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Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties

JONATHAN DANCY

This paper is about the non-existence of moral principles. Its conclusion is a thorough particularism, according to which our ethical decisions are made case by case, without the comforting support or awkward demands of moral principles. Defence of this position occurs at the end, unless it be a defence to show how a position naturally arises from the defects of its competitors.

There have been ethical particularists in the past, but their names are hardly legion. E. F. Carritt cast doubt on the need for and possibility of moral rules. Sartre is familiar for the doctrine that each choice is a new one which must be made without insincere appeal to the authority of former choices. Some remarks of Prichard's make it appear that he was sensitive to the attractions of the sort of position I shall outline. It is even possible, here and there, to appeal to the numinous shade of Wittgenstein.¹ And John McDowell's distrust of the role of principles in moral theory is at last beginning to be articulated. But by and large particularism has suffered neglect; and failing neglect, abuse. Sidgwick mentions it as a form of intuitionism, and quickly passes on. Rashdall styles it 'Unphilosophical Intuitionism' and says that it can hardly claim serious refutation; but as is common when a writer is faced with a view he thinks derisory, the refutation which Rashdall then provides is hardly serious. Frankena calls it 'Act-Deontology'; but most of his criticisms do no more than assume its falsehood.² All in all, the history of ethical particularism is far from edifying. That things should have been better, I hope to show by a sort of progress which starts from utilitarianism and eventually issues in full-blooded particularism.

Utilitarianism could be conceived as compatible with intuitionism, on the grounds that the former offers a criterion for truth in

1 Cf. Carritt, 1928, ch XIII; Prichard, 1949, pp. 14-17; Wittgenstein, 1968, §26.

2 Cf. Sidgwick, 1874, pp. 99-100; Rashdall, 1907, pp. 80-83; Frankena, 1963, p. 15.

moral judgement and the latter offers an account of the origin of that criterion. But in the original battle between the two views, the crucial difference was about the number of unreducible ethical principles. The Utilitarian was a monist, asserting the existence of only one principle. The Intuitionist was a pluralist, asserting the existence of many.

The utilitarian monist enjoys what is in many ways a healthy philosophical position. From the perspective with which this paper is concerned, his position has three advantages; though the importance and indeed the relevance of these advantages may not become clear until we have seen how his competitors get on without them. First, his approach is consistent, in the following sense: it will never yield contrary recommendations in a single case. For if there is only one principle, then perhaps only one property needs to be thought of as morally relevant; the question whether an action is our duty will depend only on the degree of presence or absence of that property at the end of the day. That other properties may affect the degree of presence of the crucial property is beside the point; we *may* if we wish think of these as secondarily relevant in some way, but we do not *need* to. The monist can get by with just one morally relevant property. Second, and consequently, this approach gives a possible account of what it is for a property to be morally relevant; a property is morally relevant iff the degree to which an action is right is determined by the degree to which it bears that property. Third, this approach offers room for various epistemological positions. We can claim direct knowledge of the Great Principle as a self-evident truth; we can claim to discover the truth of the Principle by intuitive induction from particular cases; or we can claim to know it as a contingent generalisation from past instances. So in these respects, at least, the utilitarian monist's position is healthy.

But monism, of the utilitarian variety or otherwise, suffers from one great disadvantage, which here I assert without argument. It is false. It just is not the case that there is only one morally relevant property, nor is there only one Great Principle in ethics.

Are the two bald assertions in the last sentence, for which in the present context I make no apology, assertions of the same form of pluralism? I shall take it here as I think all pluralists would, that there is a one-one correspondence between moral principles and morally relevant properties. Pluralists generally assume that if a property tells in favour of an action being a duty, it will tell in favour of any action that bears it. For such a property ϕ , there will be a

moral principle 'Promote ϕ acts', and any such principle will mention a property which is morally relevant.

If monism is false, whether in the utilitarian version or otherwise, pluralism must, it seems, be the answer. But ordinary pluralism seems to have none of the advantages of monism, while its disadvantages are equally severe. First is the problem of consistency. How is it possible for an agent with two ethical principles whose recommendations conflict in a particular case to retain both of them after the struggle? On the face of it, where one holds two principles which say respectively 'Promote ϕ acts!' and 'Eschew ψ acts!', when we have an act which, as is possible, is both ϕ and ψ , something has to give. (If one's principles were of indicative mood, an explicit contradiction would be generated, though this may not be in the best way to see the problem.) How can the pluralist make sense, then, of the co-tenability of two principles which suggest conflicting answers in an awkward case? Something must be said about the nature or logical content of moral principles to make it possible for him to surmount this obvious challenge.

The second difficulty for pluralism is found in the list of moral principles. If this list is indefinitely long, then quite apart from other problems we may have in understanding its nature we are immediately saddled with an epistemological choice. How are the principles known? The pluralist may adopt either a generalist or a particularist epistemology; he may say that the principles are directly known, or that they are 'seen in' particular cases.

Generalist epistemology has often taken the view that the principles are self-evident, but in my view the longer the list of principles, the less the likelihood that all of them are self-evident. (Remember that Sidgwick's attempt at pluralism foundered on the twin demands that all principles be both self-evident and consistent.) Suppose we start with a short list of extremely simple principles such as 'Actions that cause pleasure are right'. We can immediately recognise that some actions that cause pleasure are none the less wrong, and this leads us, as pluralists, to complicate our principles in the hope of catering for the recalcitrant cases. But quite apart from the difficulty of being reasonably sure that we have reached a formulation which will prove invulnerable in the future, there seems to come a point where it is no longer plausible to suppose that the elaborate principles to which we have come are self-evident. We might agree, after consideration, that they are *true*; but this is nothing to the point. Still, perhaps we can retain the

generalist view that these principles are directly known rather than derived from knowledge of particular cases, without asserting that they are self-evident, in any sense in which that term has been properly understood (e.g. they are not assented to as soon as proposed, nor assented to by all those who understand them).

Let us suppose that some form of generalist epistemology can survive the lack of self-evidence. The problem is to relate our general knowledge of principles to what we want to say about the moral properties of particular cases. The particular cases here cannot be seen as *tests* for the evaluation of principles, without abandoning generalism in epistemology. Principles are not like theories, for theories explain what is true in particular cases without determining it, while principles determine what is true in particular cases and explain it. So we discover what our particular duties are by relating our general knowledge to the nature of the particular case. In which case it is difficult to suppose that the nature of our particular duties, as revealed by this procedure, could ever cause us to reassess the principles from which those particular duties flow.

Those who, with me, find difficulties in such generalist epistemologies even after they have been shorn of claims for self-evidence may do so because they cannot imagine a situation in which particular cases are not tests for principles, as on a generalist approach they cannot be. All other accounts start from our knowledge of the particular case, saying that we 'see' the principle in the particular case by *intuitive induction*, or that we derive it by ordinary induction from a number of particular cases. This attempt to move from the particular to the general raises the same problem as that raised by generalism—a problem which is crucial to the argument of this paper. How are we to match what we want to say about what it is for a property to be morally relevant in a particular case to what we want to say about what it is for it to be generally morally relevant? To rely on intuitive induction is to suppose that we can see in a particular case that a property is generally morally relevant. How this is to be done, unless particular relevance is like general relevance, is a matter for speculation.

So the third and most crucial difficulty for pluralists is the account they are to give of moral relevance. The previous monistic definition will not answer now, for if ϕ is morally relevant so is ψ (in the above example) and they cannot both determine the degree to which the action is right; if ϕ does so ψ does not. Nor is it possible to define morally relevant properties in terms of the contents of moral

principles; this would achieve nothing. Still, our epistemological generalist probably thinks of morally relevant properties as those relevant to the moral value of any act to which they belong. And the epistemological particularist will feel that if a property is morally relevant in a particular case, this can only be because it is generally relevant. The question is how to understand one or both of these remarks so that they come out true. Most pluralists simply assume without argument that there is a sense of 'general relevance' which will do the trick. But if a property which is relevant to the moral value of a particular act is one which actually affects the value of that act, so that somehow the act would have had less/more value without it, what guarantee is there that all properties that we think of as generally morally relevant will 'make a difference' in every case in which they occur? For instance, it may be thought of as generally morally relevant whether anyone derives any pleasure from the act. But quite apart from cases where the act is the worse when the agent derives pleasure from it, are there not some where the fact that someone derived some pleasure makes no difference whatever to the moral worth of the act? Similarly, why should we admit that if a property 'makes a difference' in a particular case, then it generally 'makes a difference'? Isn't it possible that circumstances in a later case have the effect that the presence of *this* property does not make a difference there, though it does here? I conclude that pluralists have difficulty in providing a smooth account of the relation between general relevance and relevance in a particular case.

I have presented these problems for pluralists as if at least the first is separate from the others. The problem about consistency of principles might seem different from that of the smoothness of our account of general and particular relevance and from that of epistemology. But it seems to me that at least from the particularist point of view there are clear links between these areas, even if to some degree they have to be taken separately. The problem of consistency of principles really arises because of conflict in particular cases. Particularist epistemology tells us that moral knowledge comes from our knowledge of cases. One relevant thing we can observe in a case is that two properties are militating against each other there. Now what is it for two properties so to militate? One answer is to explain this in terms of different ethical principles. It is conflict between principles that lies behind conflict between properties in a given case. But this answer is uncongenial to particularist epistemology; it is conflict between principles that

needs to be explained by conflict between properties relevant to particular cases, not vice versa. A mistake here leads one to see the difficulty about the particular case misleadingly in terms of a truth-functional contradiction between the consequences of moral principles in particular cases. I only want to stress for the moment what a surprising attempt this is; it is not really at all obvious that appeal to conflict between principles *explains* conflict between properties in a given case. This, of course, is a particularist's complaint. The generalist will see the matter the other way round. For him inconsistency between principles is something that we could have discerned before it was revealed in the particular case, for what the case reveals is that something can be both ϕ and ψ —a possibility which we should and could perhaps have noticed before. The co-instantiation of ϕ and ψ only creates conflict because of the principles into which they are keyed.

Still, these remarks show that our three problems are not unrelated; and the purpose of doing that is to make more sense of W. D. Ross' attempt to revive pluralism in the face of the problems (Ross, 1930 and 1939). The main characteristics of Ross' attempt are an intransigent particularist epistemology and a novel account of the nature of moral principles in terms of the *prima facie*. In virtue of his emphasis on the *prima facie* we could call Ross' theory PF-pluralism; but it should be remembered that all Ross is doing is defend pluralism against objections by saying what moral principles really are. PF-pluralism holds that pluralism, properly understood, is sound. The only real difference between Pluralism and PF-pluralism is Ross' notion of the *prima facie*; and this notion is obviously designed primarily to account for the problem of cotenability of conflicting principles. But Ross would hold, I think, that it also provides acceptable pluralist accounts in the other two areas; in epistemology, it shows how we can start from the particular case and shows what we can see there for our intuitive induction to get to work on, while it also purports to provide a suitable general account of general and particular relevance. And I have tried to show that the three areas are in principle related closely enough for it to be possible for one radical shift to solve problems in all three places. This is possible; but I shall be arguing that Ross does not achieve it.¹

1 McDowell's attack on principles fails to consider Ross' work; which is a pity, since the notion of uncodifiability on which he relies is only relevant to a conception of principles as true universal propositions. Under Ross' interpre-

How does the notion of the *prima facie* provide new pluralist answers to our three problems? It accounts for co-tenability of moral principles after a conflict by providing a new view of what a moral principle says (and this seems just what is needed). Reading a principle 'Promote ϕ acts' as saying

(1) ϕ acts are right

lays one open to the charge of contradiction in a particular case if one also holds that

(2) ψ acts are wrong.

and that an action can be both ϕ and ψ .

But Ross suggests that moral principles are really of the form

(1') ϕ acts are *prima facie* right

(2') ψ acts are *prima facie* wrong.

and that 1' and 2' can be so understood that an action which is ϕ and ψ can be *prima facie* right and *prima facie* wrong, without incoherence. Whether this is so will depend on the exact account given of the *prima facie*; but one might feel that something like this is so obviously right that we won't be too dismayed if our exact account needs revision. So, given that things are looking promising in our first problem area, let us turn to the other two. In these, again, it is quite easy to see what Ross is after. He wants to say that in particular cases individual properties make the actions that bear them *prima facie* right (wrong etc.), that any such property is generally a *prima facie* right-making property, and that it is possible to see in a given case that here (and hence that generally) this property makes its bearer *prima facie* right.

Ross adds to this the sort of particularist epistemology which I recommended earlier for the pluralist. He holds that we come to know moral principles by intuitive induction from the nature of a particular case, and that in determining the nature of that case we can make no appeal to principles at all (except in a few degenerate instances). According to him, the answer to the question what one ought to do now is irredeemably a matter for particular judgement in which one's knowledge of principles plays no role.

tation of principles, McDowell's Aristotelian argument that particular cases will always escape the codifier's attentions becomes, apparently, powerless. Cf. McDowell, 1979. Of course, Ross was only putting into order an approach to pluralism made by Prichard and, long before, by Richard Price.

But when I reflect on my own attitude towards particular acts, I seem to find that it is not by deduction but by direct insight that I see them to be right or wrong. I never seem to be in the position of not seeing directly the rightness of a particular act of kindness, for instance, and of having to read this off from a general principle—‘all acts of kindness are right, and therefore this must be, though I cannot see its rightness directly’ (Ross, 1939, p. 171).

And knowledge of principles comes from knowledge of particular cases

Their rightness was not deduced from any general principle; rather the general principle was later recognised by intuitive induction as being implied in the judgements already passed on particular acts (ibid. p. 170).

It is worth pausing to contrast this appeal to intuitive induction with the other option open to the epistemological particularist, which is that we derive principles from instances by empirical generalisation, in a way which is supposedly familiar elsewhere. Broad has well characterised this option (Broad, 1930, p. 271); since many instances are required, we can suppose a particular case offers in itself no reason to suppose that the pairing of natural and moral properties would recur. We therefore think that on this approach all that we can observe in a particular case is mere coexistence of natural and moral properties. Now it would be wrong to object to this that we know *a priori* that moral properties are supervenient upon natural ones. For supervenience is a relation between *all* the natural properties and the moral ones, and the pairings we were speaking of were pairings between moral properties and *some* only of the natural ones (those from which they result). Of course supervenience does not by itself establish anything resembling what we normally think of as a moral principle. The true objection to this epistemological approach is that moral principles are not empirical generalisations. This is so despite that fact that generalisations can survive counter-examples without being any the worse for wear, which would be useful for dealing with the problem of conflict between principles. Thus it can be true that tigers have tails in the face of a tailless tiger; this is not quite the same as two principles conflicting, but is one aspect of it; if two moral principles conflict there will be an object which has a moral property that a moral principle says it does not have, without the moral principle being

rejected for that reason. Unfortunately, though, no matter how close the analogy between moral principles and generalisations, we should not take it that moral principles *are* generalisations.

The argument that moral principles are not generalisations runs as follows. Suppose that we have a moral principle 'Eschew ψ acts', and a generalisation that tigers have tails. Some acts which are ψ may be right despite their ψ -ness, and in some of these cases, (though not necessarily in all) the rightness will be reduced by their being ψ ; they will be wrong *qua* ψ act, or the worse for being ψ , but still right overall. Moral principles (and morally relevant properties too) are able, even when defeated in a particular case by counter-vailing considerations, to linger or have residual effects. But generalisations are not able to do this. A tiger that has no tail is not somehow one which has a tail *qua* tiger, or one which has more of a tail for its being a tiger, even though for other reasons it has not got one.

The alternative option, according to Broad, is that we derive a moral principle by intuitive induction from a single case. The problem is to see how this is possible. For it to be possible it must be possible to discern a relation between rightness and being ϕ in the particular case. This relation is somehow able to create a modal truth, for in virtue of it we know that *necessarily* any object which is ϕ is *prima facie* right. (Empirical generalisation would only be able to establish moral principles as contingent truths.) Any intuitionist then who believes that one case is sufficient to establish a principle, or that principles are necessary truths, is bound to opt for intuitive induction in his epistemology. The problem that faces Ross is how to make this option stick, by giving an account of what is discernible in the particular case that could enable a principle to be derived from it. So after all these preliminaries I now turn to Ross' explicit account of the *prima facie*, to see whether it is able to provide what is needed. The two questions to be asked are:

- (1) Does any notion of the *prima facie* make possible the view that we discover moral principles in/from what we discern in particular cases?
- (2) Does any notion of the *prima facie* make true the views that
 - a. If one action is *prima facie* right in virtue of being ϕ , then any ϕ action is *prima facie* right in virtue of being ϕ .
 - b. If ϕ actions are *prima facie* right, then each ϕ action is *prima facie* right in virtue of being ϕ ?

For any conclusion as to whether Ross makes good sense of conflict between principles ultimately depends on the answer to these questions.

Ross offers two accounts of a *prima facie* duty. The first is in terms of tendencies; an action is a *prima facie* duty in virtue of being ϕ iff ϕ actions tend to be duties proper. It is obvious, I think, that talk about tendencies can only be cashed at the general level. For particular acts do not have tendencies to be duties proper; they either are so or not. But for neatness' sake I shall ask of this account the two questions mentioned above.

(1) Epistemology. How could one perceive from a particular case that ϕ actions tend to be duties proper? Since talk about tendencies cannot be cashed at the particular level, *nothing* is said about what one observes when one observes that an act is *prima facie* right for being ϕ . For the account mentions nothing that a particular case could reveal.

(2) Relevance. Is there any reason to suppose that where ϕ actions tend to be duties proper, something like this will be the case—that wherever an action is ϕ , it will be the better for it? The moral principle 'Do not forget your obligations' is consistent with an action's being the better for its agent having forgotten his obligations. For instance, if I promise to help you move house and fail to turn up, it is better if I have forgotten my obligations than if I have not.¹ In fact it seems obvious that this supposition is false. Nor can we be certain that the opposite move is any better. If in a particular case some action is the better for being ϕ , does this show that actions that are ϕ tend to be duties proper?

So I conclude that this first attempt is an obvious failure in the two crucial areas. And by way of quick comment, I would say that it only seems to make sense of a conflict of moral principles at the cost of making such principles too similar to empirical generalisations.

But Ross' second account of a *prima facie* duty (perhaps his official one) is better:

I suggest '*prima facie* duty' or 'conditional duty' as a brief way of referring to the characteristic . . . which an act has, in virtue of being of a certain kind, . . . of being an act which would be a duty proper if it were not at the same time of another kind which is morally significant (Ross, 1930, p. 19).

¹ It may be that in this sort of case we first notice a moral principle which does not specify a property which is generally morally relevant.

Let us approach this account with our two questions.

(1) Epistemology. I take it that 'morally significant' is not significantly or relevantly different from 'morally relevant'. That being the case, how am I to see, in or from a particular case, that if the action had no other morally relevant characteristic it would be a duty proper? We need persuading that this is possible. If morally relevant means 'generally morally relevant', Ross will certainly assert that if an action is a *prima facie* duty in virtue of being ϕ , no property, ψ , can prevent that action from being a duty proper unless ψ be a generally morally relevant property. But on what account of general moral relevance will this be true? If a property which is generally morally relevant is one which always 'makes a difference', why shouldn't a property which 'makes a difference' here fail to do so elsewhere, since other circumstances deprive it of its influence? However, if 'morally relevant' means 'relevant to the moral worth of the particular case', it is easy to see how I am to discern in that case that where ϕ 'makes a difference' then if nothing else 'makes a difference' the only difference will be the one that ϕ makes. So Ross does here provide an account of the *prima facie* under which we can discern a *prima facie* duty in a particular case. And the account provided can be generalised. For it seems inescapable that if a property would decide the issue if it were the only one that mattered here, then it would do the same wherever that unlikely circumstance recurs. For such a thought is insulated against the interfering effects of different contexts. Thus, epistemologically at least, Ross seems to have succeeded; in his official sense of 'prima facie', if one act of a certain type is discovered to be a *prima facie* duty, we know that any act of that type is a *prima facie* duty.

But two questions remain, under the same general heading. Ross has provided an epistemologically *possible* account, but is it a *correct* one? First, can we really explain the behaviour of different properties in the more normal case where there are several morally relevant properties by appeal to a case, which never exists, when there is only one? Why should a property which would decide the issue if it were the only one that mattered be one which I should care about when it is not the only one? Second, do we capture what is noticed when we notice a quality as one which makes the act right, by saying that we notice that if no other quality made any difference this one would decide the issue? Isn't there still the danger that a property could be such that, though if it were the only relevant one it would decide the issue, it is not in fact among those which have

any effect on the outcome of all? For instance, it might be that if *per impossibile*, an action's only relevant property is that it causes pleasure to someone, that property would determine its moral worth; but that in another, normal, complicated case that property does not affect the issue either way. If this is possible, Ross' epistemology, though possible, is not correct. For what we notice when we notice that a property does 'make a difference' is not identical with what we notice when we notice that a property, if it were the only relevant one, would determine the issue.

(2) Relevance. It is an important and not merely verbal point that if 'morally significant' is equivalent to 'morally relevant', Ross's account of '*prima facie*' does not provide any independent understanding of moral relevance, since the term we seek to understand occurs unexplained in the account, and cannot be removed from it. But it is not specially because of this that Ross fails here to show that if a property is relevant in one case, it must be relevant wherever it occurs. That failure is really due more to what was pointed out in the previous paragraph, that to say that a property would decide the issue if it were the only morally relevant one is not to say that it is relevant even in the present case, let alone in others. The essential generalist move from initial case to other instances thus goes unsupported. And similar remarks can be made about the view that if a property is generally relevant it must be relevant wherever it occurs.

So I conclude that Ross fails to show how a generally relevant property gets a grip on a particular case; he fails to show how a particular case creates a generally relevant property (and hence a principle, in favourable cases); and he fails to show how I can come to know that a property is generally morally relevant from what I can see 'in' a particular case.

I have gone into detail about Ross because I feel that his failure is instructive. It is not just that it is the failure of the only detailed attempt to make sense of pluralism. The difficulties he faces are ones which face any such attempt. What has happened is that Ross has two independent inputs, which he attempts to reconcile but which are essentially at odds with each other. The first of these is the particularist epistemology about which he is so emphatic. The second is the generalist view that what we learn from particular cases constructs general principles, or that if a property is relevant anywhere it is relevant everywhere. The latter requires that what is observable in a particular case must be shown as essentially

generalisable. But the more Ross leans towards generalism, as in the generalist account of the *prima facie* in terms of tendencies, the harder it is for him to work his way back to the particular case so as to suit his epistemology. The more he turns his attention to the particular case, the harder it is to find anything which we could discern at that level and which would reveal any properties as generally relevant. And this tension will recur in any pluralist view which adopts a particularist epistemology. But pluralism cannot avoid this epistemology; the more it finds itself asserting that we know a large number of ill-assorted principles, the less plausible is the view that the principles are self-evident or in some other way discoverable independently of particular cases. So I conclude that the particularist epistemology is in the end inconsistent with generalism in the matter of moral relevance.

Even if the pluralist abandoned epistemological particularism, he would still have to face the problem of how his moral principles are relevant to particular cases. It is Ross' merit that he attempts to meet this problem head on, even though he does not solve it. The generalist's problem is the same as Ross', though it is viewed from the other side. Both want a smooth account of relevance, Ross so that he can show how a particular case somehow creates a principle, the generalist so that he can show how a principle manages to have any effect on its instances. But in the end the reason why one cannot move from particular to general is the same as the reason why one cannot move from general to particular.

The right solution, it seems to me, is to cling to the particularist epistemology and abandon the generalist tendencies that are unable to be made consistent with it. The position is eventually forced on us because after the discovery that more than one property is morally relevant, we begin to admit a plethora of such properties without there being any way of ordering them. When we face this plethora honestly, we have to adopt a particularist epistemology, and thus reject the view from which we came to it. As particularists, we give no sense to the notion of a property being generally morally relevant, since we cannot relate this satisfactorily to our epistemology; and hence we fail to understand the possibility of moral principles. So the progress is from monism, the view that there is only one moral principle, through pluralism, the view that there are many, to particularism, the view that there are none.

What extra oddities does this particularism add to ethical intuitionism, a doctrine widely held to be odd enough already? It

should be noticed that our *epistemology* is not significantly different from Ross'; we discern directly that individual acts are right, without needing any detour through principles. In Ross, the drive to principles is not epistemological but metaphysical. He feels that an individual act cannot be right without there being some principle behind it, as it were. I am suggesting that we accept Ross' epistemology and abandon his metaphysics. Does this make the epistemology significantly odder? I cannot see that it does. But I recognise that one activity in particular is commonly seen to conflict with the particularism I have defended, and that is the giving of reasons for moral judgements. Surely, it will be said, the giving of reasons is essentially an appeal to moral principles.

Before giving some idea of how, in my view, the particularist should reply to this, I want to approach it by considering other criticisms of particularism which I feel are misconceived.

Frankena argues as follows:

Now it is true that each situation has something new or unique about it, but it does not follow that it is unique in all respects, or that it cannot be like other situations in morally relevant respects. After all, events and situations are alike in some important respects, otherwise we could not make true general statements of a factual kind, as we do in ordinary life and science. Therefore, there is no reason for thinking that we cannot similarly make general statements of a moral kind (Frankena, 1963, p. 21).

All that needs to be pointed out here is that Frankena assumes that there are such things as 'morally relevant respects', which the particularist denies, and also takes it that moral principles are reached by empirical generalisation rather than by intuitive induction.

A second criticism raised by Frankena is more common, but still fruitless. He suggests that 'it is impossible for us to do without rules'. By this he does not mean the unimpressive remark, so common in discussions of utilitarianism, that sometimes we don't have time to work out the right answer and so have to rely on principles as a short cut. Instead he appeals to a remark of Hare's: 'without principles we could not learn anything from our elders' (Hare, 1952, p. 61). This is the more promising view that without principles moral education is impossible; in fact, as Hare sees, it is not just teaching but also self-teaching that seem odd from the particularist point of view. But are they odd for the same reason?

Rashdall claims that if there are no rough rules or principles of ethical judgement, 'moral instruction must be treated as absolutely impossible'. He elaborates:

We do not say to a child who asks whether he may pick a flower in somebody else's garden, 'My good child, that depends entirely upon the circumstances of the particular case: to lay down any general rule on the subject would be a piece of unwarrantable dogmatism on my part: consult your own conscience, as each case arises, and all will be well'. On the contrary, we say at one: 'You must not pick the flower, *because* that would be stealing, and stealing is wrong' (Rashdall, 1907, pp. 82–83).

It seems to me that there are three sorts of anti-particularist attack in all this. The first attack is some version of Hare's doctrine of Universalisability. The thought is that particular cases create general principles; if Jones ought to do Z in this situation, he ought to do Z in any similar situation. Here I cannot do more than say that either this thought is straightforwardly false, or it amounts to conflating universalisability and supervenience (cf. Dancy, 1981); but supervenience does not create anything recognisable as a moral principle (e.g. the universal propositions created by supervenience *could* not conflict). The attack 'If you see this in that way you *must* see that in the same way too' becomes for the particularist the question 'How can you see those two so differently when they are so similar?'. Perhaps this is a question which the particularist may at any time be called upon to answer (yet why should he answer it?); but it is also a question which it is always possible for him to answer.

The second attack is that particularism is unable to say anything about how past experience can be called on to help us reach a decision in a new case. 'Self-teaching, like all other teaching, is the teaching of principles' (Hare, 1952, p. 61). The idea here is that past experience is relevant because it produces an armoury of pairings of natural and moral properties by which a decision in a new case can be guided. How is it that past instances teach us what is right unless they offer a wide selection of natural circumstances which I can be certain that rightness accompanies? And surely they do this by the gradual construction of principles, to which I can appeal when I want help in coming to a decision.

I think that the particularist's response here is that it distorts what is really a very complex matter. If, as is suggested, we have

been able to discern pairings of natural and moral properties, why shouldn't we simply do that this time? Why is there any need for the detour through past cases and the principles they create? If the answer is that we need help in this situation because we find the moral property hard to discern here, the particularist can say that this itself is evidence that the new case is not relevantly similar to the old ones; in moving from past to present we come up against all the difficulties about moral relevance.

But still, isn't past experience even able to be *relevant* to new decisions? To deny this would put the particularist beyond the pale; he must accept it but offer a rival explanation.

One such explanation appeals to Wittgensteinian thoughts about what counts as going on in the same way, and the kind of necessity that binds previous instances to a new one. Competence with a moral concept (e.g. generosity) is knowledge of a rule, not a moral rule but a rule whose grasp is simply the ability to carry on using the word 'generous' correctly in new instances. Someone who comes to a new situation knowing what generosity is is someone who has learnt a rule (here the importance of experience) and his knowledge of the rule is manifested now in his decision that this situation is another of the same sort (here again the importance of past cases). But there need be nothing one can point to in the past cases which can determine or even guide his choice; what makes his choice right is not that it is dictated or even made probable by principles created by the past instances, but simply our acceptance of the choice as an instance of carrying on as before.¹

The third attack is the view that the giving of reasons is essentially an activity of generalisation. Frankena says, 'If Jones answers your question "Why?" by saying "Because you promised to" . . . he presupposes that it is right to keep promises' (Frankena, 1963, p. 23).

The force of Rashdall's last sentence is not that we always do add a moral principle, but that if we had merely said 'You must not pick the flower, *because* that would be stealing', we would be committed to the principle that stealing is wrong. Now the particularist denies this, clearly. So it will not do just to assert it against him. But there *is* a genuine question for the particularist here. Since we do go in for giving reasons, then if this common activity is not an activity of

1 This answer, like that to the next objection, needs a lot of filling out which space here precludes. (But cf. McDowell, 1979 and 1981.)

generalisation, but something restricted to the confines of the particular case, what is it? What is going on when I say, to others or myself, 'This action is wrong because it is ϕ ?' Here I am not *just* reacting to the particular situation as a whole, but picking out some features of it as particularly significant (here). What is this activity, and can the particularist explain it without abandoning his position?

The direction in which I think the particularist should move is to compare the activity of choosing some features of the particular situation as especially salient¹ (significant) with the activity of the aesthetic description of a complex object such as a building. In such a description, certain features will be mentioned as salient within the context of the building as a whole. There is no thought that such features will be *generally* salient; they matter here and that is enough. Someone offering the description is telling his audience how to see the building; he is doing this by selecting for stress just those features which must be salient if someone is to see the building the right way. He picks these features out, but knows that their importance cannot be assessed or even-discerned by someone who cannot see the whole building. One could not (and here is one important feature of the analogy) discover how the building was just by considering its salient features; salient features are not epistemological clues, and by the analogy reasons are not clues either. The man who provides reasons is not so much providing evidence for his ethical judgement as trying to show his audience how he sees the situation. He supposes that to see it his way is to join in with his judgement about what is right and wrong; so if you do come to see it his way you will agree with his ethical judgement, but by giving his reasons he is not *arguing* for that judgement, in the way in which adherents of moral principles might suppose.

I hope that this brief discussion of the difficulties for particularism helps further to characterise the sort of view I would recommend.²

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 2 I would like to thank David McNaughton for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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