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*Moral Particularism and the
Argument from Holism about
Reasons*

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Abstract: Proponents of moral particularism have often sought support for their negative claim about moral principles in a doctrine called holism in the theory of reasons. According to holism, a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or even the opposite reason, in another. The aim of this thesis is to investigate and elucidate the supposed connection between holism and particularism. This is done by considering the particularistic position embraced by Jonathan Dancy in his book *Ethics without Principles* and the arguments against the argument from holism recently put forth by Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge in their book *Principled Ethics: generalism as a regulative ideal*. In conclusion it is argued that holism does provide at least some support for the form of particularism which Dancy defends.

Keywords: Ethics, Particularism, Generalism, Holism, Atomism, Moral Knowledge, Moral principles, Moral reasons, Dancy; Jonathan

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William Bülow

Solna, 2011

“Occasion by occasion, one knows what to do, if one does, not by applying universal principles, but by being a certain kind of person: one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way.”

John McDowell

“The competent judge is not a person in command of general truths about the behaviour of reasons, all extracted from experience. She is a person who can tell difference when she comes across it.”

Jonathan Dancy

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1. Introduction

Moral philosophy is often thought of as an inquiry into the principles of morals. Even though there are disagreements over which are the right ones, most moral philosophy – both historical and contemporary – supposes that there are true moral principles. Or as Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge put it: “the history of moral philosophy is in large part a history of attempts to map the moral landscape with a set of principles”.¹ Influential moral theories such as Utilitarianism and Kantianism, for instance, are both committed to this claim. There are, however, moral philosophers who recently have denied that the moral landscape can be codified in universal principles, arguing that moral judgments can be found only as one decides particular cases. This thesis is known as *Moral Particularism*.

One of the most prominent proponents of a particularist conception of morality is Jonathan Dancy. According to him “the leading thought behind particularism is the thought that the behaviour of a reason (or a consideration that serves as a reason) in a new case cannot be predicted from its behaviour elsewhere”.² This thesis is referred to as *Holism in the Theory of Reasons*.

Even though the appeal to holism is not the only proposed argument in favour of particularism it is definitely conceived as one of the strongest.³ Recently, however, this argument has been challenged. In their book *Principled Ethics: generalism as a regulative ideal* McKeever and Ridge argue that even though holism is true, it does not support particularism in favour of a principled ethic. Instead they argue that there is no interesting connection between holism and particularism.⁴ If they are right this has serious implications for the prospect of particularism.⁵

The aim of this essay is to investigate and elucidate the supposed connection between holism and particularism. This I will do by considering the particularistic position embraced by Dancy and evaluating McKeever and Ridges objections to the argument from holism.

¹ McKeever and Ridge (2006) p. 4

² Dancy (1993) p. 60

³ As McKeever and Ridge have observed, arguments in favour of particularism arise from various areas of philosophical inquiry, such as moral epistemology, theories of practical reasoning, semantics and first-order moral theory (McKeever and Ridge 2006: 5). Besides the argument from holism, one common argument for particularism is based on the “metaphor of moral vision”. According to this argument, moral judgment often seems to not involve the applications of principles. Rather the moral competent agent discerns the morally salient features of a case and acts upon them. For a discussion on this argument, see (McKeever and Ridge 2006: 76-93) and (McNaughton 1988)

⁴ McKeever and Ridge (2006) p. 26

⁵ An earlier version of their argument is given in McKeever and Ridge (2005).

The essay is divided into two parts. In the first part I will outline holism in the theory of reasons and Dancy's argument that moral reasons are context-dependent. In the second part I will present the argument from holism and in what sense Dancy holds that holism supports particularism. This part starts with a presentation of Dancy's argument that given the truth of holism it would be a *cosmic accident* if there were a suitable supply of moral principles. This, he argues, supports his claim that moral thought and judgement does not depend on there being such things. I will then outline McKeever and Ridge's general claim that holism is compatible with a principled ethic as well as their more specific objections to Dancy's argument. However, before I will proceed I will make some clarifications.

1.1 Particularism versus Generalism

As McKeever and Ridge have observed there are many forms of particularism.⁶ While they all are united in their denial of the possibility to codify morality in purely descriptive terms they differ by the negative claims they make about moral principles. On one account, moral particularism can be understood as the ontological thesis that there are no moral principles whatsoever. On the other hand it can be understood as the more cautious claim that there are no good reasons to suppose that there are true moral principles. However, in his book *Ethics without Principles* Dancy has recently stated the particularist thesis in the following way:

(P) The possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles.⁷

The opposite view to particularism is *Generalism*. As in the case of particularism there are various forms of generalism.⁸ Still, all forms of generalism can be said to share the following assumption:

(G) The very possibility of moral thought and judgement depends on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles.⁹

According to Dancy the debate on particularism is not a debate on whether there are true moral principles, but whether moral thought and judgements depend on there being such things. Particularism, then, should not be thought of as a form of moral scepticism. Rather,

⁶ For an overview of various forms of Moral particularism, see McKeever and Ridge (2006) p. 14-21.

⁷ Dancy (2004) p. 7

⁸ Forms of Generalism differ both in content and for what reasons there must be moral principles. For instance, Utilitarian ethics holds that there is only one principle while for instance Rossian generalism holds that there are plural. Which of these two forms of generalism, if any, is the correct one is a question of content. As for what reasons we need moral principles a generalist can argue that we need them for practical reasons (see Hooker 2000; 2008) or for epistemic reasons (see McKeever and Ridge 2006) or perhaps both.

⁹ Dancy (2004) p. 7

moral particularism is a form of moral realism.¹⁰ Neither is particularism a purely psychological thesis. For as Dancy recognizes some people do have moral principles which they sometimes appeal to in their ethical judgments.¹¹ What particularism suggests is that moral thought and judgment can get along perfectly fine without any appeal to principles and that it would be desirable if people did not rely on principles in their moral judgments.

Dancy holds that the dispute between particularism and generalism depends on the correctness of two other views. The first one, holism, I have already mentioned:

(H) A feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or even the opposite reason, in another.¹²

Holism contrasts with *Atomism in the Theory of Reasons*, according to which:

(A) A feature that is a reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity in any other.¹³

As Dancy points out, particularists are normally holists while generalists are normally atomists. As we shall see later on, however, McKeever and Ridge tries rejects this claim and attempts to show that holism is equally compatible with both particularism and generalism.

1.2 What is a moral principle?

Before turning to the central question of this essay we must first have an idea of what kind of principles it is that particularists reject. Obviously, a moral principle is a moral generalisation, but as McKeever and Ridge notes every moral generalisation cannot be taken to be a moral principle. For instance, ‘any action is either morally right or wrong’ is a true moral generalization which no particularist would deny.¹⁴ Instead, in order to count as a moral principle a moral generalization must both provide truth-conditions for moral claims which refer to explanatory features and be well suited to guiding action.¹⁵ A moral principle, then, is

¹⁰ By moral realism, I mean a theory according to which there are objective moral truths and that we are able to have knowledge of some of these truths.

¹¹ Dancy (2004) p. 2

¹² Ibid. p. 7

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ McKeever and Ridge (2006) p. 7

¹⁵ McKeever and Ridge (2006) p. 10

not merely a rule of thumb that holds for most cases and at the same time not a mere generalisation.¹⁶

Principles that satisfy these two necessary conditions may differ both in *kind* and *content*. For instance, there are *intra-moral* principles which carry us from one moral concept to another. Examples of such principles are ‘being brave is virtuous’ or ‘being honest is morally admirable’. In addition there are *inter-moral* principles which carry us from the non-moral to the moral. Examples of inter-moral principles are “pain is morally bad” or “it is morally wrong to break promises”. In this essay I take it to be that particularism is primarily concerned with inter-moral principles.¹⁷

There is also a distinction between two different conceptions of moral principle. First, there are *absolute* moral principles. On this conception a moral principle is a universal claim to the effect that all actions of a certain type are overall wrong (or right). For instance, the principle “Promise-breaking is morally bad” is understood as an absolute principle if it is meant to entail that all actions that contains the feature of being promise-breaking is wrong despite whatever other considerations that are present. Secondly, there are *contributory* principles. On this conception the principle “Promise-breaking is morally bad” does not entail that an action which contains the characteristic of being promise-breaking is necessarily overall wrong, but rather that the fact that it contains promise-breaking counts against it. A famous proponent of a generalism based on contributory principles is William David Ross. According to Ross, there are *prima facie duties* which specifies a set of moral reasons which Ross suggest cannot seriously be held to have no moral significance. However, the fact that an act is a *prima facie* duty is not sufficient for its overall rightness. He writes:

I suggest ‘prima facie duty’ or ‘conditional duty’ as a brief way of referring to the characteristics (quite distinct from that of being a duty proper) which an act has in virtue of being of a certain kind (e.g. the keeping of a promise), or being an act which would be a duty proper if it were not at the same of another kind which is morally significant.¹⁸

¹⁶ I am aware that “well suited for guiding action” is rather vague, and that it is unclear what exactly is meant that a principle is sufficiently clear for guidance in moral dilemmas. In this essay, however, I will assume that we have a sufficiently clear idea of what is required for a moral principle to be action guiding.

¹⁷ Proponents of particularism differ on whether we need intra-moral principles. Kihlbom (2002), for instance, suggests that there are intra-moral principles which are useful in moral learning and justification. In contrast, the form of particularism which Dancy defends in *Ethics without Principles* holds for both intra- and inter-moral principles, see Dancy (2004) p. 121

¹⁸ Ross (2002) p. 19

On the Rossian account the knowledge of moral principles does not imply knowledge about what is overall right or wrong of a particular situation.¹⁹ I take it to be that particularism denies that we need moral principles of either sort.

¹⁹ Kilbom (2002) p. 22f

2. Holism in the Theory of Reasons

In this part of the essay I will present holism in the theory of reasons and Dancy's argument that moral reasons are holistic. I will start with presenting the idea behind holism: the distinction between being a *favourer* and being an *enabler*. I will then present Dancy's arguments in defence of holism about moral reasons and how he sees it as an instance of general holism in the theory of reasons.

2.1 Favourers and Enablers

The kind of reasons with which Dancy is concerned are *contributory reasons*. A contributory reason is a feature whose presence makes something of a case for acting in a certain way, but in such a way that the overall case for doing that action can be improved by the addition a second feature playing a similar role. Also, a contributory reason on one side is not necessarily destroyed by the presence of a reason on the other side. Thus contributory reasons can be combined in various ways. There is, however, no guarantee that the case for doing the action necessarily has to be improved by adding a second reason to it.²⁰

Dancy takes the notion of contributory reasons to be basic; what we have overall reason to do can only be understood in relation to contributory reasons. This assumption is important, since it underlies his argument for holism in the theory of reasons.²¹

Holism in the theory of reasons is a theory about how contributory reasons work, according to which reasons are context-dependent. To understand why Dancy takes it to be so, we must consider his distinction between being a *favourer* and being an enabling condition or *enabler*. For illustration, consider the following simplified instance of practical reasoning:

1. I promised to do an action A.
2. My promise to do A was not given under duress.
3. Therefore: I do A.

Now call (1), (2) premises and (3) the conclusion drawn from the reasoning (1)-(2). Premise (1) is a clear favourer, that is, a reason in favour of doing A. (2), however, is not a second favourer for doing A. What is true, however, is that if I had given my promise under duress, I

²⁰ Dancy makes this point in a both illuminating and amusing way by referring to a joke about a restaurant in New York: There are two things wrong with this restaurant – the food is terrible and the portions are too small. (Dancy 2004: 15f)

²¹ See Dancy (2004) p. 31ff

would have no reason to keep my promise. In other words, in the absence of (2), (1) would not have favoured (3) and in this sense, the presence of (2) is what enables (1) to favour (3).²² In Dancy's terminology, (1) is a favourer and (2) is an enabler or enabling condition.²³

If there are enablers and favourers there are also *disablers* and *disfavourers*²⁴. Further, there is a third role that a relevant consideration can play, namely as *intensifiers* and *attenuators*. These considerations leave the status of the favourer intact, but serve to increase or decrease its normative force.²⁵ In order to illustrate, Dancy gives an example where a woman is in trouble and needs help and where I am the only person around. In this case, Dancy explains that the woman needs help is a favourer but as I am the only person around, this intensifies my reason for helping her. In a different example we might assume that the woman is in need of help but that it is her own fault and she has got into the situation through trying to spite someone else. In this example, one might think that there is a reason for helping the woman despite that it is her own fault but less reason than there would have been otherwise.

Dancy's distinction between favourer and enabler conditions is important. It illustrates how reasons are context-dependent in the sense that holism intends. It also shows how moral explanations – explanations of why a particular action is right or wrong – are possible without reference to universal principles. On a particularist account, moral explanations come in terms of the favourers and enabling conditions of a particular situation.²⁶ Despite all this, many philosophers believe that holism about moral reasons is false. In what follows I will present Dancy's argument for holism about moral reasons.

2.2 Dancy's argument for Holism about moral reasons

Presumably, holism about moral reasons is motivated by examples. The fact that I would enjoy seeing a movie is a reason for me to go see it. However, if I would take pleasure in seeing someone being tortured in the movie and the movie is a documentary about human rights abuses, then the fact that I would take pleasure in watching it is no reason whatsoever

²² Of course, that my promise was not given under duress is not the only enabling condition making my promise a reason for action. For instance, I must understand the meaning of utterances like "I hereby promise" or "I promise to do X", otherwise the fact that I have promised fails to reason for me to actually keep my promise. Similarly, if I am an actor and as a part of a play I utter the phrase "I promise to X" I have no reason to actually do X.

²³ See Dancy (2004) p. 39

²⁴ In the literature on holism, disablers are sometimes referred to as *defeaters*. (e.g. McKeever & Ridge 2006; McNaughton & Rawling 2000) I have chosen the 'disablers' since it is the term that Dancy.

²⁵ Dancy (2004) p. 41f

²⁶ See Dancy (1993) p. 104ff and Kihlbom (2002) p. 49ff

to see it. More plausibly it is a reason for me not to see it.²⁷ Similarly, the fact my action will knowingly cause pain often counts as a reason for me not to do it. Suppose, however, that the one who will suffer deserves pain. In that case, the fact that the action knowingly will cause pain is a reason that counts in favour of performing it.

The appeal to examples does give holism some intuitive support but in order to prove holism about moral reason it is not enough. The only thing that the appeal to examples does show is that many non-moral features valance depends on context. This, however, is often held to be an uncontentious fact and does not exclude that some reasons are atomistic.²⁸ For instance, Torbjörn Tännsjö argues that a utilitarian “may admit that what is in one situation a sufficient reason for its rightness of an action may in another situation be a sufficient reason for its wrongness”²⁹ Therefore, further argument is needed.

In defence to this sort of objections Dancy suggests that holism about moral reasons is merely one expression of general holism. This is the kind of argument Dancy supplies in *Ethics without Principles* and even though this argument also relies on the appeal to examples, it is much stronger than the arguments which I have presented above. The argument consists in the following two premises:³⁰

P1. All non-moral reasons are holistic.

P2. If all non-moral reasons are holistic, moral reasons are holistic.

C. Moral reasons are holistic.

According to Dancy, *theoretical* reasons are perfectly capable of changing their polarity according to context. For instance, suppose that it currently seems to me that something before me is red. Normally this is a good reason for me to believe that there is something red before me. But in a case where I also believe that I have taken a drug which make blue things look red and red thing look blue, the appearance of a red-looking thing before me is no longer a reason for me to believe that something before me is red, but blue.³¹

Dancy holds that there are plenty of examples to persuade us that ordinary *practical* reasons also are holistic. The fact that there will be nobody much else around, for instance, is

²⁷ This example have I borrowed from McKeever and Ridge (2006) p. 27

²⁸ See for instance David McNaughton and Piers Rawling (2000) p. 267.

²⁹ Tännsjö (1998) p. 9 see also Tännsjö (1995)

³⁰ A similar argument for holism about moral reasons is found in Dancy (2000) p.131-7 and in Little (2000) p. 281ff

³¹ Dancy (2004) p. 74

sometimes a good reason for going there and sometimes a very good reason for staying away. There is, however, a reason for doubting that practical reasons are holistic. This reason derives from the common thought that practical reasons are grounded in desires of the agent in a way that theoretical reasons are not. Dancy writes:

It may be that we come across the real motivation for atomism in the theory of practical reasons – an adherence to the view that reasons for action are partly grounded in desires. For if we accept this view, and if we think of desires as giving the desiring agent the same reason wherever it occurs, the result looks atomistic.³²

According to Dancy the right response to this is “to claim that even if all practical reasons are grounded in desires, the same desire doesn’t always need to function as the same reason.”³³ That she wants power and he does not may be a reason to give the power to him rather than her. But it may at the same time be a reason to give it to her.

Dancy holds that it is indisputable that *aesthetical* reasons are largely holistic. A feature that in one place adds aesthetical value may in another place make it worse.³⁴ But if we assume that there perhaps are aesthetical reasons which are invariant, Dancy stresses that we seldom presupposes that we could erect a principle-based structure for aesthetical judgement despite its similarity to moral judgement.

Now what about moral reasons? Is it possible that they are different, being the only atomistic ones? Dancy takes it to be incredible and suspect that the nature of moral reasons should be so different from other reasons. He writes:

Consider here the sad fact that nobody knows how to distinguish moral from other reasons; every attempt has failed. How does this fit with the suggestion that there is a deep difference between them? Not very well at all.³⁵

Secondly, Dancy wants us to remember “that the question whether reasons are atomistic or holistic is a very basic question about the nature of rationality, of how reasons function from case to case.”³⁶ If it would be the case that some reasons are atomistic while others is holistic we would have a hybrid conception of rationality. Perhaps this is possible, but Dancy holds that it is much more attractive to think of our reasons as sharing the same logic. As we have

³² Dancy (2004) p. 75

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 76

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 77

already seen, he takes this logic to be holistic.

If moral reasons are holistic it seems hard to hold that the possibility of moral thought and judgement depends on the existence of a suitable supply of moral principles. Moral principles, as I understand them, attempt to specify features as general and informative right-making or wrong-making reasons. The principle that it is morally wrong to steal, for instance presumably claims stealing is always a wrong-making feature (contributory or absolute). At this point one might object that there are in fact reasons that always count morally in favour of an action. For instance, causing tremendous pain and suffering is perhaps feature that always counts against performing an action. As a response Dancy points out that holism allows for the possibility that there are some invariant reasons.³⁷ Holism, he points out, only concerns what may happen, not what must. It could be true that every reason may alter or lose its polarity from case to case, even though there are some reasons that do not do this. On this view reasons that are invariant reasons are invariant, not in virtue of being reasons but because of their specific content. As a result Dancy can accept the possibility that there might be some true moral principles. Still, this is far from admitting that moral thought and judgement depends on there being a suitable supply of such a thing. In order to support such a view one must locate a sufficient range of invariant reasons that together somehow cover up the moral ground and themselves explain the nature and role of variant reasons.

³⁷ See Dancy (2004) p. 77

3. From Holism to Particularism

In the previous part of the essay I outlined holism in the theory of reasons. In this part I will discuss what it establishes. In what follows I will present how Dancy holds that holism provides indirect support for particularism and raises a challenge to proponents of generalism to show that we do need moral principles. I will then present McKeever and Ridges argument that holism is compatible with generalism and their response to Dancy's argument.

3.1 The cosmic accident thesis

In *Ethics without Principles* Dancy recognises two reasons why his particularism should not be thought of as a direct consequence of holism. The first reason is that Dancy takes particularism to be a theory about the way in which actions are made right or wrong³⁸. But the holism he has established doesn't say anything about this. Instead it is concerned with another normative relation: the favouring relation.

Perhaps it might be possible for the favouring relation to be holistic while the right making relation is not. Dancy, however, argues that if either of these two domains is holistic, so is the other. His first premise is that if the favouring relation (i.e. our beliefs and reasons for action) were holistic while the right-making relation (i.e. the domain of moral metaphysics) was atomistic, the former would not be held in place by the latter. Perhaps this is possible, but for this to be the case, Dancy argues, there would have to be an explanation of how the move from one domain can take us to the other. But since no such explanation is available, Dancy concludes that if either domain is holistic, so is the other.³⁹

The second reason why particularism should not be thought of as a direct consequence of holism is that some forms of generalism in fact may be *compatible* with holism. Particularism, then, is not the only position that may accept the truth of holism and as we shall see later on, the compatibility of holism and generalism is the central part of McKeever and Ridges objection to the claim that holism supports particularism. In order to avoid such a conclusion, Dancy argues that given the truth of holism it would be a *cosmic accident* if it would turn out that morality was codifiable. He writes:

³⁸ See e.g. Dancy (2004) p. 78f, 140. It ought to be noted that in the beginning of *Ethics without Principles*, Dancy defines particularism as an epistemological thesis. Here, however, particularism is stated as an ontological one. It is not obvious how Dancy intends these both distinct theses to interrelate and whether particularism ought to be understood as either an epistemological or an ontological thesis or both.

³⁹ See e.g. Dancy (2004) p. 80

I think the best way to put the particularist conclusion is that, given the holism of reasons, it would be a sort of cosmic accident if it would turn out that morality could be captured in a set of holistic contributory principles of the sort that is here suggested. Most importantly, of course, it would be a cosmic accident if *our* morality could be expressed in this way, but the same would apply to any workable moral scheme. It would be an accident because, given the holism of reasons, there is no discernible need for a complete set of reasons to be like this. If our (our any other) morality turned out to be that way, there could be no possible explanation of that fact. It would be pure serendipity. There is no need for things to be so, and therefore there is nothing for moral principles to do.⁴⁰

How are we to understand this argument? Why exactly would it be a cosmic accident if it turned out that morality was codifiable? Most reasonably Dancy seems to hold that holism, while not implying a straight denial of the possibility of moral principles, implies that there need not be any moral principles or any invariant reasons. Moreover, Dancy seems to assume that given the truth of holism we should not expect to find any moral principles.⁴¹ For this reason he holds that his form of particularism follows from holism. He writes:

It was because for this issue that I characterized particularism as I did above, as the claim that the possibility of moral thought and judgement (and in general, one might say, of moral distinctions) in no way depends on the provision of a suitable set of moral principles. So characterized, it seems to me that particularism follows from holism. What does not follow is a straight denial of the possibility of a moral principle, of at least of a invariant moral reason.⁴²

Dancy's argument from holism, then, does not exclude the possibility of generalism. He does suggest, however, that given the truth of holism the burden of proof lies with those who believe that there *must* be moral principles. According to Dancy the fact that there does not have to be any moral principles poses "a challenge to the opposition to come up with a picture of moral thought and judgement which, though it respects the truth of reason-holism, still *requires* (rather than merely makes possible) a provision of principles that cover up the

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 82

⁴¹ A similar view is more explicitly expressed by Margaret Little (2000). She writes: "if reason-giving considerations function holistically in the moral realm, we simply shouldn't expect to find rules that mark out non-moral terms that are sufficiency conditions for applying moral concepts." (see p. 284).

⁴² Dancy (2004) p. 82

ground.”⁴³

While Dancy recognizes that holism is compatible with some forms of generalism he no longer holds, as he once did, that a principle-based approach to ethics is inconsistent with holism in the theory of reasons.⁴⁴ Of course it would be a stronger argument if holism excludes generalism altogether. This does not, however, imply that Dancy’s argument from holism is weak. Rather, if moral reasons are but an instance of general holism (as Dancy argues that it is) and we do without principles in other areas, it is up to generalists to prove that ethics is different.

In a recent article, Hooker suggests that in order to establish particularism from holism one must first prove that there are no moral principles. In order for holism to support particularism, he argues, one must go from holism via the intermediate step that holism holds for moral properties to the denial of moral principles. Only then one can draw the conclusion that moral thought and judgement doesn’t depend on moral principles.⁴⁵ In response I see no reasons why one should suppose that this is true. No doubt an argument for particularism must take the intermediate step via holism about moral properties, but why suppose that one must show that there are no moral principles whatsoever? If Hooker is right it would be reasonable to suppose that if there are but one invariant reason which can be formulated as a true moral principle while all other reasons are holistic the possibility of moral thought and judgement depends on this one principle. To me this seems like a hasty conclusion. Instead I would say that it would be reasonable to ask for what purpose this one principle is needed, or in other word, it is reasonable to conceive it as a cosmic accident.

3.2 McKeever and Ridge and the compatibility of holism and generalism

McKeever and Ridge argue that holism does not favour any form of particularism over generalism. Instead they argue that holism is compatible with generalism and particularism alike. The underlying assumption in their argument is that there are two ways to understand holism.⁴⁶ First, holism is a theory about the context-dependence of reasons (henceforth H1). Secondly, holism is a combination of two distinct theses: (1) a thesis about the context-dependency of reasons and (2) the thesis that this context-dependency escapes finite codification (henceforth H2). According to McKeever and Ridge H1 does not support

⁴³ Dancy (2004) 82

⁴⁴ See for instance Dancy (2000) p. 131-7

⁴⁵ Hooker (2008) p. 16

⁴⁶ McKeever and Ridge (2006) p. 26

particularism. Instead they emphasize that on this interpretation holism is compatible with the following form of utilitarianism:

(U) The fact that an action would promote pleasure is a reason to perform the action if and only if the pleasure is non-sadistic. The fact that an action would promote pain is a reason not to perform the action. An action is morally right just in case it promotes at least as great a balance of reason-giving pleasures over pain as any of the available alternatives; otherwise it is wrong.⁴⁷

Clearly this form of utilitarianism is an example of generalism and McKeever and Ridge's point is that holism cannot support particularism in favour of generalism since (U) *presupposes* holism.⁴⁸ According to (U) there are true moral principles such as "an action is morally right if it promotes at least as great a balance of reason-giving pleasures over pain as any of the available alternatives and that the pleasure promoted is non-sadistic". This principle specifies when "promotes pleasure" is a favourer and shows that whether it is depends on the other relevant considerations present, i.e. enabling conditions such as "the pleasure is non-sadistic or "is not outbalanced by the amount of pain". This form of generalism, then, is compatible with H1.

As for the second interpretation of holism, McKeever and Ridge points out that this interpretation *entails* a form particularism and therefore "any argument from holism in this second sense to particularism begs the question."⁴⁹ They also hold that on this second interpretation, holism is less pre-theoretically attractive and that H2 "has the unfortunate consequence of eclipsing the important question of whether the context sensitivity of morality might itself be codifiable."⁵⁰ Therefore, this interpretation of holism is not valid as a starter for discussion on whether holism supports particularism in favour of generalism.

McKeever and Ridge's objection to the argument from holism is important. It shows that the more radical formulations of particularism according to which there are no true moral principles whatsoever cannot seek support in holism. Also, it shows that the suggestion that holism is incompatible with generalism is wrong and that the argument from holism is at best indirect.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 29

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 26

⁵⁰ Ibid.

3.2.1 Reply to McKeever and Ridge (I)

McKeever and Ridge observes that the first form of the objection doesn't have to pose a serious problem for Dancy. As I have already mentioned in the previous section, Dancy admits that holism is compatible with the existence of some invariant reasons. Further, Dancy also recognizes that holism might be compatible with some forms of generalism and that particularism therefore shall not to be thought of as a direct consequence of holism. But as we saw in previous section, Dancy also holds that it is not enough to show that some form of generalism is compatible with holism. One must also show that despite the truth of holism moral principles are necessary.

As for McKeever and Ridges claim that H2 entails a form of particularism – and hence begs the question on particularism – this does not have to pose a serious objection to Dancy either. There are two reasons for this. First, Dancy's definition of particularism says nothing about the behaviour of reasons. Nor does it deny that morality in fact is or can be codifiable. All it does say is that moral thought and judgement does not depend on there being a suitable supply of moral principles. Similarly, holism does not say anything about moral thought and judgement. Therefore, H2 does not entail the form of particularism that Dancy's defends.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, H2 is not the interpretation present in Dancy's argument from holism. For as we have already seen, his interpretation of holism suggests that whatever is a favourer in one situation is so because of possible enablers or disablers and a feature that is a favourer in one context can be a disfavourer or perhaps insignificant in another context. Holism does not exclude the possibility that morality in fact is codifiable and capturable in a limited set of principles, only that it must be. Therefore, holism (on Dancy's interpretation) does not presuppose that morality transcends codifiability and hence it does not beg the question against generalism.

3.3 McKeever and Ridges objections to the cosmic accident thesis

As I have shown above, McKeever and Ridge's argument for the compatibility of holism and generalism does not refute Dancy's argument for particularism. But in addition to their overall objection to the claim that holism supports particularism, McKeever and Ridge also argue that Dancy's attempt to formulate the argument from holism in terms of the cosmic accident thesis is insufficient and invalid. According to them, Dancy's argument is an *elimination argument* and their main objection it is that it rests on the assumption that the *only* need there could be for moral principles would come from atomism. This premise, they suggest, is suppressed in

Dancy's presentation of his argument but is essential to his arguments logical validity.⁵¹ McKeever and Ridge seems to claim that Dancy's argument should be reconstructed as follow:

1. If there is no need for moral principles, moral particularism is true.
 2. If atomism is true, moral principles would be needed.
 3. There is only need for moral principles if atomism is true.
 4. Holism in the theory of reasons proves that atomism is false.
-
5. Therefore: particularism is true.

McKeever and Ridge accepts (1), (2) and (4), but denies (3) and they have several objections to this premise. For instance, we may still need moral principles for epistemic purpose. They write:

Even if moral reasons are context-dependent, it might well be possible for us to track those reasons only if we had access to a moral principle which articulates exactly how those reasons vary from one context to the next.”⁵²

Another point made by McKeever and Ridge is that atomism only entails a need for moral principles that specifies reasons.⁵³ This kind of moral principle is of the form: “if an action has the non-moral property N, then the action also has the moral property M”. But as McKeever and Ridge remarks generalists has not only been concerned with this kind of principles alone, but also with principles about what we ought to do all things considered. As examples of such principles McKeever and Ridge suggest the *utilitarian maximization principle* and the *categorical imperative*. Along these lines, McKeever and Ridge hold that Dancy's argument cannot do justice to the generalist tradition which he means to oppose. It is, they argue, not likely that philosophers have embraced generalism because of some prior belief in atomism. Instead, many forms of generalism, such as hedonistic utilitarianism, accept that moral reasons are holistic while at the same time assume that we need principles about all things considered. They write:

Atomism and Holism are, after all, doctrines about what is (or is not) necessary for a consideration to count as a reason and as such are entirely silent on how those reasons might be weight against one another to determine what should be

⁵¹ See McKeever and Ridge (2006) p. 37

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 38

done, all things considered.⁵⁴

For these reasons McKeever and Ridge conclude that holism does not support particularism. They do recognize, however, that the argument from holism does sharpen the particularist challenge to generalism.⁵⁵ Generalist must be able to explain why we need moral principles and how this is compatible with the holistic nature of moral reasons.⁵⁶

3.3.1 Reply to McKeever and Ridge (II)

McKeever and Ridge misrepresents Dancy's argument. According to them, it is an *elimination argument*, and as such invalid. This, however, is not how Dancy presents it. As we have already seen Dancy holds that his argument poses "a challenge to the opposition to come up with a picture of moral thought and judgement which, though it respects the truth of reason-holism, still requires (rather than merely makes possible) a provision of principles that cover up the ground" and that in order to prove generalism one has to look for "some positive suggestion as to why the behaviour of moral reasons might *need* to be capturable in some principled way, even though we continue to respect the truth of holism."⁵⁷ Therefore, Dancy admits that we might in fact need moral principles that carry us from the 'non-moral' to the 'moral'.

Unfortunately many of McKeever and Ridge's objections to the cosmic accident thesis rest on their misinterpretation of Dancy's argument. Consider their claim that Dancy presumes that the only need for principles would be to account for atomism.⁵⁸ I do not believe that this is has to be a necessary premise in Dancy argument. What is more reasonable is that holism (and the rejection of atomism) doesn't imply that there *is no need for* moral principles, but that there does *not need to be* any. This is also how I have suggested that Dancy's argument should be understood and unlike McKeever and Ridges, this interpretation of Dancy's argument fits well with his claim that holism poses a challenge to generalism to prove that there is a need for moral principles.

Now turn to the other important part of McKeever and Ridge's objection: that atomism only entails principles about reasons but not principles about what we ought to do all things

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 38

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 40

⁵⁶ In the second part of their book, McKeever and Ridge argue in favour of a form of generalism which respects the truth of holism about moral reasons but according to which we need moral principles in order to acquire moral knowledge. See McKeever and Ridge (2006) chapter 6-9.

⁵⁷ See Dancy (2004) p. 82-3

⁵⁸ Strictly speaking, it is in fact not obvious whether atomism implies that moral thought and judgment need moral principles. What atomism implies, in itself, is merely that it is possible to formulate moral principles.

considered. One of McKeever and Ridges examples of a principle about all things considered oughts is the *maximizing utility principle*. Now if it is true that Dancy's argument ignores this kind of principle, this presupposes that there is a significant difference between them and principles about reasons. But in an important respect there is no such difference. For like principles about reasons, the maximizing utility principle specifies a certain reason for an action's being right, namely that it has the property of maximizing value. In that case, the principle shares structure with "principles about reasons" and hence is not ignored by Dancy's argument. The same, I believe, holds for the common formulation of the categorical imperative that we ought to act in such a way that we treat our fellow human beings not only as a means but also as an end in themselves.

Perhaps McKeever and Ridge might respond to this claim by showing that there are principles about all things considered moral properties that do not have the same structure as principles about reasons. This possibility, however, does seem bleak. For a moral principle, as I understand it in this essay, express the truth-conditions for moral claims which refer to explanatory features. In other words; it is a necessary condition for a moral principle to specify how a certain feature or property (moral or non-moral) is connected to moral concepts. Therefore, all principles are principles about reasons *per se*.

More crucial, I believe, is McKeever and Ridge's suggestion that given the truth of holism we might need moral principles for epistemic reasons in order to track how moral reasons given their context-dependence. Again, consider the utility maximization principle. This principle does not only tell us that actions that have the property of being the action among several alternatives that leads to most utility are morally right, but also explains why other reasons such as promise-keeping and causing pain might lose and change polarity due to the particular circumstances. This sort of reasons, McKeever and Ridge points out, are ignored by Dancy and hence his argument is insufficient.

As I have already pointed out, Dancy does not hold that the only need there is for moral principles is in virtue of atomism but that holism entails that it is possible that there are no principles. Therefore, Dancy may respond that it is perhaps possible that we need moral principles for epistemic reasons and that this is a good candidate for meeting his challenge.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Another possible candidate is Hooker's suggestion that we need moral reasons for *practical reasons*. According to Hooker, one of the things a shared commitment must do is to give people some assurance that others won't lie to them, not to rob or attack them. In order to do that, Hooker argues, we must have moral principles (Hooker 2000: 15ff). This is not, I believe, a very convincing argument. What Hooker seems to

However, at the same time Dancy might suggest that it is not enough to stress epistemic reasons as a possible candidate; one must also show that we do need moral principles for this purpose. Most likely none of this will settle the debate between particularist and generalists. Unsurprisingly, generalists have not only presupposed that there are moral principles but have also held that there is a need for them. I will now consider this possibility in detail.

On the particularist account, moral knowledge is the recognition of moral reason-facts and given the truth of holism these moral reasons are particular and initially restricted to the particular case. The moral competent person, then, is not a person in command of general truths about the behaviour of reasons. She is a person who can tell the difference when she comes across it, i.e. a person whom recognizes instances of favouring and the presence of enablers etc.⁶⁰ A generalist will not rest satisfied with this account. Presumably, she will respond that none of this explains why a certain feature, given a particular set of enablers, is a favourer. A hedonistic utilitarian, for instance, would most likely claim that if it weren't for the happiness promoted, a particular feature would not be morally relevant.⁶¹ This, the utilitarian would continue, shows in what sense we do need moral principles for epistemic reasons: in order to grasp which feature is the relevant in a particular context. In similar vein a utilitarian will hold that we need the utilitarian principle in order to explain the rightness of a particular action.

In reply to the generalist argument just sketched, Dancy would probably try to convince us that moral reasons are but an instance of reasons and that moral epistemology therefore is merely an application of more general epistemology of reasons.⁶² According to him, the truth of holism implies that the epistemology of moral reasons is similar to those of practical, theoretical and aesthetical reasons which are also holistic. In these areas, however, we do not claim that knowledge of reasons depend on principles. So why suppose that moral knowledge does? As for the fact that we need moral principles in order to explain particular moral truths Dancy would likely respond that particularism can account for such explanations in terms of enabling and favouring conditions.⁶³ Take for instance epistemic reasons. If a thing looks red I

suggest is that a society where everyone acts upon explicitly holds principles people are much more assured that no one will do anything immoral. But what suggests that the people in a society in which all inhabitants are particularist are not moral or that people can be assured that no one will rob or steal from them? For these reasons I am not convinced by Hookers argument. For a discussion on Hooker argument, see Dancy (2004) p. 133-4.

⁶⁰ See Dancy (2004) p. 140-4

⁶¹ See for instance Tännsjö (1998) p. 11-2 for such an argument for the need of principles.

⁶² See for instance Dancy (2004) p. 141. Compare also to the argument for holism in section 2.1 in this essay.

⁶³ See Khilbom (2002) for a similar answer.

usually have a reason to suppose that it is red but in a case where a have taken a drug which make all red things look blue, the fact that a thing looks blue is a reason for me to assume that it is red. Now the explanation of why I hold the particular thing before me is red is that I have taken a drug that make red things look blue and that the thing before me appears blue. This, I believe, is a satisfying explanation that involves no appeal to principles. Similarly a particularist would say that the fact that a drowning man needs my help is a perfectly good explanation for why I ought to help him. For what reason then, should we favour the particularist account over the generalists? The particularist answer is that moral principles are not needed in any of the senses suggested since particularism is capable of accounting for these considerations in a satisfactory way. Therefore, if generalists are to prove that there must be moral principles it must be for reasons that the particularist cannot account for in a satisfactory way.

There is yet another possible interpretation of McKeever and Ridge's argument. Perhaps their claim that we may need principles is not to be interpreted as an attempt to meet Dancy's challenge. Rather, their point is that despite the truth of holism it is still possible that we do need moral principles for epistemic reason. Both generalist and particularist can accept the truth of holism about moral reasons but disagree on whether we need moral principles. Therefore, holism alone favours neither particularism nor generalism over the other and does not give us any reasons to believe that particularism is true. This is a more crucial and serious objection to Dancy's argument. Also, it is also reasonable that this is how McKeever and Ridge intend their argument to be understood. This, I believe, shows that the particularist argument from holism is not as strong as Dancy assumes that it is.

There is one possible response on behalf of Dancy. For McKeever and Ridge are right that the truth of holism about moral reasons is not enough to establish particularism. But as I have pointed out earlier in this essay, Dancy does not only defend holism about moral reasons, but asserts that all kinds of reasons are holistic.⁶⁴ In contrast to holism about moral reasons, the truth of overall holism in the theory of reasons does give us reasons to doubt whether we need moral principles. For if we assume that all reasons are holistic, then why assume that we need overall principles about moral reasons when knowledge about other reasons, such as epistemic, practical and aesthetical reasons does not seem to depend such principles? Why must knowledge about moral reason differ from other sorts of reasons even though they are

⁶⁴ See section 2.2 in this essay.

functioning in the same way? For this reason Dancy can insist that given the truth of holism about reasons it would be a cosmic accident if morality would be capturable in a limited set of moral principles, or that our moral judgements would depend on a limited supply of moral principles. However, this argument is a much more controversial one than the claim that holism about moral reasons supports particularism.

4. Conclusions

Dancy holds that holism supports particularism. According to him, the truth of holism allows for the possibility that some reasons are invariant reasons, but equally possible (and perhaps more likely) that there none. Rather, he sees the possible existence of invariant reasons as a cosmic accident. This puts the burden on the generalists not only to show that there are moral principles specifying invariant reasons, but also to prove that we do need reasons of this sort and that moral thought and judgement depend on there being a suitable supply of such things.

I have argued that Dancy is able to respond to all of McKeever and Ridges objections to his argument from holism about reasons. However, one of their objections, that despite the truth of holism we do need moral principles for epistemic reasons, does show that an argument from holism cannot be based on holism about moral reasons alone. In response I have suggested that Dancy's defence of particularism does not rest solely on the assumption that moral reasons are holistic, but on the claim that holism is true about all sorts of reasons. Unlike holism about moral reasons, overall holism does provide some support of particularism. For if holism is true about all other sorts of reasons (epistemic, practical and aesthetic) and none of these reasons presupposes principles, it seems strange to suppose that moral reasons, when similar in their nature, must be different in the sense that they require principles. Therefore, given holism it would perhaps be a cosmic accident if morality can be captured in a limited set of moral principles. Also, it is reasonable, I believe, that if it is possible that there are such principles about morality, Dancy are justified in asking for what reason such principles are required.

For this reason I believe that a more successful argument against Dancy's moral particularism should involve a critical discussion on holism about reasons and his argument in favour of this position. For this argument is based on the assertion that holism holds for all sort of reasons and that knowledge about epistemic, practical and aesthetic reasons doesn't depend on principles. This assumption should to be scrutinized.

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