the relevant kind of generality below.) If a moral principle is to be something that can be asserted, accepted, denied, disputed, or doubted, it must be able to take some form in which it can function as an object of thought. This is so irrespective of whether moral thought and judgment are best understood in cognitivist or expressivist terms (see below). And presumably a principle is specifically moral only if makes reference to a moral property or assertions of or thoughts about it deploy a moral concept.

An account of what a moral principle is should require no specific normative content. Philosophers otherwise as diverse as Plato, Aquinas, Kant, Mill, Sidgwick, Moore, Ross, Hare,

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<sup>6</sup>I'll talk about "moral reasons" more out of convenience than a conviction that moral reasons can be sharply distinguished from various kinds of non-moral normative reasons. For discussion, see Crisp, 'Prudential and Moral Reasons', and McGonigal, 'Aesthetic Reasons', both in this volume.

and Rawls debate whether it is always morally permissible to bring about the best outcome available. But they all agree that whatever the morally right thing to do may be, it can be captured in general principles. Nor should such an account require any particular metaethical – or, more broadly, “metanormative” – views concerning the semantics, the metaphysics or the epistemology of the normative. For instance, Mill and Moore are *cognitivists*: they take the primary function of the statements of moral principles to be that of expressing beliefs that represent general moral facts and so can be true or false in some metaphysically robust sense. By contrast Hare accepts a form of *expressivism*: he takes the primary function of the statements of moral principles to be that of expressing universal prescriptions which, though capable of taking a propositional guise, aren’t the sorts of things that can be robustly true or false.<sup>7</sup> But they all count as generalists in virtue of accepting some form of utilitarianism as the fundamental principle of morality.

So the particularist opposition to principles concerns primarily the structure of morality rather than its substantive first-order content or its metanormative foundations. What particularists resist more precisely is assigning either “contributory” or “overall” principles a fundamental role in morality (Dancy 2004: ch. 2-4). The utilitarian principle that right actions are all and only those actions that maximize general happiness is one example of an overall moral principle. By contrast contributory principles concern the contribution of some particular, more or less specific factor (stealing, stealing-to-help-others, killing, gratuitous killing, promise-breaking, ...) to the overall moral statuses of particular objects of moral assessment (actions, states of affairs, and so on).

The notion of a contributory principle is needed because many people want to acknowledge a plurality of morally relevant considerations that somehow combine to determine overall moral status. How this happens has important implications for moral theory but remains inadequately

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<sup>7</sup>The formulations of cognitivism and expressivism given in the text are rough and meant only to give the general idea.

understood.<sup>8</sup> In any case the idea that what one ought to do in a given situation is some function of potentially multiple relevant considerations is familiar: an action might be right insofar as doing it would fulfill a promise but wrong insofar as it is incompatible with saving a drowning child. These contributory reasons can be opposed (most things have some features that count in their favor but others that count against them) and outweighed (considerations on one side are stronger than those on the other). But they can be *pro tanto*: they can remain in force – and sometimes ground residual duties of compensation, regret, or the like – even if they are outweighed.<sup>9</sup>

It then becomes a significant question whether contributory reasons work in a principled way. Philosophers associated with contemporary particularism (most prominently Jonathan Dancy and Margaret Little) claim that even the way that contributory reasons get determined is too complex and sensitive to context to be captured in general principles. The traditional family dispute within generalism is between those (such as Kant and Mill) who agree that there are true general principles about what one ought to do overall and those (such as Ross) who argue that the way that contributory moral principles combine to determine overall moral status is much too complex and sensitive to context to be captured in general principles. Particularism denies the presupposition shared by these views. Not even contributory principles play a fundamental role in morality.

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<sup>8</sup>The overall moral status of a situation may not be determined in any straightforwardly additive fashion and the relevant combinatorial function(s) can get very complex. See e.g. Kagan (1988), Dancy (2000), Berker (2007), and Lechler (2012). See also Cullity, ‘Weighing Reasons’, in this volume.

<sup>9</sup>See the notion of “prima facie duty” in Ross (1930: ch. 2). My formulation doesn’t assume that what is a *pro tanto* reason to  $\phi$  in one situation must be a *pro tanto* reason to  $\phi$  in all other situations. (Compare the “argument from holism” discussed in §5.)

### 3. Moral Principles: Standards vs. Guides

What roles might moral theorists ask principles (whether contributory or overall) to play in morality? Moral theories can be thought of as having both a *theoretical* and a *practical* function. First, moral theories aim to *explain* certain phenomena. Those who take morality seriously wish to understand not merely what things are morally right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust, but also *why* they are so. Second, moral theories aim to *guide action*. Those who take morality seriously wish to figure out what they ought to do before action, not only in hindsight.<sup>10</sup> Different forms of particularism correspond to denying that general principles play one or the other (or either) of these roles.

Let's first consider the notion of a principle relevant to the theoretical function of moral theories. Few of us think that wrong actions are wrong, period. Some wrong actions are so because they involve deception, others because they are selfish, yet others in virtue of causing death, and so on. One notion of a moral principle is a "standard" for something to have a given moral feature such as rightness or wrongness. A standard in the relevant sense would be some kind of a general connection between the moral feature and a set of features or conditions in virtue of which things have it, or perhaps a proposition that states such a connection.<sup>11</sup>

Principles understood as standards can play a theoretically significant role only if they have certain kinds of modal and explanatory implications. First, genuine moral standards must support counterfactuals ("If *p* were the case, then *q* would be the case"). And at least the basic moral principles are often regarded as necessary, not contingent. If a claim like "It has been wrong of me to treat others as mere means to my ends" were correct merely as a summary of past cases, it wouldn't support the counterfactual "If one were to treat another person as mere

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<sup>10</sup>These roles need to be kept distinct even if both are essential. It might turn out that no moral claim, principle or otherwise, fully meets the demands of both.

<sup>11</sup>The term "standard" is due to McKeever and Ridge (2006: 7). They understand moral principles as standards for the correct application of moral concepts, but reference to concept application seems inessential.

means, that would be wrong”, except perhaps accidentally. And if its truth were necessary, it would entail something logically yet stronger, namely that treating others as mere means is wrong in all possible worlds.

These modal implications are related to the idea that a moral principle must be *universal*: it must make no essential reference to particular persons, times, or places. The idea seems to be that a principle that built in an ineliminable reference to a particular person (say) would make moral distinctions on the basis of an arbitrary non-qualitative feature. Hitting someone, for instance, doesn’t become any less wrong merely because it was done by me rather than you or on Friday night rather than Sunday morning. If there is a moral difference, it must be expressible without such particular references. (Perhaps you were hitting a drunken assailant in self-defense whereas I was hitting a helpless old lady to rob her.)

Principles that are universal may vary a lot in other ways. In particular, their *content* may range from quite narrow or specific to highly general.<sup>12</sup> A principle according to which killing is at least *pro tanto* wrong in all circumstances has a broader scope than one according to which killing is always at least *pro tanto* wrong except in cases of self-defense – but both are universal. A universal principle could be so narrowly tailored that it applies only to one case. A highly narrow principle might fail to play such explanatory roles as capturing what some set of seemingly disparate actual cases have in common. But the intuitive idea that an appropriately explanatory moral principle should have some significant degree of generality is difficult to firm up. Generality comes in finely grained degrees.

The modal implications of moral principles aren’t built into a different important sense in which reasons may be general. It is common to suppose that our concept of a reason is a concept of a *reason relation* – a relation between some consideration F, an agent A, a set of circumstances C and an action (type or token)  $\phi$ .<sup>13</sup> Reasons must be general in one sense if

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<sup>12</sup>See Hare (1972) for the distinction between universality and generality.

<sup>13</sup>Skorupski (2006) takes reason relations to have argument places also for time and degree of strength. Universal moral principles would presumably universally quantify over time variables.

what slots in for “F” must be a repeatedly instantiable type (promising, lying to get out of trouble, doing pirouettes during the full moon, and so on). It doesn’t follow from this that a consideration which slots into a reason relation upon one instantiation would have done so if the circumstances had been different. Particularists can therefore happily allow that reasons must be general in *this* sense.

Genuine moral principles must also be *substantive* or *informative* in some sense that goes beyond the requisite modal implications. For instance, if “murder” were properly analyzed as “wrongful killing”, then the claim that murder is wrong would be an analytic truth with the requisite modal profile, but it would be a morally trivial claim that particularists needn’t deny. (What we would debate is what counts as murder, that is, as wrongful killing.) Yet particularists would protest if told that the principle of utility is true, irrespective of whether its truth were supposed to be analytic. The plausible contrast is that the latter principle seems substantive in a way that the former doesn’t. (The generalism-particularism debate is similarly neutral on whether moral principles are supposed to be knowable *a priori* or *a posteriori*.)

General moral claims can also have the requisite modal profile without being appropriately *explanatory* of particular moral facts. Particularists tend not to deny principles like “*ought* implies *can*” even on readings according to which it is a necessary truth that one can have a moral obligation to  $\phi$  only if one has some suitable sort of ability and opportunity to  $\phi$ . Or consider the widely accepted claim that the moral “supervenes” on the non-moral.<sup>14</sup> This is to say that no two objects can differ in any moral respect without some non-moral difference between the objects or the broader worlds they inhabit. Assume that moral nihilism is false: some things are morally right and some are wrong. Now take a right action and an exhaustive description of the world in which it occurs (including the action itself). Under these assumptions, supervenience entails that, necessarily, any action that is just like this one non-morally is also right. Particularists needn’t be opposed to such “supervenience functions” although they will

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<sup>14</sup>McLaughlin and Bennett (2011) provide a good introduction to supervenience.

be substantive necessary truths if true at all.<sup>15</sup> An exhaustive description of a morally right act will include many facts that are irrelevant to its rightness, but the addition of irrelevant information can destroy an explanation.<sup>16</sup>

What this suggests is that a genuine moral principle should refer only to features that are sufficiently directly relevant to the instantiation of the moral feature to play a role in explaining why it obtains. But what it takes for a moral principle to count as appropriately explanatory is itself controversial.<sup>17</sup> So is the nature of moral principles given the characteristics identified above. Should they be understood as law-like generalizations of some kind, as statements of a certain kind of dispositions, or something else?<sup>18</sup> While such ancillary disputes regarding the nature of moral principles remain, we have seen enough regarding the theoretical function of moral theories to characterize particularism. We get most of the cases right if we take moral particularism to deny that substantive moral standards play a significant role in explaining particular moral facts.<sup>19</sup>

Turning now more briefly to the practical function of morality, principles might fulfill it by providing guidance for moral reasoning, decisions and action in the face of moral novelty, uncertainty and difficulty. So another notion of a moral principle is a general claim that functions as a “guide”. A valuable guide in at least one relevant sense would be such that people – or,

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<sup>15</sup>Discussions of supervenience in the context of particularism include Dancy (1993: 73-8; 2004: 86-9), Jackson, Pettit and Smith (2000), Little (2000), McKeever and Ridge (2006: 7-8), and Strandberg (2008).

<sup>16</sup>See e.g. Salmon (1989) on this general point about explanation.

<sup>17</sup>See e.g. Strandberg (2008), Väyrynen (2009b), and Leibowitz (2011).

<sup>18</sup>See e.g. Lance and Little (2007), Robinson (2008; 2011), and Väyrynen (2009b).

<sup>19</sup>One hard case for this characterization are views like analytic utilitarianism, according to which the property of being morally right is identical to the property of maximizing aggregate utility because the predicates *is morally right* and *maximizes aggregate utility* are analytically equivalent. This kind of analytic definitions of moral concepts are a minority pursuit in contemporary moral theory. But one might think that if such a definition were correct, then the fact that an action maximizes aggregate utility couldn't *explain* the fact that it is right. In that case analytic utilitarianism would imply that substantive moral standards don't play a significant explanatory role, but would still not count as particularist.

at least, conscientious moral agents who care about morality – can more reliably act in morally valuable ways and avoid immoral actions with its assistance than without it.<sup>20</sup> A reliable guide for “acting well” in this sense needn’t (though it may) be explanatory in the above sense. Nor need it be an algorithmic decision procedure which will guide us to right action without fail and can be applied to particular cases without any further exercise of judgment.<sup>21</sup> Judgment is necessary (though fallible) even in the application of the moral and the non-moral concepts which figure in principles. (To use a famous example by H. L. A. Hart, does a Jeep placed in a park as a war memorial count as a “vehicle” with respect to the rule “No vehicles in the park”?) This is especially clear with principles that require varied implementation in different cases, such as “Teachers should set work which is adjusted to each student’s level of ability” (O’Neill 1996: 75). As we’ll see in §7 below, particularists nonetheless argue that, even allowing the need for judgment, relying on principles in deliberation is at best a good heuristic for acting well but more often a hindrance.

#### 4. Three Forms of Moral Particularism

There are three main forms which opposition to both contributory and overall principles – whether as theoretical standards or practical guides – may take.

- (1) There *are no* true or valid moral principles.
- (2) There *is no good evidence* for the existence of true or valid moral principles.

(An evidential variant of (1).)

- (3) Morality *in no way depends* on the existence of true or valid moral principles.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>See McKeever and Ridge (2006: ch. 9) and Väyrynen (2008). For different notions of usability and complications with the notion of using moral principles as guides, see Smith (1988; 2012).

<sup>21</sup>This point is emphasized in McDowell (1979). Generalists like O’Neill (1996), Crisp (2000), McKeever and Ridge (2006), and Väyrynen (2008) agree.

<sup>22</sup>Each of (1)-(3) is to be understood as allowing that some substantive moral claims are correct and knowable. Particularism isn’t a form of general moral skepticism, but only denies a particular view of the nature of morality.

The debate about particularism has been shifting from claims like (1) towards claims like (3).<sup>23</sup> For instance, the current official formulation of particularism by Jonathan Dancy, a leading particularist, says: “The possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend upon the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles” (Dancy 2004: 7). This is a dependence claim along the lines of (3). But reference to “moral thought and judgment” doesn’t draw the line in quite the right place. Many generalists allow that there can be moral agents who don’t accept or even implicitly rely on moral principles, just as many particularists allow that some agents (however mistakenly) follow principles. What these generalists would claim is not that such agents cannot engage in moral thought and judgment, but that they are unlikely to get their moral judgments reliably right (McKeever and Ridge 2006; Väyrynen 2006; 2008). This is why I formulate this third form of particularism as in (3) above. What exactly (3) says turns further on just what the relevant dependence relation is in the case of principles understood as standards or as guides.

It makes dialectical sense to frame discussion around the third form of particularism. While (1)-(3) are mutually compatible, (3) is logically the weakest. It can allow that morality happens to display some patterns that can be captured in informative general claims. What (3) denies is that morality must be so (for instance, that moral principles are partly constitutive of what morality is) or that anything in morality hangs on it. (3) will still be strong enough to count as a form of particularism about standards so long as it denies that particular moral facts depend for their existence, or the corresponding moral judgments for their correctness, on principles. And (3) will still count as a form of particularism about guides so long as it denies that reliable moral guidance depends on principles. These claims don’t require that the very conditions of moral thought and judgment depend on principles. But if they are correct, principles will still have a hard time playing any fundamental theoretical or practical role.

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<sup>23</sup>Compare, for instance, the positions defended in Dancy (1993) and Dancy (2004).

These forms of particularist opposition to moral principles needn't extend to everything that one could decide to call a principle. Particularism allows, for instance, that the way that past situations have turned out morally could be summarized in useful "rules of thumb" for future deliberation. Such summary generalizations won't serve to explain why particular situations turn out morally as they do or constrain how future situations may turn out morally. They are also in principle dispensable in deliberation. Hence they make no claim to play a fundamental theoretical or practical role.

## 5. The Argument from Reasons Holism

What would support particularism about principles in their theoretical role as standards? Consider first those particularists who claim that there are no true moral principles or no good evidence for their existence. How might generalists seek to settle this dispute? Showing that some particular principle is true might be effective against these forms of particularism but not enough to establish that the whole range of moral reasons depends on some suitable provision of general principles. For that result wouldn't yet show that morality isn't fragmented. This worry would go away if the principle being established were an overarching overall principle like utilitarianism or the Kantian Categorical Imperative. But such principles are highly controversial. Those generalists who defend a view about the structure of morality might not be happy to rest their case on the resolution of long-standing debates in substantive normative ethics.

The most prominent argument for particularism, the so-called "argument from holism", avoids these dialectical problems. The holism at issue concerns an important kind of sensitivity of reasons to context. The idea can be brought out with examples. One might think that although actions which cause pleasure are very often the better for it, they are in no way better when they bring pleasure to a sadist delighting in his victim's pain. Or one might think that even if the fact that I promised to do something is normally a reason to do it, that fact may be

no reason at all when the promise was given under deception or duress.<sup>24</sup>

The “reasons holism” that such examples are used to motivate is a modal thesis about reason relations. It says that a consideration that is a reason to  $\phi$  in one set of circumstances may be no reason at all, or a even a reason not to  $\phi$ , in some different set of circumstances (Dancy 1993: 60; 2000: 132, 135). Contrary to “reasons atomism”, there is no necessary connection between the property of being a reason of a certain kind and the property of always being the same kind of reason. Nothing in the nature of the relevant reason relations as such requires that a consideration that slots in for the reason role in one context does so in any other context that isn’t exactly similar. (Recall supervenience.) Any reason, *qua* a reason, is in principle capable of having its valence (positive or negative) altered by changes in context.<sup>25</sup> Reasons holism is weak in its modality but strong in its scope. Everyone can agree that “non-basic” or “derivative” reasons behave holistically. For instance, whether some situational factor is an instrumental reason varies depending on its relation to more fundamental reasons or ends.<sup>26</sup> To deny holism is to claim that any variable reasons can be explained by reference to “basic” or “non-derivative” reasons which are invariable. Holism denies that even basic or non-derivative reasons are invariable *qua* reasons.

The argument from holism says that if reasons are contextually variable in the way holism implies, their behavior across contexts cannot be captured in substantive general principles.<sup>27</sup> A wrinkle in this argument is worth sorting out up front. Holism is usually stated as a claim about

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<sup>24</sup>A large selection of such examples can be found in Dancy (1993; 2000) and Little (2000). For a more general discussion of how context may undermine reasons for action, see Cullity (2013).

<sup>25</sup>The qualifier “*qua* a reason” is meant to allow that some considerations may be invariable reasons so long as this is due to some idiosyncratic feature, such as their particular content (Dancy 2000: 136). The idea is that if (say) the fact that an act would be courageous invariably counts in its favor, this just tells us something about courage, not about the nature of normative reasonhood.

<sup>26</sup>Instrumental reasons are discussed in Kolodny, ‘Instrumental Reasons’, in this volume.

<sup>27</sup>The most prominent statement of this argument is Dancy (1993: ch. 4). See also Little (2000) and Dancy (2000).

the kind of favoring that features of a situation do to an action when they are normative reasons for (or against) performing it. But particularism about standards concerns the explanation of the rightness of an action to which features of a situation contribute when they make an action right (or wrong). So the favoring relation and the right-making relation seem distinct. 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” (Dancy 2004: 79). So shouldn’t the argument from holism to particularism then proceed from the holism of the right-making relation? Nonetheless it seems reasonable to assume provisionally that if the reasons for doing something are variable *qua* reasons, then so must be the reasons why it is right. It would be surprising if normative reasons were holistic but explanatory reasons weren’t (Dancy 2004: 79-80).

Generalists have taken issue with the argument from holism with respect both to its soundness and its validity. Objections to its soundness focus on reasons holism. Some generalists argue that holism is false because morality is based on some factors which are or generate invariable reasons. Perhaps, for instance, morality is based on virtues and vices, and these give rise to invariable reasons. The idea would be that whether an action is right or good is determined by whether it is generous, courageous, just, and so on, and if something is generous, courageous, just, and so on, that is invariably a reason to do it. This view can grant to holists that considerations such as lying might have variable moral import; perhaps not all lies need involve dishonesty, which is the real and invariable reason why lying is wrong, when it is (Crisp 2000; McNaughton and Rawling 2000). In reply, some particularists deny that particular virtues and vices are invariably relevant (perhaps actions can sometimes be worse for being honest or considerate), whereas others limit holism to non-moral considerations.<sup>28</sup>

A more modest objection to reasons holism is that the typical examples used to support it

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<sup>28</sup>See Swanton (2001) and Dancy (2004: 121-2) for the former view, McNaughton and Rawling (2000) for the latter, and Stangl (2010) for an account that treats virtues and vices asymmetrically in this respect.

are ineffective. All that they show is that a consideration that has invariable normative valence is outweighed by other considerations, not that its valence is altered by context (Shafer-Landau 1997; Hooker 2000). Settling this issue requires some way of determining which type of case is in question. So the debate cannot be settled by examples alone (McNaughton and Rawling 2000; Väyrynen 2006). Judgments about which sort of case is in question may also be unreliable in predictable ways, and hence a poor basis for arguments either way.<sup>29</sup>

Other arguments against reasons holism target the distinction that holism requires between reasons and other ways that features of the broader context can be relevant to what one ought or has reason to do. Holism requires us to distinguish reasons from “disablers” and “enablers”.<sup>30</sup> Disablers play a negative role with respect to whether some consideration is a reason. They are conditions in whose presence something that would in their absence have been a reason isn’t a reason. An example might be that my promise was given under duress or deception. Had these conditions been absent, the fact that I promised to do something would have constituted a reason for me to act as promised. Enablers, on the other hand, are conditions that must be present for some consideration to be a reason, and thus play a positive role in making it a reason. One example might be that promising to  $\phi$  gives a reason to  $\phi$  only given that  $\phi$ -ing is itself morally permissible. Another might be that my having a reason to  $\phi$  entails that  $\phi$ -ing is related to my motivations in a certain way. Holism implies that these conditions are no part of the reasons in question; they are no part of what favors the actions in question. Reasons can be variable in the way holism requires only if they depend on background conditions which may vary by context.

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<sup>29</sup>See Schroeder (2011), as well as Kennett and Fine, ‘Reliable and Unreliable Judgments about Reasons’, in this volume.

<sup>30</sup>On these distinctions, see e.g. Dancy (2004: ch. 3). Reasons, disablers, and enablers can further be distinguished from “modifiers” which intensify or attenuate the strength of a reason. For a good discussion of how these different types of moral relevance which holism distinguishes are related to one another, see Bader (2016).

One move against this picture of reasons is to say that the examples in support of holism specify reasons incompletely. Complete reasons for action guarantee that a reason exists, and so must include also the presence of enablers and the absence of disablers (Hooker 2000, 2008; Raz 2000, 2006). Thus the reason for me to fix your bike isn't simply that I promised; it is that I made an uncoerced and informed promise to fix your bike, and fixing your bike is morally permissible, and so on and so forth. If reasons are composed in this inclusive way, then it becomes much less plausible that what is a reason in one context may be no reason at all or even an opposite reason in a different context. But taking a view on whether the reason is some more narrowly drawn consideration or some more fully specified complex of features means relying on different judgments about what exactly is the reason in a particular case in the first place. Again such judgments may be a poor basis for arguments either way. But there may be other ways to argue that the distinctions drawn by holism are metaphysically robust, not merely pragmatic.<sup>31</sup>

A different move is to object to a claim that is often associated with holism, namely that any consideration whatever can be a reason, given suitable circumstances. Holism alone doesn't yield this view, for reasons might depend on context without being solely determined by it. This threatens to "flatten the moral landscape": considerations like killing, infliction of pain and truth-telling have no deeper sort of moral import than considerations like shoelace color or hair parting (Little 2000). Some particularists seek to capture this intuitive difference by arguing that some considerations, "default" reasons, need no enablers and hence are reasons unless something prevents them from being so, whereas others, "non-default" reasons, aren't reasons unless enabled by some features of the context.<sup>32</sup> Issues in this debate include which of the various possible notions of a default reason (such as pragmatic, epistemic and metaphysical)

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<sup>31</sup>See Bader (2016). The status of the parallel distinction between causes and other causally relevant conditions, and its relation to causal explanation, is controversial in this kind of way; classic discussions include Davidson (1967) and Lewis (1986).

<sup>32</sup>See Cullity (2002), Dancy (2004: 111-17), and Lance and Little (2006a).

are plausible, whether any of them would be sufficient for the particularist purposes, and whether the best way to model them supports particularism.<sup>33</sup>

The above responses to the argument from holism challenge its holist premise. A different response is to challenge its validity by arguing that holism is compatible with generalism. In that case holism wouldn't support particularism even if true. Several philosophers argue that principles concerning moral reasons can incorporate as part of their content the very contextual variability of reasons which follows from holism.<sup>34</sup> Principles can make reference not only to features which provide reasons but also to disablers and enablers. For instance, one could endorse a principle like "Necessarily, that one promised to  $\phi$  is a reason to  $\phi$ , unless the promise was given under deception or duress". This specifies the fact that one promised to do something as a reason to do it and the condition that the promise wasn't given under deception or duress as something that must obtain in order for the fact that one promised to do something to be a reason to do it. The extensionally equivalent atomistic principle "Necessarily, that one made an uncoerced and informed promise to  $\phi$  is a reason to  $\phi$ " might not be explanatorily equivalent. For instance, that my promise to  $\phi$  wasn't given under deception or duress might play a different role in the explanation of why I have reason to  $\phi$  than the fact that I promised to  $\phi$ . Accommodating holism is desirable insofar as the distinctions that holism draws among different types of moral relevance really are metaphysically robust and normatively important.

One particularist reply to this objection is that the argument from holism is better understood as indirect. Although holism is compatible with generalism, particularism provides a better explanation of holism. Given holism, it would be a mere "cosmic accident", rather than anything supporting the dependence of morality on principles, if reasons behaved in a way that can be captured in general principles (Little 2000: 277; Dancy 2004: 82). How this argument is to be understood is disputed (McKeever and Ridge 2006: 32-41; Leibowitz 2009). (Perhaps the idea is that it is merely a fortunate contingency that killing and stealing are so systematically

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<sup>33</sup>See Väyrynen (2004), McKeever and Ridge (2006: ch. 3), and Horty (2007; 2012).

<sup>34</sup>See Jackson, Pettit and Smith (2000), Väyrynen (2004; 2006), and McKeever and Ridge (2005; 2006: ch. 2).

wrong, making people happier so reliably good and so on.) Some generalists develop accounts of moral principles according to which the best overall explanation of particular moral facts under holism still relies on principles (Väyrynen 2006; 2009b). Others argue that enablers and disablers work in a way that can be explained by general and independently plausible principles of reasoning (Horty 2007, 2012; Schroeder 2009, 2011).

The force of these objections to the validity of the argument from holism depends less on the extent to which morality is sensitive to context than on what exactly it takes to count as a substantive moral principle. Can all the contextual variation that one must capture to accommodate holism be captured in terms of general principles that have the requisite modal implications, count as appropriately explanatory and so on? This debate remains open.<sup>35</sup>

Particularism, if true, would clearly have significant implications for our understanding of morality. But reasons holism is of interest to moral philosophy even if the argument from holism fails against moral generalism. I'll mention three respects in which this is so.

First, reasons holism bears on the integration of morality with the rest of our normative thought. The relationship between theoretical and practical reasons is controversial, but we might end up wanting a unified account of their basic nature. But now imagine that holism turns out to be independently plausible as an account of epistemic reasons for belief. For instance, perhaps the fact that the apple looks red is a reason to believe that it is red only provided that I am not a brain in a vat and the lighting is normal, but these latter considerations don't themselves look like reasons to believe anything in particular.<sup>36</sup> In that case considerations of theoretical unity might favor a holist account of moral and other practical reasons.

Second, if holism were true, this would complicate the appeal to intuitions about particular cases in normative ethics. If a consideration that makes a moral difference in one situation may matter in a different way or not at all in other circumstances, then generalizing from individual cases to principles won't be safe. Even if it was wrong to break a promise in one situation,

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<sup>35</sup>Recent contributions include Robinson (2008; 2011), Väyrynen (2009b), and Leibowitz (2011).

<sup>36</sup>Dancy (2000) supports holism about reasons for belief with examples like this.

we cannot infer that promise-making contributes in the same way in other cases or combines in the same way with whatever other contributory factors are present there.<sup>37</sup> Transporting conclusions from streamlined hypothetical cases which are widely used in moral theory to more complex real-life cases might be particularly treacherous. We can acknowledge all this as points of methodological caution even if we think that careful consideration of a wide range of cases and various candidate principles will help us to identify atomistic considerations standing behind the putative holistic considerations.

Third, holism bears on the structure of moral theories. If holism is compatible with moral generalism, then paradigmatically generalist moral theories may treat their normatively fundamental considerations either as normative reasons or as conditions that explain reasons without having to count themselves as reasons. (Such consideration might fail to meet some relevant further conditions on reasons.) Kantians, for instance, might treat an action's violating the Categorical Imperative either as a (indeed, the) moral reason against an action or as something that explains when and why a wide variety of other considerations – from lying, promise-breaking, and withholding mutual aid to much else besides – are moral reasons against actions (namely, when actions performed with such maxims violate the Categorical Imperative). Parallel structural options are available many other moral theories, including contractualism and virtue ethics. In any of these forms, holist generalism will endorse more complicated principles than generalists have traditionally endorsed. But this new program has yet to be put into serious practice in normative ethics.

## 6. Moral Principles and the Explanation of Reasons

An important stake in the generalism-particularism debate is whether moral principles play a significant explanatory role with respect to moral reasons and other particular moral facts.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>For discussion, see e.g. Kagan (1988) and Dancy (1993).

<sup>38</sup>One might also wonder what explains moral principles themselves. This question is under-explored but important to the relationship between reasons and moral principles. Might some principles have no further

Any view owes us some account of how the relevant sorts of non-causal explanations work. This burden may be multilayered. Suppose that the fact that  $\phi$ -ing would involve lying counts against  $\phi$ -ing. We might take this to explain (or at least play a role in explaining) why  $\phi$ -ing would be at least *pro tanto* wrong. We might then wonder how these normative explanations work. But a further explanatory question could also be asked: why does the fact that  $\phi$ -ing would involve lying count against  $\phi$ -ing in the first place? (Why isn't it morally neutral instead?) We might then wonder how these latter kind of normative explanations work and how they are related to the former kind. And might wonder further what role, if any, moral principles play in either kind of explanations. Prior commitments regarding any of these issues would presumably constrain one's views about the nature of reasons, of at least the explanatory sort. Conversely, prior commitments regarding the nature of reasons will constrain what models for normative explanation are available. I'll now briefly address two issues: first, how the explanatory role of moral principles might be understood and, second, the implications of different generalist replies to the argument from holism regarding normative explanation.

Any normative view regarding what we have reason to do and not do, what things are right and wrong, and so on, is, among other things, a view about how these normative features are distributed. A mere description of such a distribution doesn't explain why that distribution obtains. So if moral principles were mere generalizations, they couldn't be offered as an explanation of how moral features are distributed. One way to avoid this worry would be to require that moral principles will be relevantly explanatory only if they play some role in "grounding" particular moral facts. There are many possible ways to make such a requirement more precise. To illustrate, just one option is to think that the role of moral principles is to govern or constrain which non-moral facts ground which particular moral facts. Saying this much wouldn't ground or explanation? Or might principles be explained by reasons of some kind, such as perhaps reasons that individuals have for rejecting or accepting principles? (A view of this kind might be the contractualism of Scanlon 1998.) If that were the case, then morality might involve principles without assigning them a fundamental explanatory role.

yet settle whether moral principles should be treated as parts of the explanations of particular moral facts by the non-moral facts that ground them. But moral principles needn't be a part of those explanations to play an important role in them. Those explanations would still presuppose moral principles and their depth and counterfactual stability might well be greater owing to their relationship to principles. The exact shape of the explanatory requirement is also going to depend on various general issues about explanation.<sup>39</sup> The explanatory roles that moral principles might play with respect to particular moral facts merit further analysis.

Different generalist replies to the argument from holism have different implications regarding whether genuine principles can tolerate exceptions, which constrain the models of normative explanation available to them. Some generalist replies to the argument from holism commit them to pursuing "unhedged" principles which enumerate the potential disablers and enablers. The idea is that it is possible to specify a complete list of the requisite qualifications and exceptions, and thus give at least contributory principles which hold without exception.<sup>40</sup> An example might be that the fact that one promised to do something will always be a reason to do it, provided that the promise was informed and uncoerced, requires nothing morally impermissible, hasn't been canceled by the promisee and \_\_\_\_ (where the blank is a placeholder for all the further relevant features, whatever they may be).<sup>41</sup>

This strategy would seem to succeed only if the list of the potential disablers and enablers is finite. One defense of this claim is epistemological: if knowledge of what is morally right and wrong in particular cases is possible (as particularists agree it is), then the idea that moral facts aren't brute can be used to support generalism.<sup>42</sup> If the moral features of things result from their

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<sup>39</sup>One issue is whether everything that is necessary for X to explain Y must be part of X. For one account of explanation that doesn't require this, see Ruben (1990: 199-205); cf. Väyrynen (2009b: 114-5).

<sup>40</sup>See e.g. Ross (1930: ch. 2), Hare (1972), Shafer-Landau (1997), Gert (1998), McKeever and Ridge (2006: ch. 7), and Hooker (2008).

<sup>41</sup>Not all exceptionless generalizations count as genuine principles. Some are merely accidentally true and lack the requisite modal and explanatory implications.

<sup>42</sup>This argument is due to McKeever and Ridge (2006: chs. 6-7). For critical discussion, see Schroeder (2009)

other features (such as that they are cases of lying, killing or the like), then moral knowledge in particular cases requires appropriate sensitivity to these underlying features. If holism is true, this sensitivity must concern not only considerations that are reasons but also enablers, disablers, and so on. Unless there were only finitely many factors for moral standards to list and for us to check, cognitively limited beings like ourselves couldn't have moral knowledge, since we couldn't reliably judge whether various considerations are undefeated reasons.<sup>43</sup> But more remains to be said about why epistemological considerations should constrain the complexity of moral facts.

Forms of generalism that seek exceptionless moral principles go naturally with the “deductive-nomological” (D-N) model of explanation (Hempel and Oppenheim 1948). If (successful) explanation consists in a sound deductive argument whose conclusion is the explanans and whose premises are the explanandum consisting in a covering law or principle that is essential to the validity of the argument plus a set of initial conditions, then explanation requires exceptionless principles. (If the only exceptionless principles were contributory, then we could have D-N explanations of *pro tanto* moral verdicts but not overall verdicts.) But the D-N model of explanation faces well-known problems that aren't distinctive to ethics.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, even if the D-N model worked in explaining why (say) some action is *pro tanto* wrong, that wouldn't yet tell us how to explain why the features which the principle figuring in that explanation identifies as wrong-making are wrong-makers.

What other models of explanation might be available to generalists? A different option for those forms of generalism that are compatible with holism is to allow that the list of potential

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and Väyrynen (2009b).

<sup>43</sup>If the list of disablers and enablers ended up too complex to be cognitively manageable to humans, then the resulting standards might fail to function as practical guides.

<sup>44</sup>Good surveys can be found in Salmon (1989) and Ruben (1990: ch. 6). Particularists sometimes criticize generalism on the grounds that good explanations needn't be deductive or “guarantee” the facts being explained; see Dancy (2000), Little (2000), and Leibowitz (2011). Such criticisms don't apply to the weaker forms of generalism discussed below.

exceptions and qualifications might be open-ended and not fully specifiable, but then argue that general moral claims can count as genuine principles even if they are “hedged” in some way that tolerates exceptions.<sup>45</sup> Not just any hedges would do, of course. If “Breaking promises is wrong, other things being equal” amounted merely to the claim that breaking promises is wrong, except when it isn’t, then it couldn’t explain when or why breaking promises is wrong. But many philosophers accept that the special sciences, such as biology and psychology, feature genuine explanatory laws which permit exceptions. Some argue that the same is true of morality: such claims as “In suitable conditions, lying is wrong” or “All else equal, pain is bad” can state (contributory) principles even if there is nothing wrong with some lies or nothing bad about some instances of pain, so long as their hedges are informative. This grants to particularists that substantive moral generalities may have exceptions, but not that principles play no fundamental theoretical role. Such forms of generalism will require some non-deductive model of explanation on which principles nonetheless do some crucial explanatory work.

How might hedged principles be explanatory if they permit exceptions? Some take the “un-exceptional” cases where pain is bad, lying wrong and so on, as basic and argue that exceptions can then be explained in terms of deviations from them (Lance and Little 2006a; 2006b). But again the burdens of explanation might run deeper: just as the moral status of an action requires explanation in terms of its other features, why those other features bear on its moral status in the ways they do might itself require explanation. Consider an example. If a government policy is bad because it increases the inequality of well-being, perhaps there should also be some explanation of why such inequality has negative moral import in the first place. (It seems legitimate to wonder why inequality isn’t morally irrelevant instead.) Such an explanation might well turn on features which aren’t manifested by all instances of inequality. For instance, perhaps unequal distributions of well-being are bad when and because of some such deeper moral flaws as that they are unfair or not to everyone’s benefit. Exceptional cases might

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<sup>45</sup>See Pietroski (1993), Lance and Little (2006b; 2007), and Väyrynen (2006; 2009b).

then be explained in the same stroke by the absence of the very same features whose presence explains why inequality is bad, when it is. Perhaps inequality as such isn't bad when it doesn't result from some unfairness or when it makes everyone better off than they would otherwise be. Some generalists argue that the best account of this kind of explanation delivers principles which incorporate the common explanatory basis of both moral reasons and their enablers and disablers.<sup>46</sup> Grasping such principles might also improve our reliability in detecting reasons, the absence of enablers, the presence of disablers, and so on.

Hedged moral principles would support non-deductive explanations both of the moral status of actions and of why considerations count as reasons, enablers, disablers, and so on. Such explanations aren't well understood as inductive or statistical, and *ceteris paribus* explanations remain controversial in general (Väyrynen 2009b; Leibowitz 2011). So these are explanations in search of a model. Many neglected questions arise in specifying what a suitable model would have to look like. One is precisely how the explanatory role of moral principles with respect to particular moral facts should be understood. But even short of a suitable general model of explanation, it might be possible to show that explanations involving hedged principles can have various hallmarks of good explanations, such as a certain degree of robustness across counterfactual variation in the circumstances and the power to unify some seemingly disparate set of phenomena. That would provide some initial support, or at least motivation, for a generalist account of reasons and other particular moral facts.

What model of normative explanation should particularists endorse? They tend to grant that if some consideration is a moral reason to  $\phi$  in one context but not another, this requires explanation. One suggestion is that normative explanations seek the kind of unifying structure of the particular circumstances at hand which is characteristic of a (coherent) narrative (Dancy 1993: 106, 112-4). But so far this suggestion remains impressionistic, and other models

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<sup>46</sup>Väyrynen (2006; 2009b) and Robinson (2006; 2011) develop two (otherwise very different) accounts of this kind.

that rely in no way even on hedged principles remain to be articulated and defended. Other suggestions from philosophers who identify themselves as particularists turn on non-deductive models of explanation which appeal to some kind of generalities.<sup>47</sup> In that case generalism and particularism might not be committed to crucially different general models of explanation. But, either way, certain ways forward in the generalism-particularism debate are sensitive to general issues about explanation. Work on their bearing on the debate has barely begun.

## 7. Moral Principles and Practical Guidance

In closing I'll turn briefly to the practical role of moral principles as guides. Some of these are corollaries of theoretical considerations such as the argument from holism. If moral reasons were context-sensitive in some way that principles cannot capture, then relying on principles for guidance might be more likely than not to make agents go morally astray. It might, for instance, encourage the thought that if a consideration was a reason to  $\phi$  in one case, then it will be a reason to  $\phi$  in others – precisely what holism says we cannot rely on. Generalism is untouched by this argument if it is compatible with holism. (But recall that holist generalism will require a more complicated program in normative ethics than traditional forms of generalism.)

Reasons holism seems easiest to accommodate if we take practical reasoning to be non-monotonic. Holism says that a reason statement that holds relative to some set of circumstances  $\psi$  may no longer hold relative to  $\{\psi, C\}$ , for some additional circumstance  $C$ . A classically deductive inference isn't defeasible in this way: once such an inference is valid, it stays valid with the addition of further information. By contrast non-monotonic inference is such that previously drawn conclusions may be withdrawn given further information, although all the original premises are retained.<sup>48</sup> Reasons holism may be a stronger claim than the claim that

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<sup>47</sup>See especially Little (2000) and Lance and Little (2006a; 2006b; 2007).

<sup>48</sup>Non-monotonicity is relevant also to the explanatory role of moral principles discussed in §6. Explanations that may be destroyed by the addition of irrelevant information seem to be well understood as non-monotonic. Explanations supported by hedged principles would seem to be of this kind.

practical reasoning is non-monotonic, since the latter doesn't require the structural distinctions drawn by holism (Dancy 2004: 80). But the converse is plausible: non-monotonicity seems like the appropriate model for practical reasoning if holism is true. There is, however, no reason to suppose that this supports particularist accounts of moral reasoning over holist forms of generalism which appeal to exception-tolerating principles.<sup>49</sup>

One might still worry about the practicality of moral principles, however. Moral principles might be able to accommodate reasons holism only by becoming too complex to provide adequate guidance. (Non-monotonicity subjects practical reasoning to potentially vast informational complexity.) But the theoretical role of principles as standards may come apart from their practical role as guides.<sup>50</sup> What counts as a valuable guide depends on contingent facts about humans in a way that the content of correct moral standards may very well not. A rule that is too simple to be accurate and explanatory with respect to all actual and possible cases in its scope might still be a valuable guide precisely if it oversimplifies in useful ways, even if it also sometimes leads to error.<sup>51</sup> For instance, "Killing is wrong" can be a reliable heuristic guide in the actual world even if what is fundamentally wrong with killing is some more specific feature not possessed by all killings and even if very many killings indeed are permissible in hypothetical Mad Max worlds. The sort of informational complexity to which reasons holism may subject us therefore needn't compromise the availability of principles understood as guides.

Another prominent particularist worry about principles as guides is that relying on principles tends to direct our attention only to the features which already figure in our principles. This might be thought easily to lead us to miss morally relevant features which we would have noticed, had we only given the details and nuances of the particular case the kind of attentive

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<sup>49</sup>For discussion, see Väyrynen (2004), Thomas (2011), and, especially, Horty (2007; 2012). On the logic of reasons generally, see Nair and Horty, 'The Logic of Reasons', in this volume.

<sup>50</sup>Many generalists have long acknowledged this point. For the particularly clear case of utilitarianism, see e.g. Sidgwick (1907: 78, 121, 413) and Bales (1971).

<sup>51</sup>See e.g. Sunstein (2005), McKeever and Ridge (2006: chs. 8-9), and Väyrynen (2008).

examination which particularists think can be sufficient for reliably acting well.<sup>52</sup> Relying on principles instead of trying to cultivate the kind of moral sensitivity to particularities which marks the virtuous person is all too likely to breed moral laziness, rigidity or narrow-mindedness in imperfect humans. The particularists' recommended antidote is "principle abstinence".<sup>53</sup>

Some generalists respond that principles are more useful than anything particularism offers in ensuring the benefits of interpersonal assurance, coordination and the like (Hooker 2000; 2008). Others respond, more directly to the point of the objection, that principles may be able to provide reliable guidance even if their guidance is fallible and doesn't take the form of a rigid check-list of considerations. Generalists can agree that the kinds of sensitivity to reasons and skill of judgment on which particularists insist are necessary, though perhaps not sufficient, for acting well. Generalists can also accommodate the evidence from cognitive science that people's moral decisions are often not consciously based on principles represented in propositional form.<sup>54</sup>

Principles might still do important work even if they didn't figure explicitly in the content of our deliberations but instead played a tacit or implicit regulative role that might not be easily amenable to verbal expression. Their guiding role might be, for instance, a kind of constraint satisfaction. In accepting a principle one accepts certain constraints on one's decisions and actions. Principles might, for instance, frame our deliberations without figuring explicitly in their content. To a rough first approximation, we might understand the acceptance of a moral principle as an internalization of a stable ideal or commitment that shapes one's responsiveness to reasons, thereby involving a settled disposition to make certain judgments in the circumstances with which the principle is concerned.<sup>55</sup> (No doubt tweaks are required to deal with various

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<sup>52</sup>It seems fair to ask particularists to provide more evidence in support of this worry than they have so far done. Zamzow (2015) argues that in fact empirical evidence counts against particularism here.

<sup>53</sup>See McNaughton (1988: 62, 190-3), Dancy (1993: 64, 67), and, perhaps, McDowell (1979).

<sup>54</sup>For discussion, see McKeever and Ridge (2006: ch. 9) and Väyrynen (2008). See also Dworkin (1995).

<sup>55</sup>See e.g. Väyrynen (2008; 2009b) and Albrecht (2013). Jordan (2013) suggests that virtues, too, can play the sort of structuring role envisaged for principles here. The relationship between moral principles and the capacity and activity of moral judgment is discussed at length in Albrecht (2014). Older valuable discussions

complicated epistemic situations.) Insofar as one can commit oneself to ideals (such as fairness, honesty and the like) without fully knowing just how they are best conceived or what exactly they imply in particular situations, the acceptance of a principle so understood would seem to bring with it also a commitment to further cultivating one's sensitivities and judgment.

One challenge to particularists is to explain how we are able to learn from moral experience. The typical reply is that experience can inform our judgments in new cases at least by providing data about what features can be morally relevant and what sort of relevance they can have in different cases; such data might also support the classification of new cases without appeal to a prior generalization.<sup>56</sup> But getting from such information to accurate judgments of particular cases would seem to be quite complicated under particularism – at least outside normal contexts, where the need for guidance is most pressing. So the worry arises whether particularists can offer valuable guidance to that multitude of us who are still trying to refine our moral sensitivities and judgment and to advance on our path towards practical wisdom.

Particularists regard describing someone as “a person of principle” as criticism, not praise. But already the quick sketch above suggests that relying on principles that are more than mere rules of thumb for guidance needn't mean dogmatism, rigidity or narrow-mindedness. As a view about the structure of morality, generalism has no commitment to any particular substantive view about the content of the correct moral principles. Nor need it recommend people to adhere dogmatically to the principles they accept. Fundamentalists and fanatics notwithstanding, many people are uncertain about at least some of the moral views they hold and regard some others as capable of refinement and improvement. Generalists no less than particularists can acknowledge that our actual moral outlooks are works in progress and that resolving uncertainty, mistakes and disagreements about particular moral principles requires thinking hard about a wide range of notoriously messy and complicated moral problems. All sides can agree that the best remedy for poor moral judgment is better moral judgment. It seems too early to conclude

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in this vicinity include O'Neill (1996) and various papers in Herman (1993).

<sup>56</sup>See Harman (2005) and Leibowitz (2014), as well as Dancy (2004: ch. 8).

that better moral judgment isn't judgment guided in part by moral principles.

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