Generalists and particularists debate the nature, existence and role of moral principles or generalizations. It seems fair to say that some form of generalism is the traditional and default view in ethical theory and that particularism is the challenger. What does the generalist believe? Some possibilities.

- There are true moral principles or generalizations. They may be absolute (e.g. lying is all-things-considered wrong) or contributory (e.g. lying is pro tanto wrong or is a wrong-making feature).
- These principles may need to be refined (e.g. lying is wrong in circumstances C or lying in circumstances C is pro tanto wrong).
- These principles may be exceptionless, or they may be hedged, including an “other things being equal” clause.
- It is the truth of such principles that explains the moral valence of individual people, actions, or situations.
- Moral principles can, do, and should guide moral reasoning, debate, and education.
- Being principled is a virtue.

Particularists deny some of these claims. There are stronger and weaker particularist theses. Some possibilities, arranged (roughly) from stronger to weaker.

- There are no true moral principles.
- There are no true contributory moral principles.
- There are no true absolute moral principles.
- There may be true moral principles, but they are few and recondite, and nothing hangs on their existence.
- The moral valence of particulars does not need explaining; if there are true moral principles, they are explained by moral particulars.
- Moral principles distort moral reasoning and education.
- Moral principles are not needed in moral reasoning or education.
- Being principled is a vice, not a virtue.
- Being principled is not a virtue.

DANCY ON PARTICULARISM

Dancy distinguishes two generalist opponents. An absolutist conception claims that a moral principle is an exceptionless claim that all actions of a certain type have a particular overall moral valence, whether deontic (permissible, forbidden, or obligatory) or axiological (good, bad).\(^1\) A contributory conception claims that a moral principle is an exceptionless claim that all actions of a certain type make an invariant contribution to the overall moral valence of the situations in which they occur.

The particularist denies both forms of generalism. The central contention is that moral variability is at odds with generalism. Generalists assert that all Fs are Gs. But while some Fs are G, this is not always so. Some Fs have no moral valence, and some Fs have a contrary moral valence. Consider the moral principle

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\(^1\) Dancy suggests that a Divine Command theory that embraces the Decalogue is a form of absolutism. But Divine Command theories, as such, are not committed to generalism, much less absolutist versions of generalism. Consider this formulation of Divine Command: x is morally good iff and because God approves of x. But if x ranges over individual actions, then Divine Command appears to be particularist, because moral valence is assigned individually to actions, and there is no reason why similar actions have to have the same valence. Similar remarks apply to the relation between dispositional theories of moral value and particularism, since this version of Divine Command just is a special case of a dispositional theory.
that lying is wrong. Understood as an absolutist claim, this implies that lying is always all-things-considered wrong. Even if this is sometime true, it is not always, perhaps not in the case of white lies. But while the permissibility of white lies undermines the absolutist conception of the simple lying principle, it need not undermine the contributory conception if white lies, though permissible, are pro tanto wrong. But we have a counterexample to even the contributory conception of the simple lying principle if there are lies that are not even prima facie wrong. Perhaps white lies are not even prima facie wrong. Or consider lying within a game, such as Diplomacy, that prizes lying. Here, it seems, lying is not even prima facie wrong.

An obvious generalist reply is to say that we can and should refine the simple lying principle by identifying the exceptional circumstances and incorporating them into a more complex form of the principle. This might be done with either an absolute or a contributory conception of moral principles. The complexification might take the form of brute enumeration of the exceptions, but that might result in an extremely complex, perhaps infinitely complex, moral principle. Better if there is principled statement of the conditions under which lying is wrong or pro tanto wrong. Perhaps lying is only wrong when it uses another as a means or in a way to which the other could not reasonably consent. We might think that some such principled complexification of the simple principle allows us to defuse the white lie and Diplomacy counterexamples. This would involve adding enabling conditions to our statement of the moral principle.

Dancy may wonder if we should have any confidence that we can find a complexification of the initial principle that is immune to counterexample. He suggests that particularism derives support from holism about reasons. But many forms of holism, especially those that regard it as an epistemological doctrine, do not imply that generalism is false. For instance, one might be a generalist recognizing ultimate morally relevant factors that explain the moral valence of particulars, while thinking that one justifies beliefs about which ultimate factors are correct, in part, by seeing which particular judgments the more general ones subsume and explain. On this picture, the correct metaphysical picture is top-down, but the correct epistemological picture is bottom-up or, better, bidirectional. My suspicion is that holism only implies particularism if it is committed to metaphysical thesis of systematic variability, in which case particularism can’t be supported by holism without begging the question.

A DEFENSE OF GENERALISM

Here is an outline of a form of generalism that tries to take on some particularist insights about variability while preserving the advantages of generalism.

1. Moral principles are statements of pro tanto or contributory moral factors (e.g. good-making or right-making features) that make an invariant contribution to the overall moral valence of an act or situation.
2. Most moral situations involve multiple moral factors, and an overall moral verdict depends on which factors are most important.
3. Like, Ross we should be skeptical that there are simple master priority rules specifying which moral factors always take precedence over which (i.e. skepticism that priority is type-specific, rather than token-specific).
4. Moral principles have enabling conditions that must be met if that factor is to make its contribution (e.g. only free and voluntary promises are pro tanto binding).
5. If enabling conditions cannot be finitely or conveniently specified, then even contributory principles must be formulated in a hedged way, containing an “other things being equal” clause.
6. In principle, enabling conditions could be folded into the specification of the moral principle.
7. Because moral principles state only contributory moral factors, their contribution to the moral valence of an act or situation is subject to interference and defeat from other moral factors in the situation.
8. If potential interference and defeat from other moral factors cannot be finitely or conveniently specified, then moral principles, understood as claims about overall moral valence, must always be hedged, containing an “other things being equal” clause.

Why accept some such version of generalism?
1. This sort of generalism allows us to explain the overall moral valence of acts and situations as a function of the contributions of individual moral factors via moral factor addition.
2. Moral factor addition seems to be a reasonable description of solipsistic moral reasoning, moral debate, and moral education.
3. It’s not clear why analogical reasoning has probative significance if relevant moral factors do not make an invariant contribution to overall moral valence. It’s not clear why the particularist should believe that analogical reasoning is reliable or that similar cases should be treated similarly.
4. Doesn’t the supervenience of the moral on the nonmoral imply some version of generalism? If the nonmoral features of an act or situation fix its moral valence, and two situations can’t differ in moral valence without differing in their nonmoral features, then we should conclude that some nonmoral features make an invariant contribution to overall moral valence and that moral properties are inherently general.

HEDGED MORAL PRINCIPLES

On this picture, principles need to be hedged if they are understood as making claims about overall moral valence. Värynyn’s hedged form of generalism bears some similarities to this picture, but I think it differs in certain ways. Värynyn seems to want hedged principles even if they are understood as contributory principles. He seems to think that there are cases in which contributory principles do not make an invariant contribution that should not be thought of as falsifying the generalization. My own view is that such cases should be thought of as identifying enabling conditions for the factor and that, at least in principle, once such conditions have been identified, they should, if possible, be folded into a more complex and complete specification of the factor, such that it will make an invariant contribution. I think Värynyn supposes that we might preserve the original simpler specification of the factor while accounting for these enabling conditions by hedging the contributory principle. He also wants to claim not only that the resulting hedged contributory principles are not falsified by cases in which other things are not equal but also that the hedging does not render the generalization vacuous.

Värynyn introduces the idea of a normative basis associated with various moral principles that explains what the rationale for the principle is and when deviations from the letter of the principle count as permissible exceptions and when they don’t. So, for example, in relation to the contributory principle that lying is a wrong-making feature of an act, one normative basis might identify the reason not to lie as involving the subversion of beneficial social practices involving trust, and another normative basis might identify the reason not to lie as involving not giving the target of the lie what she is owed. Each of these normative bases of the lying principle identify permissible exceptions to the simple lying principle, though presumably different ones. Consider Värynyn’s claim about permissible exceptions to the lying principle.

(Perm). For any action x and any circumstances C such that x is a lie but this fact is no reason not to do it in C, C constitutes a permissible exception to the status of something’s being a lie as a moral reason not to do it when, and because, x fails to instantiate the designated normative basis of the status of something’s being a lie as a moral reason not to do it [99].

If one can get past the tortuous formulation of this principle, I think it shows how important the notion of a normative basis is to Värynyn’s hedged generalism. It is the normative basis that explains when alleged exceptions to the generalization are not true exceptions and that implies that the hedging of the generalization does not render it vacuous.

The importance of the normative basis invites at least two questions, which JP will likely take up in his presentation. (1) Why not treat the normative basis of the simple principle as an enabling condition on the invariant contribution of the relevant factor and then fold it into a more complex and complete specification of the factor/principle? Wouldn’t this enable us to dispense with the ceteris paribus clause in the statement of contributory principles? (2) Does this mean that the normative basis is the true or more ultimate contributing principle and that the hedged contributing principle appealing to F is just a consequence or instance of the moral relevance of the normative basis?