Problems for hard moral particularism: Can we really dismiss general reasons?

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Abstract: Moral particularism, in its extreme version, is the theory that argues that there are no invariant context-independent moral reasons. It states also that moral knowledge is not constituted by principles and that these are useless or harmful in practice. In this paper, I intend to argue that this position takes context-sensitiveness of reasons too seriously and has to face many philosophical problems – mainly because its most important argument (the argument from holism of reasons) is not convincing but also because a pluralist generalist account is preferable both from metaethical and normative points of view.

Keywords: Moral Particularism; Particularism and Generalism debate; moral reasons; usefulness of moral principles

1. *Introduction*

In philosophy, it is often argued that moral reasons are context-sensitive: what features count as reasons for the rightness or the wrongness of a conduct depend on the particular situation they are applied to. Moral particularism takes context-sensitiveness of reasons very seriously. According to its most extreme version, particularism argues that general reasons and then principles should be dismissed from moral deliberation.

In this essay, I will defend the indispensability of general reasons and principles for deliberation by rejecting particularism's main claim. In the first section, I will provide a plausible core definition of moral particularism and identify three different types of particularism: metaphysical, epistemological, and normative. Then, in the second section, I will try to undermine particularism's main argument: the argument from holism of reasons. Specifically, I will raise doubts about the assumption that ordinary reasons are holistic. In the third section, I will raise an objection against metaphysical and epistemological particularism (which are strictly entangled): moral principles do play an important role in explaining why a particular conduct is good or bad; replacing them requires hard work on the part of the particularist. Finally, in the fourth section, I will argue for the usefulness of moral principles from a normative point of

view: moral principles do play an indispensable role in guiding conduct.

What emerges from my argumentation is that on one side, generalism does not need a strong theoretical account to reject particularism. Indeed, I will take into consideration the cheapest objections from the literature. On the other side, particularism appears to be a controversial theory that requires much theoretical work to be defensible. Of course, a fully developed generalism would need a better-defined account of how moral reasons work and what kinds of principles are usable. However, I think a defense of the indispensability of general reasons is a valid starting point for a generalist theory.

2. *Moral particularism: definition and clarifications*

In the literature on the subject, moral particularism is introduced in many ways (Crisp 2000, Ridge and McKeever 2016): sometimes it is meant as a claim about the *existence* of true moral principles (McNaughton and Rawling 2000, Vayrynen 2008), sometimes as a claim about the *usefulness* of moral principles (Nussbaum 2000; Lekan 2003), and sometimes as a claim about the *ontology* of moral properties (Dancy 1993). In my opinion, before being all of those, moral particularism is a claim about *moral reasons* for actions and deliberations.

Explaining how moral reasons work is one of the tasks of an ethical theory, and one of the main troubles with it is that reasons for actions are highly context-sensitive. For example, generally speaking, most people would readily admit that since stealing is morally wrong, morality gives us a reason against doing it. However, if a woman is dying and the only way to save her life is to break the window of a pharmacy and take a drug, in this context the same people would probably say that we do have moral reasons to steal the drug. Another moral platitude is that we always have reasons to keep our promises; but suppose I promised to pick up a friend of mine and then I found out that he is plotting a terrorist attack in a mall. In this context, the reason to keep my promise disappears.

Moral particularism (MP) is the theory that takes this context-sensitiveness of reasons very seriously and argues that moral reasons fully depend on the context. As a consequence, speaking of invariant moral reasons would be unjustified. Therefore:

(MP) There are no invariant reasons that contribute to a moral decision in every situation or context.

As Dancy (2004, 2017) argues, in real moral situations there are so many particular conditions that might alter or defeat supposed general reasons and make moral principles impossible. In the previous example, the fact that a

woman may die is clearly a *defeating condition* of the reason against stealing; or, if we suppose she is merely suffering and not risking death, that might be an *attenuating condition.* Or take the moral principle on not lying: if we imagine a situation in which somebody is lying in order to cheat people, we will have a condition that *intensifies* the standard reason we have for not lying. Finally, we should consider also the fact that, in the situation, a moral reason needs to be *enabled* by some condition in order to be considered by the moral agent. For instance, if somebody cannot run because of a recent injury, she has no reason to catch a pickpocket who is running away. On these grounds, the particularist argues that the morally wise agent is not the typical "person of principle", but rather the one who is sensitive to different contexts, flexible, and grasps reasons from the particular.

A first important point to clarify is that MP is not a claim about the *authoritativeness* of moral reasons. Whether they are categorical reasons or hypothetical ones does not affect MP. A reason can still be authoritative and categorical even though it is particular. Rather, the debate between particularists and their opponents – moral generalists – is about the context-sensitiveness of reasons (regardless of their authoritativeness).

A second point is that the target of MP is not necessarily a moral absolutist, who claims that there is a definite hierarchy of reasons and assumes the existence of absolute moral principles that cannot conflict with each other in particular contexts. The generalist could be a moral pluralist, such as a Rossian pluralist (Ross 1930). According to this soft version of generalism, when we face a deliberation, our moral intuition gives us access to some prima facie or pro tanto duties – that is, a definite set of moral inputs (such as duties of beneficence, of justice, of reparation, of self-improvement) that always provide reasons with some weight, which can vary according to the context. Nevertheless, the resultant reason – the actual duty – depends on the particular situation, in which many prima facie duties can come into conflict. As a result, there is still room for the role of particular judgment. Take the case of the friend who is planning a terrorist attack. The pluralist would say that the prima facie duty to keep promises is overridden by a duty to save human lives. But this does not mean that we had no reasons for keeping that promise. They were simply defeated by another, stronger general reason. So, according to this account, moral principles are saved, though particular contextual considerations are indispensable for a correct deliberation.

Moral particularism argues that even this kind of generalism is untenable. We will see what its main argument is in the next section. For now I want to go into MP in more detail and explore its philosophical consequences. As we have seen, MP is firstly a claim about reasons. However, this claim can be developed

from many points of view, and that explains why it was intended in different ways in the literature. I have identified three main dimensions along which the debate between particularism and generalism can be shaped: metaphysical, epistemological, and normative.

If there are no invariant moral reasons and moral reasons are purely contextual, it follows that in ethics no generalizations are possible. From a metaphysical point of view, this means that the descriptive features that determine the moral status of an action are not governed by any kind of generalization. In other words, the particularist says that if we take some moral property (such as being good, being wrong, being bad), we cannot appeal to any generalization in order to individuate the range of nonmoral facts (e.g., facts about promises, facts about pleasures) in which the moral properties are instantiated. So contextualism based on moral reasons has direct consequences for the metaphysics of moral properties and the way in which their nonmoral base properties constitute them.

It is noteworthy here that the generalist is not necessarily a *reductionist* regarding moral properties. That is, in order to avoid particularism, her account does not need to individuate one single nonmoral property that fully constitutes a moral property (for example, the reductionist account that argues that *being good* is nothing but *being pleasant*). A moral generalist – such as a Rossian pluralist – merely affirms that some moral generalizations are possible (for instance, "An unfulfilled promise always contributes to the wrongness of an action") and not only reductive kinds of generalization.

The fact that there are no general moral truths has some epistemological consequences for the nature of moral knowledge. The latter – according to MP – cannot be constituted by principles, whose aim is to establish which reasons always contribute to the goodness or badness of an action, regardless of the particular context. Indeed, the particularist argues in a twofold sense that access to what is good or what is bad does not depend on principles: (a) from a *justificatory* point of view and (b) from a *genetic* point of view. According to the latter, moral knowledge derives from particular contexts. The former is a stronger claim:[1] the justification of a moral conduct cannot be grounded in general principles.

One more important point may help to clarify this epistemological aspect of MP. Epistemological particularism does not say anything about the epistemic nature of moral principles – that is, whether they are a priori or empirical knowledge. A generalist might be extremely fallibilist on moral knowl-

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[1]   One can be a genetic particularist about moral knowledge without being a justificatory particularist, but not conversely.

edge by claiming that moral principles are acquired by induction and tested through particular cases. However, this does not mean that principles do not represent a consistent part of moral knowledge, which is exactly what particularism rejects.

The last dimension along which the generalism-particularism debate takes place is normative: it concerns the usefulness of moral principles in moral practice and deliberation. In this regard, some of the strongest versions of particularism – such as Dancy's or McNaughton's particularism – argue that moral principles are "at best useless and at worst a hindrance" (McNaughton 1988) and are the cause of bad decisions.[2]

Moral principles are supposed to be guides for conduct, but particularists point out that they are not good ones (and that is not surprising, if we think of particularism's insistence on the variability and context-sensitiveness of reasons). Indeed, particularism's main point is that the use of principles in deliberation can lead to a kind of *inflexibility* that prevents agents from understanding the complexity of a situation. For instance, suppose a person has deeply internalized the principle of not breaking the law. Imagine she then finds out that a friend of hers is hosting a family of illegal refugees that police might send back to their country, where there is a war; nevertheless, her very strong sense of being law abiding brings her to denounce the family. Normative particularists say that attachment to principles brings one to make questionable decisions like that: if that person had focused more on the context, probably she would have made a better choice. Meanwhile, generalists argue that, in cases like that, the problem does not lie in principles per se, but rather in detecting the different conflicting principles within the particular situation and evaluating carefully their weight.

In conclusion, according to my analysis, we can say that the MP claim about reasons can be differentiated into three kinds of particularism:

(*Metaphysical MP*) There are no law-like generalizations that govern moral properties.
(*Epistemological MP*) Moral knowledge is not constituted by principles.
(*Normative MP*) Moral principles are useless or harmful.

It seems to me that the first two kinds of particularism are quite logically dependent on each other: it is hard to understand how moral knowledge can be constituted by principles without law-like generalizations governing moral properties or why moral knowledge cannot involve moral principles if there are some generalizations that govern moral properties. Much more controversial, I think, is the relationship between metaphysical and epistemological particu-

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[2] "Particularists are fond of saying that generalists will make bad decisions" (Dancy 2017).

larism and normative particularism. Maybe a metaphysical and epistemological MP will still make room for some kind of heuristic value of principles in moral deliberations. But in this essay I am not interested in exploring this possibility. In the next sections, I will argue against all three versions of MP. The sum of the objections I will consider can, I think, contribute to undermining the MP view on reasons.

3. *The argument from holism of reasons*

As Dancy affirms, the core of particularist doctrine is the so-called *holism of reasons* (HR):[3]

(**HR**) Each reason can be evaluated only in the context of all the relevant reasons that apply to a situation.

Moral particularism essentially *is* a holism of reasons.[4] In fact, its main argument consists in applying HR specifically to moral domain. I intend to show that this argument is unsound, especially because of the weakness of at least two of its premises.

The argument from holism of reasons goes as follows:
(**P1**) Ordinary reasons are holistic (from HR).
(**P2**) Moral reasons are not a special kind of reason.
(**C1**) Therefore, moral reasons are holistic.
(**P3**) If moral reasons are holistic, then there are no invariant moral reasons.
(**C2**) Therefore, there are no invariant moral reasons (MP).

We might consider P1 as a weakened form of HR, if we mean HR as a universal statement. By *ordinary reasons* the particularist means nonmoral reasons. She appeals to the fact that in everyday deliberations reasons are purely contextual, extremely variable according to the subject or the moment. For example, imagine that a friend of mine invited me to go for a walk. The fact that it is raining might be a reason to not accept his invitation. But I might have a romantic addiction to walking in the rain, in which case the presence of rain would be a reason *for* going out. Or maybe this is the last occasion to meet him before he leaves for India, or maybe he is the man I love. In these cases, the reason provided by the rain would be quite irrelevant. In decisions such as that (other examples are easily constructible), an appeal to some kind of principle

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[3]   "This [holism of reasons] is the doctrine that what is a reason in one case may be no reason at all in another, or even a reason on the other side" (Dancy 2017).

[4]   The opposite vi holism of reasons is *atomism*.

– one supposed to suggest invariant reasons – would be pointless and obtuse.

The moral particularist takes P1 as an uncontroversial statement. However, as Hooker (2000) showed, this assumption does not appear very convincing. To raise some doubts, it is sufficient to take Dancy's example. If I see something red in front of me, I will have reason for believing that there is something red in front of me; but if I have just taken a drug that makes blue things look red and red things blue, the appearance of a red-looking thing is a reason *against* the belief that there is a red thing (Dancy 2017). In my opinion, this example does not undermine the fact that normally – that is to say, in *standard conditions* – sight is a reliable source of truth; and the clause "standard conditions" implicitly excludes cases in which the subject took a drug that alters sight or situations in which something could be a mirage. Or maybe a hypothetical epistemic generalist would say that this is a case where a stronger general reason (the fact that a drug has been taken) has overridden the default reason for believing the appearance: therefore, similar story to the moral debate. It is important to notice that here the generalist does not need to show that there are invariant epistemic reasons in order to undermine the argument from HR; it is sufficient to show that, even on epistemic reasons, a debate between generalism and particularism (or between atomism and holism of reasons) is *possible*, and then it is not uncontroversial that each kind of nonmoral reason is holistic (contrary to particularism).

Another kind of reason that may show a different sort of invariance is provided – sometimes – by technical disciplines. In cookery, for instance, if the water is boiling, then I have a reason to add salt and then to throw in pasta, regardless of the particular context (the quantity of water, the quantity of pasta, the kind of pasta I am going to cook, etc.). In DIY projects, if there is a star screw, you have a reason to use a star screwdriver, regardless whether you are assembling a table or renovating a kitchen. Or, in team sports such as volleyball, basketball, and football, tactical principles are important to play well and their validity in different contexts is continuously tested.[5] In disciplines like those, though context-sensitiveness is fundamental, general rules and principles still play an important role, in virtue of the scientific component of the skills required.

The point here is that though it is quite obvious that reasons are contextual and principles are useless in decisions on whether to accept a friend's invitation or on choosing an ice cream flavor, it is much less obvious in areas in which some skill or expertise is required. In those contexts, reasons appear more stable and some generalizations seem possible. I do not want to suggest that

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[5]   It is curious to notice that even in this context, we could identify a more generalist-like faction on sports principles and a more particularist-like faction.

ethics is like technical disciplines or that moral reasons work in the same way that technical reasons do (even though I believe there are some interesting analogies). For the sake purposes of the argument, I just intend to suggest that at least some nonmoral reasons might be invariant.

The generalist argumentative strategy cannot merely consist in showing that nonmoral reasons could be not holistic (against P1). The generalist should also argue that moral reasons are different from ordinary ones, such that it implies some kind of generality. This latter strategy counters P2. That there are some intuitive differences between moral and nonmoral reasons is obviously recognized by particularism. The question is whether they are such as to entail a claim of invariance or – from this point of view – they are exactly alike.

The difference between moral and nonmoral reasons is a very complex matter. It is useful to recall what Hare says about the meaning of "good" in moral contexts (Hare 1952). Deliberations[6] do not run out in themselves, but have some effects on the practice in which one deliberates and then on the agents of that practice. As Hare said, a particular deliberation involves a judgment that, in some sense, forms a rule. More simply, if I deliberately choose X, this means that I think that people like me, in similar circumstances, should choose X. For example, if I choose this chronometer because I think it is a good one, I mean that everyone who is interested in using a chronometer should choose this one. But people could legitimately be not interested in using a chronometer, and deliberations on chronometers affect only chronometer users. When we consider moral deliberations, they affect humans as humans and "we cannot out get out of being men [or women], as we can get out of being architects or out of making or using chronometers" (142). This means that moral deliberations must be shareable and communicable, and – as a consequence – the reasons they exhibit must be like that, in order to live in a good and stable community. In more recent times, Korsgaard has shown that while ordinary nonmoral choices are contingent because they affect our contingent practical identity (our being an architect or our being a chronometer user), moral reasons are inescapable as they concern our inescapable identity as human beings – that is, reflective animals who need reasons in order to act at all (Korsgaard 1996).

Therefore, on these grounds, we can say that moral reasons require a stronger sense of rationality compared to nonmoral ones. But do these considerations affect moral particularism? Is it possible to understand the inescapable character of moral reasons without the possibility of invariant reasons? Is it possible (or at least desirable) to live in a community that considers moral reasons as purely

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6   By *deliberations* I mean rational choices, i.e., decisions someone makes for at least one reason that, if required, the deliberator can exhibit.

contextual? I will argue in the next sections that extreme contextualism on reasons limits ethics in at least two important aspects of moral rationality: the explanatory constraint (section 3), concerning the justificatory role of reasons, and the power of guidance (section 4). The former can be considered as an objection to what in the first section I defined as metaphysical and epistemological particularism. The latter includes several objections against probably the most controversial kind of particularism: the normative one.

4. *The explanatory role of principles*

Imagine that an acquaintance – John – is a government official who has falsified a public competition in order to favor one of his relatives. How could we explain to John that he did a wrong thing, in a purely contextual way? Our justification cannot contain any appeal to general truths such as "Because nepotism is a very unfair and dishonest practice". So we may start to tell him that he prevented the worthiest people from winning the competition, or we may show him the consequences of his act to the community. However, if we assume that he is a very naive person, he will still ask: "What's wrong in all of that? What did I do wrong?" At this point, we must surrender, because the particular context is the only field we had to convince John. But if we were generalists, we would have much more to add: we might appeal to the bad effects of nepotism as a widespread practice in society; we might involve different background ethical theories that explain the wrongness of nepotism; and – most importantly – we might force John to exhibit his reasons, according to his different general interpretation of the context (e.g., "Since nepotism is a very widespread and harmless practice, my conduct wasn't bad" or "I think that it wasn't a case of nepotism, but an act of helping people we love and helping people we love is a good thing").

In my opinion, this example shows that moral principles perform an indispensable justificatory function and that depriving us of the possibility of gaining knowledge of them (exactly what epistemological MP claims) would partially miss what Zangwill has defined as "the because constraint" that moral judgments and discussions require (Zangwill 2006). I will consider now three possible replies of moral particularism to this objection.

First, the particularist might argue that the descriptive features of the context are sufficient to explain our moral judgment since there is a relation of *supervenience*[7] between moral and nonmoral properties. That relation

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[7] Moral supervenience, as I understand it, is the commonly accepted intuitive idea that "there cannot be a moral difference without a nonmoral difference". Therefore, two exactly indiscernible worlds (or objects) by nonmoral properties must be indiscernible by moral properties as well.

would allow us to use the nonmoral fact that John has favored his relative as a sufficient particular reason since it is the sufficient nonmoral basis of the wrongness of John's behavior. Then John *must* convince himself after we have provided a good and detailed explanation of the context.

My reply is that the relation of supervenience does not have the explanatory power the particularist ascribes to it. An explanatory dependence of the moral property on the nonmoral features does not follow from the mere fact that two nonmorally indiscernible objects cannot be morally discernible (Depaul 1987, Kim 1990). In order to establish such dependence relation, the nonmoral features (the good- or bad-making properties) have to be relevant for the moral property and their relation has to be asymmetric; but supervenience (understood as covariance between properties) lacks these characteristics. Therefore, particularism needs a stronger explanatory-bridge principle between moral and nonmoral properties than supervenience. This principle has to be *reductive* since contextual features have to *fully* explain the moral property; but the particularist cannot appeal to a type-reductionism (the goodness of an action is reducible to a general property), because it would be inconsistent with the metaphysical claim of MP. Dancy's concept of *resultance* (Dancy 2004: 89-93) is one possible candidate: it is meant as an explanatory relation among particular nonmoral properties and particular moral reasons. In my view, it can be considered as a kind of *token-reductionism*: particular nonmoral properties fully ground moral ones, while no general nonmoral property fully grounds the moral one. However, the fact that resultance has to be understood as a primitive metaphysical explanation, without any true generalizations, makes the framework quite obscure. For instance, the statement remains obscure that John's favoring his relative counts as reason against his conduct "in virtue of some primitive explanatory relation between what he did and what counts as moral reason".

The second possible line of reply is epistemological rather than metaphysical. The particularist might say that the context in which we deliberate does not have only natural properties, but is rich in moral properties that an agent can perceive. Our friend John does not have sufficient moral sensitiveness and hence fails to perceive the wrongness of his conduct. This latter response leads MP to a kind of moral intuitionism.[8] Particularist intuitionism has two main tasks: first, explaining how agents access moral properties and, second, showing how this access guarantees rational forms of communication in or-

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[8]   "Intuitionism" in the moral domain is the claim that at least some moral propositions are "self-evident" (Stratton-Lake 2002), That is, intuitions about moral facts provide independent justification for some moral propositions.

der to make moral reasons shareable and arguable. If particularism did not succeed in these tasks, many moral disagreements – such as the one with John – would be unamenable to rational argumentation.

Recent developments on *moral perception* may help to ground a sound epistemology for particularism (see Audi 2013, Dancy 2010). However, it is still quite controversial whether subjects can literally perceive moral properties from particular situations (Vayrynen 2018). A moral-particularist intuitionist needs an argument to dismiss an "inferentialist" account of moral knowledge, according to which particular judgments (for instance, "John's conduct is wrong") are always the result of an inference from a particular observed nonmoral fact (John's conduct) and a moral principle ("Nepotism is wrong") held by the judging subject.

Finally, one might argue that John would have had the same naive reaction consequent to an explanation of the principle ("What's wrong with nepotism?"); so the generalist account would not have an explanatory advantage over the particularist one. I do not think this is a good point, because even after that kind of reaction the generalist would have much to offer: she could use a more general explanation, such as "Nepotism is a practice that contributes to a dishonest society" or "Nepotism causes damage to other citizens", which in some way forces John to reply and directs the argument into rational patterns. Principles have more explanatory value than contextual reasons as they are linked to a more or less defined ethical *theory*. The most fundamental task for an ethical theory is not merely to make a list of rules saying what is good and what is bad, but rather to explain, justify, and provide rational means for orientating agents through discussions. Without this important theoretical work, moral principles would be obtuse and too rigid, as particularism affirms.

In conclusion, we can say that metaphysical and epistemological MP has to face this explanatory puzzle. In order to solve it, on the one hand it needs much metaphysical work to establish a strong token-reductive dependence between moral and nonmoral properties; on the other hand, it needs much epistemological work to build a robust account of moral perception. Moral generalism, instead, has a substantial advantage thanks to the use of general explanatory principles.

As I said previously, moral principles are supposed to capture invariant reasons. MP claims that such generalizations are not possible, since in particular contexts there are intensifiers, favorers, attenuators, enablers, and disablers. However – as Hooker (2008) notices – the simple fact that there are such contextual elements does not necessarily favor particularism. A pluralist generalist has two options: (a) not separate reasons from contextual

variables[9] or (b) distinguish contextual variables from reasons but explain and capture them in a theoretical account.

I think the latter option is a good move for the generalist. If she succeeded, she would rehabilitate the intuitive conception of principles such as "*In standard conditions*, we ought to keep promises" or "*In standard conditions*, we ought not to harm others". To strengthen this idea, it is useful to compare moral philosophy with other disciplines. For instance, in economics, where the contextual variables are many, some models are used in order to capture general regularities. The interesting aspect is that, though they are not necessarily valid laws – because conditions can change – they still maintain an explanatory and heuristic value that helps to make predictions.

In fact, they include the so-called *ceteris paribus* clause ("if conditions do not change"). For example, "Ceteris paribus, if the price of an asset increases, then the demand will decrease" or "Ceteris paribus, marginal utility is decreasing". Moral principles are not supposed to have a predictive value, but they can still have an important justificatory value – as we have seen in this section – and help with more practical problems, as we will see in the next section. Maybe the most important lesson that generalism can learn from particularism is to reconsider the concept of invariance so as to get a more fallibilist concept of invariance within a governable variability of contextual situations.

5.   *The practical need for principles*

The aim of moral principles does not consist just in explaining or justifying, but – inseparable from this function – in performing a prescriptive role of guidance in deliberations. As Ridge and McKeever (2016) notice, there are principles *qua standards*, which "purport to offer explanations of why given actions are right or wrong", and there are principles *qua guides*, which "purport to be well suited to guiding action". Most principles have to perform both functions.

In this last section, I intend to argue for the practical indispensability of moral principles as guides. My argumentation will try to reject the normative component of MP – that is, the thesis that moral principles are harmful or useless and lead to bad decisions because of their inflexibility. While so far the objections considered have been mainly metaethical, as they aimed to show how MP could not *explain* correctly moral practice and discourse, now we need normative considerations, which can contribute to showing that MP is not a *good* or desirable ethical position.

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[9]   This path might be hard, because, as Dancy showed, general reasons would become very long and unrealistic subjunctive conditionals (Dancy 2004).

Before considering the ways in which principles can be useful, we must distinguish – with Nussbaum (2000) – the practice of merely prescribing rules from genuine moral theorizing. As I stated previously, prescriptive rules, without a theoretical background, can be obtuse and harmful; the aim of a moral theory consists in explaining them, connecting reasons in a systematic and explicit manner, and providing arguments in favor of or against a line of conduct. If we mean principles as fundamental components of moral theorizing, then they must have an indispensable role in moral experience and practice. I want to mention three important features of principles: (1) *transmissibility and learning process* of ethics, (2) *orientation* in complex and undetermined situations, and (3) *predictability* of other agents' decisions.

(1) Practical knowledge, in general, requires norms and rules as an initial foothold in the process of learning. They are important especially for novices that have not acquired an expertise yet. For example, learning recipes is fundamental for someone who is not very experienced in cookery, and learning grammar rules is a necessary step toward mastering a new language. Of course, cooking and speaking a foreign language are know-how skills: an advanced level of these kinds of knowledge requires one to internalize rules and to act without them; but rules are indispensable in the process of transmission of those skills.

I think ethical knowledge is not an exception, from this point of view. It is true that the most virtuous persons are the ones who have internalized principles and can act without their support. It is also true that moral rules and principles *should* always be tested in the particular situation; that is why focusing on the context is very important, as particularists state. But despite that, general prescriptions are still indispensable in moral learning and transmission processes for at least two reasons. First, if principles are derived from solid moral theories, they will be the result of a wide range of already-faced particular cases. Principles that include a long history of past moral experience can surely help to respond correctly to new situations because – notwithstanding the extreme contextual variability of human action – it is undeniable that some patterns tend to repeat themselves.

The second reason why general prescriptions are indispensable in the moral-learning process is that, whether they are theoretically well grounded or not, principle-based historical transmission is an ineradicable practice in a stable human community. Teaching ethical conduct through general prescriptions is the quickest and most effective way from an educational point of view because general prescriptions make people act promptly when they do not have time or capacity for deliberating thoughtfully (and this is the case in most situations). Assuming that, stating that we should avoid principles en-

tirely does not appear to be a good proposal. On the contrary, I think a good practice might be to transmit principles that are more theoretically grounded, testing them against particular situations and using individual cases to make generalizations more rigorous.

(2) The latter point leads to my second objection to normative MP, concerning the indispensability of theory-based principles in order to understand complex undetermined situations. Paradoxically, I think it is exactly in analyzing particular contexts that moral principles reveal their main usefulness. This is shown by Nussbaum (2000) and Lekan (2003).

We must consider that usually ordinary life does not leave much room for critical reflection and individual judgment. We live in a world that is deeply *theory-laden*, from a moral point of view: we can encounter social prejudices, theories about conduct, religious theories, theories based on convention and habit, magic, astrology, or exotic styles of life (Nussbaum 2000: 70). Even if the individual has good thoughts and intuitions in particular cases, she might feel overwhelmed by the persuading power of these kinds of theories and this might prevent her from doing the right thing. In a real context like this, philosophical rational theories can help the agent: first, by detecting implicit theories and their supposed reasons from the context, through a process of "estrangement or defamiliarization" (74); then, by countering them through rational arguments; and, in addition, by making good individual judgments and thoughts more explicit and systematic through sound generalizations. It is important to notice that theories cannot be taken as authorities individual agents must obey; on the contrary, theories are rational tools that demand just to listen their arguments in order to favor autonomous individual judgment (74).

Moral theories perform an important role in what Lekan (2003) has called "determination problems" (111-114), in which a current theoretical backdrop (often embodied in positive laws) does not work anymore and the situation needs to be restructured in a new, satisfying, and consistent way. For example, for many centuries "marital rape" was a conceptual impossibility, according to the dominant conception of marriage in Western countries. Individual criticisms and denounces were not enough: a feminist theory – with an overall picture of women's dignity and autonomy – was needed in order to change the legal system (Nussbaum 2000: 70-71). Other examples of determination problems are the first debates on the legalization of abortion and euthanasia: they started from individual experiences, but a more general moral theory about life and death was necessary in order to counter arguments based on traditional principles.

(3) The last normative objection I want to consider comes from Hooker (2000, 2008). It is based on the consideration that ethical particularism would

have bad effects on society and, as a consequence, it would not be desirable to live in a community populated by particularists.

Imagine a particularist agent makes us a promise (for instance, to take our laptop and bring it back at the end of the day). We do not know whether he is a good or bad person, so we cannot know whether he will do the right thing; we just know he is totally faithful to the particularist doctrine against moral principles. Would we believe his promise? The fact that we do not know for sure whether he will put importance on promise keeping in general counts against his trustworthiness. I think that in comparing the particularist agent with a generalist one – at the same level of moral reputation – we tend to trust the latter more since we do know, with a certain degree of probability, that she will assign value to promises, regardless of the particular decision she will make. The general point here is that the *predictability* of another agent's decisions is an important goal that each ethical theory should pursue. In order to create a society where people can trust each other, individuals should be able to predict – within some limits – others' reflections and choices. For this goal, the value ascribed to general principles is an indispensable means. On this basis, we might wonder whether we would like to live in a particularist society.

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