SOME VARIETIES OF PARTICULARISM*  

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ABSTRACT: Analytic particularism claims that judgments of moral wrongness are about particular acts rather than general principles. Metaphysical particularism claims that what makes true moral judgments true is not general principles but nonmoral properties of particular acts. Epistemological particularism claims that studying particular acts apart from general principles can justify beliefs in moral judgments. Methodological particularism claims that we will do better morally in everyday life if we look carefully at each particular decision as it arises and give up the search for a complete moral theory. This paper raises problems for each of these versions of particularism.

Key words: ethics, moral philosophy, particularism, logical form, epistemology, metaphysics, moral methodology.

Particularism is popular. It has been espoused recently by Jonathan Dancy (1993), John McDowell (1998), David McNaughton (1988), and many feminists, including Margaret Walker (1989). There are also honorable ancestors from Sartre (1956) all the way back to Aristotle. Still, recent particularists have developed the view more thoroughly than ever before.

When a label applies to so many philosophers, it should not be surprising to find that it covers many very different views. So the first step must be to define precisely what particularism claims.

Scope

The kind of particularism that interests me here is a theory about judgments, which include linguistic assertions as well as mental beliefs and thoughts. More specifically, particularism is about moral judgments rather than about aesthetic or prudential judgments. Even more specifically, it is...
about moral judgments of actions. There are corresponding views about people, character traits, institutions, and so on, but the particularism that concerns me is about which actions are morally right or wrong, obligatory or forbidden, good or bad, and so on.

What unites particularists is their claim that such moral judgments are not and should not be based on general principles (or rules). But which kinds of principles do they oppose? And what is the alternative to principles?

**Analytic Particularism**

Its very name suggests that particularism is the claim that all such moral judgments are basically about particular actions. However, that claim is almost incoherent. Davidson (1980a) has shown that action sentences have to be analyzed with quantifiers, and I have argued that deontic logic falls into paradoxes unless judgments about obligations and what ought to be done are analyzed with operators quantified on action sentences (Sinnott-Armstrong 1985). If so, even a very specific moral judgment that Sarah morally ought to paint Tom’s house on this Sunday afternoon at 3 P.M. must be analyzed as the claim that there morally ought to exist some act by Sarah that is an act of painting Tom’s house and that occurs on this Sunday afternoon at 3 P.M. What she ought to do is some act of a kind. So even this very specific judgment is not about any particular act. Indeed, since every moral obligation can be fulfilled by more than one act, no moral judgment is basically about only one particular act.

Past-tense moral judgments might seem to be an exception. For example, the moral judgment “Sarah’s act of painting Tom’s house last Sunday was morally obligatory” seems to be about the particular act that Sarah did. However, although Sarah did fulfill her obligation by means of one particular act, she could have fulfilled it by a slightly different act (say, by starting a minute earlier or on a different side), so Sarah was not obligated to do the particular act that she did. This variability can be represented by analyzing this judgment as “Sarah did an act of painting Tom’s house last Sunday, and Sarah was morally obligated to do some act of painting Tom’s house last Sunday.” Such judgments are not basically about only one particular act. They are implicitly universal, and so can be seen as implying a principle in a minimal way. Action theory and deontic logic alone are enough to refute any variety of particularism that claims otherwise.

**Metaphysical Particularism**

Particularists will complain that I have mischaracterized their position. Maybe I have. Maybe particularism is not about logical form. Instead, it

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2 See the quotation from Aristotle in note 1.

3 Specificity contrasts with generality, but particularity contrasts with universalizability, as Hare (1963, 38–40) pointed out.
might be about moral metaphysics (55, 74), and specifically about what makes some moral judgments true or about which properties make some acts morally right or wrong, good or bad, and so forth. The question is then: What is it that makes Sarah morally obligated to paint Tom’s house? Particularists say that it is not general principles, but we still need to know what they think it is instead.

Particularists might not all agree, but Dancy claims that moral properties result from nonmoral properties (73–77). If so, then Sarah’s act of painting Tom’s house has the moral property of being obligatory by virtue of having some nonmoral property, presumably the property of fulfilling her promise.

This relation of resultance would entail moral principles, if the same property that results in a moral obligation in Sarah’s case also had to result in a moral obligation in every other case. That is what particularists deny. They claim that the same nonmoral base properties result in different moral properties in different contexts. So particularists avoid moral principles by being contextualists, that is, by insisting that the relation of resultance varies from context to context (114–15).

At one level, this contextualism is obvious. What makes it true that Sarah ought to paint Tom’s house is the fact that she promised to paint Tom’s house. But that same fact does not make it true that Sarah ought to paint Tom’s house in a different context where Tom changed his mind and told her not to paint his house. Moreover, if Sarah promises to paint Tom’s house tomorrow, but Tom’s house burns down today, then it is no longer morally obligatory for Sarah to paint Tom’s house tomorrow. Whether her promise results in an obligation to paint Tom’s house tomorrow thus depends on features of the context, such as whether Tom’s house burns down, whether he tells her not to paint it, and so on. Nobody should deny any of this.

Dancy gives a string of examples like these. Within this string, he claims, first, that I usually have a moral reason to return to you a book that I borrowed from you, but if I discover that you stole the book from the library, then “I have no reason at all to return it to you.” Second, “that an action is a lie is commonly a reason not to do it [but in a game that would be spoiled without lying] it is a reason in favour.” Third, pleasure is usually a reason that supports an activity, but “pleasure at a wrong action compounds the wrong.” Fourth, an action is usually worse for causing pain, but “if someone deserves pain, the infliction of that pain can hardly be diminished in value by the pain inflicted.” Fifth, “the fact that an action is against the law is [usually] a reason against doing it,” but “[i]t might also be a reason for doing it, if this sort of behavior is not one that should be regulated by law” (60–62).

Such examples do not, however, rule out moral principles. All they rule
out is overly simple moral principles. More complex principles will avoid such counterexamples. In Dancy’s first example, even if I have no reason to return to you the stolen library book that I borrowed from you, one can still hold a principle that I always have a moral reason to return to you *your property* that I borrowed from you. Second, even if I have no reason not to lie in a game that requires lying, the players consented to play the game, so one can still hold a principle that I always have a moral reason not to lie *without consent*. Third, even if pleasure at a wrong action compounds the wrong, one can still hold a principle that there is always a moral reason to cause *innocent* pleasure. Fourth, even if the value of deserved punishment is not diminished by the pain inflicted, one can still hold a principle that there is always a moral reason not to inflict pain on *innocent* people. Fifth, even if a law against an action is a reason to do that action when the law is unjust (and breaking that law will shorten its life without causing too much harm), one can still hold a principle that there is always a moral reason not to break a *just* law. So such examples show that principles should not be formulated too broadly, but they do not show that no exceptionless principles should or could ever be formulated.

Admittedly, these more complex principles include moral terms in their exception clauses. We still need to specify when pleasures and people are innocent, when laws are just, and so on. However, my point here is just that such examples by themselves are not enough to show that these moral terms cannot be ultimately replaced by nonmoral terms or, hence, that exceptionless principles are impossible.

Of course, Dancy gives more than a few examples. He also claims that the resultant base and the relevant factors are “naturally shapeless” (76). This seems to mean that people who lack the resulting moral concept cannot discern or see what is common to the items in the nonmoral resultant base that are classified together under the resulting moral concept (79) and also cannot discern the “interrelationships of the various properties” (76). This claim would be falsified if one could formulate exceptionless universal principles that go from the nonmoral resultant base (in the antecedent) to the moral properties (in the consequent). For example, if there is always some (possibly overridden) moral reason not to kill any adult human, then someone who lacks the concept of a moral reason can still see that all acts of killing adult humans get classified together. So the denial of natural shape seems to be just another way of denying principles.

These denials are analogous to Donald Davidson’s anomalous monism (Davidson 1980b). Just as Davidson allows token identities but denies type identities and bridging laws between the mental and the physical, so Dancy allows token identities but no type identities or bridging laws between the moral and its nonmoral base (116). This kind of view seems as coherent in ethics as it is in the philosophy of mind, but such coherence alone is no reason to adopt such a view. Davidson gives an argument for viewing mental events in this way. Dancy owes us a similar argument to
show why the base for moral properties must be naturally shapeless. I found no such argument.

Nonetheless, a challenge has been laid down. To meet this challenge, we need to show some shape in the principles that link the nonmoral base with moral properties or facts. So I will suggest a simple outline. If Tom tells Sarah that she does not have to keep her promise, since he can find another painter if she wants him to, then this cancels Sarah’s reason to paint Tom’s house without giving her any reason to do anything to the contrary. When a fact has this force, it is an *underminer*. In contrast, if Tom tells Sarah not to paint his house, this undermines her reason to paint his house and also gives her a reason not to paint his house. Such facts not only cancel but reverse the force of the reason, so they can be called *reversers*. Third, the fact that Sarah broke her leg removes her responsibility for not painting the house. When a fact has this force, it is an *excuse*. The fact that Sarah’s daughter is very sick is a conflicting reason for Sarah to take her daughter to the hospital instead of painting Tom’s house. If this new reason overrides her reason to paint his house, it is an *overrider*. Overriders, underminers, reversers, and excuses are, then, all reason *defeaters*.

This list of defeaters is hard to spell out in general and in detail. One complication is that defeaters themselves can be defeated. If Sarah promises to paint Tom’s house, and the house burns down, but Tom tells Sarah that he wants her to paint the ashes and rubble anyway, maybe then she does have a reason to paint it, so her reason is not undermined after all. Maybe not. It is not obvious what to say about such odd cases. That makes it hard to specify exactly when a fact counts as an underminer or, more generally, a defeater. Nonetheless, even if some are hard to classify, different kinds of facts can still be different kinds of defeaters because they have different effects on reasons.

Even without being fully spelled out, this classification of defeaters shows what is wrong with Dancy’s argument against what he calls “the doctrine of universalizability.” He states this doctrine in two parts:

i. If we judge one action right, we must judge any other relevantly similar action right.

ii. An action is said to be relevantly similar if, roughly, it shares with the first action all the properties which were reasons why the first action was right. (57; cf. 80)

This doctrine is said to fail in cases like that in which Sarah promises to paint Tom’s house. If everything else remains the same, but the house does not burn down, then the right thing for Sarah to do is paint Tom’s house. This is not the right thing to do when the house does burn down (if Tom

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5 This list extends my list in Sinnott-Armstrong 1988 (41-43, 93–94, 98–101).
does not tell her to paint it anyway). Yet Sarah’s reason to paint the house is that she promised. The fact that the house did not burn down is not a reason or even part of a reason for her to paint the house (81). Why not? Because not burning down is a background condition. Background conditions do not count as reasons any more than they count as causes. Just as the absence of water is not a cause of a match lighting, so the house not burning down is not a reason to paint it (24, 66). This refutes (i) on the assumption that reasons are the only relevant features, as (ii) claims.

A defender of universalizability is bound to respond that reasons are not the only relevant features. Even if the fact that the house did not burn down is not a reason for Sarah to paint the house, it is still relevant in another way, because it is the absence of an underminer. The relevance of underminers refutes (ii), since an action is not relevantly similar to another action unless it is similar in all relevant respects, so it has to be similar not only in the reasons for it but also in the underminers. Indeed, since all defeaters as well as reasons are relevant, we need to rewrite the second part of universalizability like this:

ii*. An action is relevantly similar if, roughly, it shares with the first action all the properties which were reasons why the first action was right, as well as all the underminers, reversers, excuses, and overriders.

The revised doctrine of universalizability that combines (i) with (ii*) is not subject to any of Dancy’s counterexamples. Moreover, (i) plus (ii*) seems closer to the views of traditional defenders of universalizability, such as Sidgwick and Hare, since they did not endorse Dancy’s (ii).

In addition to saving universalizability, my classification of defeaters also shows one way to qualify moral principles so as to avoid exceptions. Instead of saying that there is always a moral reason not to kill any adult human, just say that there is always a moral reason not to kill any adult human when there is no underminer, reverser, excuse, or overrider. Maybe we also ought to obey the law, keep our promises, avoid causing pain, and so on, as long as there is no underminer, reverser, excuse, or overrider. Such qualified principles are fully compatible with Dancy’s contextualism, since they allow the existence and force of reasons to vary with the context, which includes defeaters.

Despite their context-sensitivity, these principles give some shape to the resultance base. Principles with ceteris paribus clauses would not do the trick, since such open-ended principles are almost empty without any way to tell when the other things are equal (82). In contrast, the definitions of underminers, reversers, excuses, and overriders place limits on exceptions. If you demand more shape, I could subdivide, for example, by distinguishing consequential overriders from deontological overriders, and so on. Much more could and should be done to explain the metaphysics and epistemology of various kinds of defeaters (96–104).
Nonetheless, my simple list of defeaters at least points toward one way to formulate moral principles without exceptions.

Dancy will complain that my definitions of defeaters refer to moral reasons, so principles whose antecedents refer to defeaters do not take us from purely nonmoral antecedents to moral consequents. What Dancy claims is not shapelessness, but natural shapelessness, which is the claim that the shape of the resultance base for moral reasons cannot be described in purely natural or nonmoral terms (76). This challenge is hard to meet, because it seems to call for a general theory that uses only nonmoral terms to specify exactly which facts count as underminers, reversers, excuses, and overriders in all cases.

Nonetheless, even in the absence of any general theory, some cases seem clear. There is a moral reason not to kill a normal adult human (1) intentionally and on purpose when one suffers from no false belief, compulsion, or coercion, (2) when this person did not consent and did not cause death or disability or unusual pain to anyone, and (3) when this killing would not prevent any pain, disability, or death for anyone else. Clause (1) rules out any excuse, clause (2) rules out any underminer or reverser, and clause (3) rules out any overrider. Refinements are probably needed, but the basic idea should be clear: Somehow one can use nonmoral terms to describe facts that are sufficient (even if not necessary) to rule out any kind of defeater. This yields principles that go from purely nonmoral antecedents, like (1)–(3), to moral consequents in some cases. That is enough to reveal some shape in part of the nonmoral resultance base for moral properties. So that base is not all naturally shapeless.

This move might seem to miss something, which suggests that the real issue is not shapelessness. The real issue is incompleteness. Even if the resultance base has some shape, it might not have shape in every corner.

Dancy claims, “we can give no sense to the idea that we might now have finished the list of moral principles or of properties that can make a difference sometimes” (67). There might be other relevant kinds of factors in addition to underminers, reversers, excuses, and overriders. And no matter how long are our lists of facts within each category, there always might be more underminers, reversers, excuses, and overriders that are not on our lists. Consequently, “it will be impossible to codify any moral maxim in a way that will render it invulnerable to the vagaries of future situations” (92).

To assess these claims, we need to separate completeness in principle from completeness in practice. I found no argument by Dancy that even begins to show that the list of relevant factors cannot in principle be complete. No set of examples can show that much. No uncontroversial view about the nature of morality implies incompleteness in principle. So why believe it?

Consider the dialectical situation: A generalist holds a theory with a long list of defeaters shaped into groups. A particularist comes up and
claims, “This example shows you need another item on your list.” A generalist can always respond, “No, it doesn’t. Your moral judgment about the example is incorrect.” Alternatively, a generalist can respond, “OK, I’ll add another item to my list.” A particularist can then come up with more examples, but a generalist again has these two possible responses – and so on. Some generalists might not be ingenious enough to figure out how to redefine their principles or add to their list of defeaters. Or they might just get frustrated and give up. But that does not show that it is impossible in principle for generalists to keep adding qualifications and defeaters until no more are needed. After all, such changes are needed only to capture intuitions, and more complex theories might not conflict with any strong intuitions. Maybe Dancy’s own intuitions are such that no list could ever in principle completely capture his intuitions, but that would hardly show that completeness is impossible in principle for any adequate moral theory.

What about completeness in practice? Particularists seem to think that no moral theory has gone very far toward listing all of the morally relevant factors. Maybe so, although utilitarians and possibly Gert (1999) will claim that they have. Still, this does not show that completeness cannot ever be attained in practice. Secular ethical theory is too young to feel sure about this issue. So it is hard to see any reason to admit uncodifiability even just in practice.

Suppose Dancy is right, and complete codifiability is not attainable in practice. What does that show? It shows limits on human abilities. It does not show anything about the metaphysical structure of moral reality unless one assumes that there can be no more to morality than what everyone knows already. Dancy never endorses or argues for any such assumption. The metaphysical version of particularism remains unsupported.

**Epistemological Particularism**

Incompleteness in practice still might seem to have implications for moral epistemology, specifically for whether or when we can be epistemically justified in believing a moral claim. To be justified in believing that an act is morally wrong, we need to be justified in believing that no fact undermines or overrides or reverses the moral reasons that make the act wrong. If we cannot in practice ever complete the list of relevant facts, then we cannot in practice ever be certain of any of our judgments about what is morally wrong. We may still reach the conditional conclusion that, if there are no defeaters, then the act is wrong. But if we cannot tell whether or not there are defeaters, we cannot tell whether the act categorically is morally wrong. This seems to support Dancy’s claim that “the moral relevance of a property in a new case cannot be predicted from its relevance elsewhere” (57; cf. 60).

I do not disagree if all Dancy means is that our prediction cannot be
certain. Dancy suggests this weak position when he says, for example, “we must be careful to retain the sense that considerations may not be functioning here as they have previously done, and so not allow ourselves to be driven too easily to fit what we say here to what we have said on other occasions” (63; my emphasis). If “may” means “might for all we know” and hence refers to epistemic uncertainty, then this quotation calls for recognizing fallibility. We should all answer that call.

After all, almost no predictions are certain. Even physicists cannot be certain that there are no forces that science has not discovered. And even if we had a complete list of moral defeaters in hand, we still could not be certain that our list is complete, so we could not be certain of unconditional moral judgments. So let’s give up the quest for certainty, as Dewey named it. We can still use a theory with a well-worked-out list of defeaters to get some justification for our moral beliefs.

This justification can be adequate and even strong. If we get a list that fits every case that either we or our critics can come up with, and if we and they have tried long and hard to find flaws in the theory, then we have strong reason to believe that the list is complete, even if we admit that we cannot be certain. Maybe few people’s moral beliefs are justified in this way, but it still seems possible, or at least Dancy has not shown otherwise.

**Methodological Particularism**

Some particularists will claim that I have misunderstood them yet again. Maybe I have. Maybe they are making a different point about moral methodology, namely, that we should not “search for a set of principles” (56). I take this as a piece of practical advice in living our everyday moral lives. Even if we could justify our moral beliefs by basing them on general theories, why should we want that kind of justification? We might do better morally if we quit looking for a complete theory and just look carefully at each particular decision as it arises.

This suspicion of theory might be based on several observations. First, in cases where the correct moral judgment is obvious, theories do not and should not increase our confidence in a moral belief. Second, any universal generalization is less likely to be true than the cases on which it is based. Third, incomplete theories sometimes lead us to overlook relevant facts (64). Just as too much aesthetic theory can blind a viewer to the aesthetic quality of a painting, poem, or song, so too much moral theory can blind an agent to the moral quality of an act. These are all serious challenges to the practical usefulness of general moral theories. They all need to be met. But I will not try to meet them here, since that would require a full-scale moral epistemology and methodology.

Here I will just ask: What is the alternative method if we cannot cite any universal moral principle? It seems that particularists can only appeal to
bare direct intuition of a particular case. This creates a variety of practical problems.

An intrapersonal problem arises when someone studies a case in depth but still does not see whether or not an act is morally wrong. Moral principles can be useful in some such cases for some people to help them decide what to believe about what they should do.

The most serious problems are interpersonal. Suppose Ken believes that same-sex marriage is unnatural and morally wrong, so it should not be recognized by law. John disagrees on all counts, but he is a particularist. What can John say to Ken? He can say, “Look again” or “Think more about it” or “You would see if you were more sensitive and reliable or had better training” or just “Trust me.” But this will hardly impress Ken, who could say the same to John with the same grounds (compare 89–90). Moreover, John’s encounter with Ken will give John some reason to doubt his own moral judgment. Our vision becomes questionable when others see what we do not see. Our moral judgment seems to be subject to the same tests of intersubjective agreement. John might be right even if everyone else agrees with Ken, but disagreement gives John some reason to doubt that he is right.

Such doubts can be counteracted in two ways. John might cite a moral principle that no act is morally wrong when it has or lacks a certain general feature. But John cannot cite any such first-order reason if he remains a particularist. Particularists can cite moral principles if “a moral principle amounts [only] to a reminder of the sort of importance that a property can have in suitable circumstances” (67; Dancy’s emphasis). But that kind of principle cannot be used against Ken, who may respond that the property of being same-sex has significance in the case of marriage, regardless of what significance it can have or lack in other situations.

Dancy might respond that a particularist can use arguments from analogy as long as they are seen as providing “enlightenment, not coercion” (65). However, this cannot help if Ken sees the analogy but is not enlightened. Moreover, this gives no explanation of why analogies are more useful with morality than with colors. One cannot argue that Ken’s neighbor’s house is red, so Ken’s house must be red; but one can argue that Ken’s neighbor has a reason not to lie (without consent, etc.), so Ken also has a reason not to lie (without consent, etc.). It is the peculiar force of analogies in moral reasoning that a particularist cannot explain or admit.

The remaining possibility is to cite circumstances under which a moral judgment is reliable (that is, probably true). But how could a particularist formulate such a second-order reason to believe in his own reliability? Dancy says, “the person on whom we can rely... is someone who gets it right case by case” (64); so, to show that he is reliable, John might cite past cases where he got it right. But Ken could simply question whether John really did get it right in those cases, at least whenever they are relevant to same-sex marriage. John could not show that he was right in those
past cases any more than in the present case. So John and Ken are left with no good reason to believe that John is a reliable detector of moral wrongness (or its absence) in these kinds of circumstances. A particularist might be a reliable detector, but being reliable is not much use if one has no reason to believe that one is reliable and no way to show others that one is reliable. That is what a particularist lacks.

And that is what generality is supposed to add. If John could cite general principles, or if he could draw an analogy with interracial marriage, for example, then he would have some way to check his own intuition and to show others that he is reliable. His audience might be too bullheaded to accept his reasons, but at least he would have a reason to give. In contrast, without analogies or principles, all a particularist has to offer is bare intuition.

Particularists often respond that universal principles, analogies, and theories really cannot achieve these goals any better than particularism. Maybe not. But the failure of general theories does not show that particularism is defensible. If moral theory, analogy, and principle really get us nothing, then the conclusion should be moral skepticism, not moral particularism.

This conclusion is not to be despised. Indeed, I have argued for a limited version of moral skepticism (Sinnott-Armstrong 1996). But my goal here is not to argue for any skepticism. My main goals here have been, first, to distinguish different versions of particularism, so that Dancy can tell us which is his view (or, if his view is “none of the above,” what his view is). My second goal has been to raise problems for these various views so that Dancy can try to defend the ones he does believe in.

References


