Moral Particularism

Edited by
BRAD HOOKER and
MARGARET OLIVIA LITTLE

explained in universalizable terms. But the explanations are not themselves
reasons, and they need not refer to factors which are reasons. In this case
they refer to the agents' moral character, and to the fact of their decisions,
neither of which are reasons for these agents.

4

Ethical Particularism and Patterns

Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith

Information couched in descriptive terms plays a major role in determin-
ing our moral judgements. Perhaps we learn that an action involves break-
ing a promise and respond by forming the view that it is wrong. Later we
learn that it was necessary to break the promise in order to save a life, and
retract our earlier judgement and decide that the action was right. Later
still we learn that, although a life was saved, many more were lost as result
of the promise-breaking and we return to our original judgement. Here we
have a simple example of the role of descriptive information in leading us
to a moral judgement, and of how our judgement may change as more
descriptive information comes to hand.

A familiar question in meta-ethics is the status of the passage from the
descriptive to the evaluative, from, as it is so often put, an 'is' to an 'ought'.
Is it an entailment? How might it be justified, if at all? Is it *sui generis*? Is it
to be understood as some kind of rationally defensible adopting of an atti-
tude? And so on. However, our focus will be on the question whether there
is a *pattern* in the transition, rather than on the status of the transition
itself. We will be concerned with whether there is a pattern to the way
descriptively given information determines moral conclusions, and, more
generally, with whether there are patterned interconnections between the
non-evaluative and the evaluative.

Utilitarians say that there are relatively simple patterns, and that they
know what they are; they say, for example, that if the ethical conclusion is
that X is right, the pattern is given by the rubric: X is right if and only if X
maximizes expected happiness. Others say that the pattern for rightness is
given by: X is right if and only if X is what an agent who exemplified all the
virtues would do; or by: X is right if and only if X satisfies a certain

weighted sum of prima facie duties better than any available alternative to X; or by: X is right if and only if X is what an ideal agent would desire to do.[1] Still others are agnostic about what the pattern is but are confident that there must be one; perhaps they hope to find the pattern during their next study leave and tell us what it is in a future article or book. Much of the history of normative ethics is the history of attempts to find and state the pattern in some set of more or less complicated principles. Let's call the consensus that lies behind this history *principle-ism*.

Our concern in this chapter is with a major challenge to this consensus that often goes under the name of *particularism*. Particularism's best known contemporary defenders are perhaps John McDowell, Jonathan Dancy and David McNaughton. Margaret Little has recently offered a particularly clear and concise account of the doctrine, and in what follows we have been much influenced by her formulations of the issues.[2] We should, though, emphasise that our focus is on the radical, interesting view we find common to their writings, not on textual fidelity to any individual presentation. According to these theorists, the relationship between descriptive or non-evaluative information, on the one hand, and a moral or evaluative verdict, on the other, is not merely complex—*pace*, say, utilitarianism—it is *irreducibly* complex. There is no codifiable pattern to be found in the passage from the descriptive to the ethical, and vice versa. Little puts the basic idea in a number of ways: 'There is no way of cashing out propositionally the ways in which non-evaluative properties contribute to the evaluative natures of situations, actions, characters.' 'The particularist's claim is that the *good-making relation* cannot be cashed out in propositional form.' '[Particularists] share the intuition that moral properties are, to use Simon Blackburn's felicitous phrase, "shapeless" with respect to the nonmoral.' 'To understand the real lesson of particularism is to understand that there is reason to doubt the existence of *any* codifiable generalities linking moral and nonmoral properties.'

A familiar objection to particularism is an epistemological one: we need moral principles to arrive at and justify our moral judgements.[3]

---

[1] We are thinking, of course, of versions of these views that cash out their key notions in descriptive terms.

[2] John McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason', *The Monist*, 62 (1979), 331–50; Jonathan Dancy, 'Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties', *Mind*, 92 (1982), 530–47; Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993); David McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Margaret Little, 'Moral Generalities Revisited', Ch. 12 this volume. Quotations in this paragraph of text from Little's chapter are from 283, 285, 279, 288 respectively.

[3] Russ Shafer-Landau, 'Moral Rules', *Ethics*, 107 (1997), 609.

Particularists talk of coming to know the moral landscape by discernment, or in similar terms; principle-ists hear this as a refusal to engage properly in the business of justifying one's moral judgements. They argue that we cannot properly adjudicate between competing discerned judgements except by noting the principles that one or the other discerned judgement falls under, or fails to fall under. However, our line of objection to particularism turns more on semantic and metaphysical considerations, as will emerge. But, first, it will be helpful to address some preliminary matters.

Preliminaries

The first preliminary concerns the distinction between, on the one hand, the descriptive, non-evaluative, factual, natural etc. and, on the other, the evaluative, ethical, normative, moral etc., that figures centrally in statements of the issue between particularism and principle-ism. All we can do here is presume some reasonable conception of the distinction and note that particularists do likewise. The statements of the particularist credo we gave above, and the statements and arguments to be found in the particularist literature, would all be a nonsense if there is no viable distinction to be drawn. Indeed, whether or not the relation between the descriptive and the moral is codifiable is not even a subject for discussion if there is no viable distinction between the descriptive and the moral to start with.

Though we will try, as much as possible, to frame matters so as to avoid begging controversial questions about the nature of the distinction, our own view is that it is probably best to think of the distinction as one between vocabularies rather than properties or states of affairs as such. For example, those who think that moral properties and states of affairs *are* descriptive or natural properties and states of affairs, still think that there is an important question concerning the relations between matters framed in the language of morals and matters framed in the language of the natural sciences. The question as to whether there are principles, properly so-called, of the form '$D \rightarrow E$', where 'D' and 'E' are descriptive and ethical sentences, respectively, is a question of interest independently of whether or not one should think of the sentences on each side of the conditional operator as concerning different properties or states of affairs, or as concerning the same properties and states of affairs but picked out in different terms. We will, though, sometimes speak loosely in the interests of brevity of, for example, moral properties and situations, when strictly it would be best to talk of properties and situations picked out in moral terms. Also,

although we will conduct the discussion in terms of the 'thin' moral terms—indeed, we will mainly focus on the term 'right'—what we say could be said *mutatis mutandis* about the thick moral terms like 'courageous' and 'generous'. Our case for saying that there are patterned inter-connections between the descriptive and the ethical is independent of whether the ethical is thought of as thin or thick.

The second preliminary concerns the bearing of 'hedged' generalizations of various kinds on the debate. It is not in dispute that many acts of deliberate torture are wrong. It is not in dispute that when they are wrong, very often the reason that they are wrong is that they are acts of deliberate torture. Or at least these facts had better not be in dispute. It might, accordingly, be suggested that we can non-controversially say 'Typically or other things equal or . . . an act of deliberate torture is wrong', and that particularists can only be objecting to ethical theories that offer neat, exceptionless generalizations; their objection cannot be to patterns and principles linking the descriptive and the moral *per se*; it must be to ones that seek to avoid terms like 'other things equal' and 'typically'.

However, this would be to misunderstand the radical, and radically interesting, nature of the particularists' proposal. They are much more than pluralists about value who insist that, when we try to state how the different values stack up, we cannot avoid the hedgers' usual suspects. Nor do they belong to the party which insists that these usual suspects are ultimately vacuous, that all you can ever really mean by 'As are typically Bs' is that As are Bs when they are Bs. They have too much respect for common-sense to hold that self-denying position. Their view is that we cannot understand the hedge terms descriptively, that they do not capture something about the descriptive way things are.

Perhaps the key point can be best grasped via a simple example. Consider the following raft of true conditionals connecting facts about particular heights with facts about who is taller:

If x is 180cm and y is 190cm, then x is shorter than y
If x is 185cm and y is 190cm, then x is shorter than y
If x is 180cm and y is 170cm, then x is not shorter than y

and so on.

There is an obvious pattern in the antecedents, and, once you have grasped it, you have grasped what it is for someone to be shorter than someone else. What is required is that you latch on to the right way to go on, that you see what the 'and so on' comes to. There are contentious issues here; namely, those discussed under the heading of the rule-following

debate. All the same, whatever sceptics may say, we do grasp what is meant by 'and so on' in these kinds of contexts, and, in doing so, we grasp a similarity *among* the states of affairs specified in the antecedents.

The contention of the particularists is that, when given a list of conditionals of the form

If D_i then E

where the D_i are various descriptive states of affairs in which some particular moral claim E is true, no matter how long and varied the list may be, we can never say 'and so on'. The problem is not the term 'and so on' as such. As we have just seen, that can play a perfectly legitimate role. The problem, according to particularists, is that there is no projectible pattern in the D_is to latch on to. There is no pattern *in the D_is*, the grasping of which would enable you to write down new members of the list.

The same applies to terms like 'typically' and 'other things equal'. When biologists say what hearts typically do, they say what, among the hearts, is typical; the problem, according to particularists, with saying that torture is typically wrong is not that it is false, but that what is typical is not typical among the relevant descriptive circumstances: you cannot find the 'shape' if you restrict yourself to the descriptive facts alone.

The third preliminary concerns what particularists mean by holding that the relation between the descriptive and the moral is irreducibly complex; that the moral is shape*less*. The doctrine is not that there is a pattern in the descriptive facts that underlie an act's being, say, right, but it is a highly complex, difficult-to-spot one. That view would simply be a principle-ism that maintained that the principles are complex and hard to spot. The doctrine is that there is not even a highly disjunctive commonality or pattern that unites the right acts when described in descriptive terms. It is not, for example, like Wittgenstein's famous example of a game and, more generally, of family resemblances. In these cases, it can be difficult to spot or state the pattern, but the fact that, given a large enough diet of examples, we can say of some new case whether or not it is, say, a game (or, perhaps, that it is indeterminate whether it is or not) shows that there is a pattern we can latch on to; our ability to project shows that we have discerned the complex commonality that constitutes the pattern.

As a final preliminary, we should mention that the contention that there is no pattern in or among the descriptive facts underpinning some given moral category is occasionally expressed in an unfortunate way. Sometimes particularists express it by saying that we could not grasp the relevant

pattern unless we had the relevant moral concept.[4] However, this is something that analytical descriptivists in ethics accept. Consider, for example, *analytical* utilitarians who hold that 'X is right' *means* 'X maximizes expected happiness'. According to them, the relevant descriptive similarity among right acts is maximizing expected happiness, and you cannot grasp that without grasping the relevant moral concept because that *is* the relevant moral concept. But, of course, analytical utilitarianism is an extreme version of exactly the kind of doctrine that particularists oppose. The key issue, therefore, is not whether you can grasp the descriptive similarity without grasping the moral concept, but whether there is a descriptive similarity to be grasped.

Supervenience Conditionals

Particularists typically grant the supervenience of the ethical on the descriptive, but insist that it is consistent with their view. We agree that supervenience, *in and of itself*, is compatible with their view, but will argue that considerations that take off from the fact of supervenience raise serious problems for particularism.

Supervenience is the thesis that descriptively identical situations, actions, characters and so on are evaluatively identical. It comes in two versions in discussions in ethics. One is a global thesis, and one is an intra-world thesis. The global thesis says that descriptively identical worlds are morally or evaluatively identical; the intra-world thesis says that descriptively identical acts, states, etc. within a world are morally identical. From the global thesis, the version that will mainly concern us here, it follows that there are necessary truths that take us from the descriptive way things are to the moral way they are; if the moral nature of a world cannot vary independently of its descriptive nature, then descriptive nature fixes moral nature. In particular, any complete specification of the descriptive nature of a possible world—a specification that is true at that possible world and at all possible worlds that are descriptively exactly like that world—necessarily determines whether or not, say, X is right in that world. There will, therefore, be a raft of necessarily true conditionals whose antecedents are complete specifications of the descriptive nature of a world and whose consequents say that X is right, and another raft of necessarily true conditionals whose antecedents are complete specifications of the descriptive nature of a world and whose consequents say that X is not right.

[4] See, e.g., Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, 78, and his discussion of McDowell on p. 79.

To simplify the discussion, let's focus on the various complete descriptive specifications of ways things might be that determine that X is right. Supervenience tells us that there is a raft of conditionals of the following form:

If D_1, then X is right
If D_2, then X is right.

We can write this as a single conditional, thus

If D_1 or D_2 or . . ., then X is right.

Here we have a conditional that takes us from the descriptive to the moral. But particularists are right to urge that this fact is, in itself, no vindication of principle-ism. The reason is that, for all that supervenience says, there need be no pattern in the dependence of the moral on the descriptive reflected in this conditional, or, equally, in the raft from which it was constructed; there may be no pattern unifying the D_i. The conditional *per se* does not constitute a principle of the sort in which the principle-ist believes. For all that supervenience says, the assignment of moral properties among the various complete descriptive states of affairs could be essentially random. Provided only that identical descriptive states of affairs are assigned the same moral predicates, supervenience will be respected. As the point is important, we will labour it with a simple example; also the example will be useful later in the paper.

Suppose we construct a machine that flashes a light only when objects of certain shapes are placed in front of it. Suppose, further, that we programme which shapes will, and which shapes will not, trigger the flash of light by using a table of random shapes and the following rule: a shape triggers a light flash if and only if its first appearance in the table is at an odd-numbered place. If, *per impossibile*, every possible shape appears in the table, we will have two conditionals of the form

If a presented object has shape . . . or . . . or . . ., the light will flash
If a presented object has shape . . . or . . . or . . ., the light will not flash

whose antecedents between them cover every shape. It will then be true that identity in triggering light flashings supervenes on identity in shape. However, there will be no pattern in the connection between shapes and light flashings. Or, more precisely, there will be no pattern *in the shapes*

themselves. There will, of course, be an extraneous pattern: the shapes that trigger the light will all share the property of having made their first appearance at an odd-numbered place in the random table, and the shapes that fail to trigger the light will have made their first appearance at an even-numbered place in the table.

The upshot is that, although supervenience tells us that there are necessarily true conditionals that take us from descriptive ways things might be to moral ways things might be, it is a separate question whether there are moral principles in the sense of patterned connections between descriptive ways things might be and moral ways things might be. This sounds like good news for particularism, but, in fact, when we look at the various ways that supervenience might be respected without there being the kind of patterned connections between the descriptive and the moral that principle-ists affirm and particularists deny, we find serious problems in each way—or so we now proceed to argue. As we said earlier, supervenience in itself is compatible with particularism; it is considerations that take off from it that cause the trouble.

We start by considering the suggestion that the connection between the descriptive and the moral is essentially akin to that between shapes and light flashings in our example—that is, that the reason that there is no pattern in the connection between the descriptive and the moral, over and above the minimum required to respect supervenience, is that we are dealing with what is, at bottom, a random phenomenon.

Could the 'Connection' be Random?

We suspect that few particularists will want to embrace this suggestion, but we place an objection to it on the table, nevertheless. It is important that it be clear that the suggestion is bizarre and, hence, that a major question for particularists is how their view differs from it. Also, the thought behind the objection will play an important role in later sections.

We can diagram the suggestion as follows (Figure 1). The 'randomness' suggestion is that there is no pattern uniting what lies inside and outside the circles in either case. In neither case could you say for a new case—a new shape or a new descriptively specified action—based on the answer for as many old cases as you care to nominate, whether it fell inside or outside the circle.

The basic objection to this suggestion is a semantic one. We use words to mark divisions. Tables are different from chairs, and we mark this by using
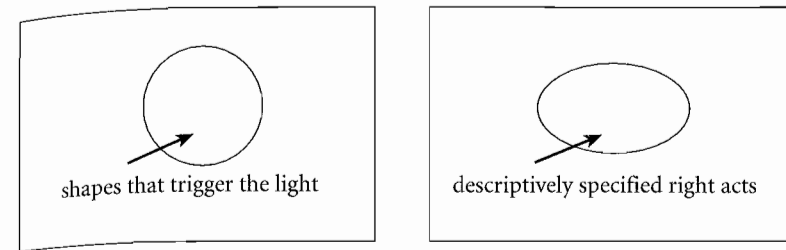
Figure 1

different words for them. In the same way, wrong acts are different from right ones—how else could it make sense to care which we did? And we use the moral terms to tell each other about the difference; the word 'right' is (and had better be on pain of not knowing what papers and discussions in ethics are about) a good word for talking about right acts. What, then, marks off the acts we use 'right' for from the acts we use 'wrong' for? Or, equivalently, what do the right ones have in common that the wrong ones lack?

Particularists cannot answer that what unites right actions is *simply* the fact that we properly apply the predicate 'is right' to them. The problem with this answer can be variously put by saying that there is no such thing as bare predication, that predicates apply because of how things are, or that predication supervenes on nature. They might say that all that the right actions have in common is that they belong to the set of right actions. Grasp of the predicate 'is right' simply consists in a grasp of the various D_i which constitute that set. But this cannot be *all* that unites the class of right actions. There must be some commonality in the sense of a pattern that allows projection from some sufficiently large subset of the D_i to new members. If there isn't, we finite creatures could not have grasped through a finite learning process (the only sort there is) the predicate 'is right'. So, there must be a pattern or commonality—in the weak sense operative in this paper of that which enables projection—uniting the set of right acts.

It might be objected that, *pace* what we said before in the preliminaries, Wittgenstein's example of family resemblances shows that this line of thought is mistaken. A diet of examples, or putative examples, can give us understanding of a term, can allow us to grasp a concept, without its being the case that there is a pattern exemplified by the examples, namely, the pattern whose grasp underlies our ability to say of new cases whether or not they fall under the concept. What shows this is that, in the case of family

resemblance concepts, new cases often call for *decision*—perhaps arbitrary, perhaps guided by 'external' considerations.[5] But then, the argument might continue, there is no pattern, because if there were, no decision would be called for. However, if there is no pattern in the diet of examples, *every* new case would call for decision, and any decision would be as good, semantically speaking, as any other. Sceptics about meaning can perhaps embrace this conclusion, but meaning scepticism is a high price to pay for particularism in ethics. We can all agree that there are cases where it is indeterminate whether or not some concept or term applies (and this is consistent with there being a pattern, because it can be indeterminate whether or not a pattern is exemplified), but only a meaning sceptic accepts wholesale indeterminacy.

But if there must be a pattern uniting the right acts, either it is a descriptive one, in which case particularism is false, or it is one which cannot be understood in terms of the presence or absence of the descriptive—something unanalysable and non-natural, as G. E. Moore put it when discussing goodness.[6] If this is the particularists' view, however, then we think that they can fairly be accused of false advertising. Under examination the new and exciting thesis that there are no moral principles collapses into the jejune doctrine advanced by Moore at the turn of the century: moral properties are *sui generis*, and hence are not to be found among the descriptive.

It might be objected that there is another possibility. The pattern uniting the right acts might be neither descriptive nor a *sui generis* Moorean one; it might be something like *being something that there is a good reason to do* or a pattern capturable in terms of the thick moral concepts. However, being something that there is a good reason to do, along with being generous and the like, supervene on the descriptive in exactly the same way that rightness does: two descriptively identical acts cannot differ solely in that one is something that there is a good reason to do whereas the other is not; two descriptively identical acts cannot differ solely in that one is generous whereas the other is not. This means that the same line of argument applies to them. Our language for talking about them—the predicates 'is something that there is good reason to do' and 'is generous'—must apply because of the nature of what they apply to. There must, therefore, be a pat-

[5] H. L. A. Hart's example of the distinction between the legal and the illegal may well be one where new cases often call for decision, but there are external considerations in the sense of general ethical and practical considerations relevant to which decision should be made.

[6] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: CUP, 1929), ch. 1.

tern that makes it intelligible how we could have mastered that language. But, given their supervenience on the descriptive, the choice is then as before: either there is a projectible descriptive pattern, or else the unifier is *sui generis*.

Uncodifiable Patterns?

It might be objected that we moved too quickly when we said that if there is a descriptive pattern, particularism is false. Particularists can and should allow that there are patterns in the way the moral connects with the descriptive. Their claim is rather that these patterns are *uncodifiable* or escape *propositional* capture. But what does this amount to? Perhaps to be codifiable or propositionally capturable is to be expressible in language. The particularists' claim would then be, on the construal now in play, that there is a pattern in the way that the moral connects with the descriptive, but it is one we cannot, as a matter of principle, express in words; there is, for example, a descriptive pattern uniting the right acts but we cannot *say* what it is.

One way this might be true is by virtue of the descriptive patterns being ones we cannot know: if we cannot know what the patterns are, we can hardly capture them in words. But unknowable patterns present similar problems to non-existent ones. We noted earlier that if the connection between descriptive ways things are and moral ways things are is a random one, then it is impossible to see how we could have come to grasp moral concepts by exposure to, or reflection on, a finite number of cases. The same is true if, *as far as we can tell*, the connection is a random one. We might know that some descriptive similarities or other were germane to questions about the distribution of moral properties, but if we could not know which they were, we would not know which similarities we could properly regard as germane. Moreover, the suggestion is an open invitation to scepticism: if there is a descriptive pattern that settles what is right but we cannot know it, we cannot know what is right. The view is an invitation to scepticism in the same way as one that holds that what is right is settled by what God approves of, at the same time as holding that we cannot know what God approves of.

Therefore, particularists who hold that there is a pattern should allow that it can be known. But then it is hard to see why we could not capture it in words. There are many things we know that we do not have words for— for example, the number of colours we can recognize substantially outruns

Consider a familiar question that arises in discussions of colour. One thing that unites red things is that they typically look red. It is plausible that this is part of our concept of red, which is why it is plausible that something (*something*) along the lines of '*x* is red if and only if *x* typically looks red in normal circumstances' is a priori. However, we can be confident that something *further* unites red things. The fact that colour vision evolved—in part, it seems, to help detect what is edible—tells us that the unity in our response to red things—their looking red in normal circumstances—connects to some underlying common feature, albeit one which is moderately disjunctive and of interest only to creatures with certain kinds of physiological makeups. There are, that is, two patterns: one in the nature of our response, and the other in the nature of what our response is to.

The same is true quite generally of the classifications we effect with terms like 'comic', 'attractive', and 'calming'. For example, comic situations are united in what they typically tend to do to us, their tendency to make us laugh; this is a conceptual fact about the comic.[8] But they are also united in what explains what they typically tend to do to us. It is the latter that essays on the essential nature of comedy are usually directed to elucidating. One suggestion, for example, is that comic situations are united by the fact that they make us expect a connection between two ideas when we know perfectly well that no such connection really exists; it is this feature that underwrites the tendency comic situations have to make us laugh.

Now, many have held that the concept of rightness is like the comic, colour, and so on, in having a response-dependent element. Just as part of what makes something comic is its effect on us, so part of what makes something right is its effect on us. For example, one suggestion is that part of what makes something right is that it ideally tends to attract us, and this is the sense in which internalism in ethics is true.[9] If this, or something along these general lines, is right, and we think it is, there are two questions to ask about right actions: Is there a descriptive pattern essentially involving our responses to right actions? and: Is there also a descriptive pattern *in* the right actions themselves?

We might call the view that there is no descriptive pattern *in* the right actions themselves *restricted* particularism. It holds that all that unifies the

---

[8] This is putting the point very roughly. There is, of course, a normative element to be acknowledged. Some things that tend to make us laugh *ought* not to do so, and are thereby disqualified from being comic.

[9] Response-dependence in this sense is a matter of certain responses being part of what makes a term or concept apply to something. Response-dependence in a quite distinct (and, we would argue, much more ubiquitous) sense is a matter of certain responses being in part responsible for a term or concept having the content that it does.

---

right (and, for that matter, the good, the bad, and so on) lies in something about our responses. This can be given descriptively, and so, in one perfectly good sense, there are principles, properly so called, running to and from the descriptive and the moral, and the moral is not shapeless with respect to the descriptive. However, on this view, its shape can only be discerned when you step back and see its effects on us. Obviously, restricted particularism is a substantial retreat on what some particularists want to say—the moral is shaped, albeit that its shape comes from our responses—but we hazard, all the same, that restricted particularism is, at bottom, the view of many who call themselves particularists.[10]

Restricted particularism is not subject to the semantic argument we brought against full-blown particularism. By allowing that there are descriptive patterns unifying the situations, acts, characters, and so on that fall under some given moral classification, it respects the supervenience of predication on nature without thereby being committed to the existence of a class of Moorean *sui generis* moral properties to provide that nature.[11]

It is, however, very hard to believe that the *only* way to unify right acts is by looking at the descriptively specified, response-dependent role that they play—and hence that there is no descriptive unity in the acts themselves. The reason is that if this were true, the acts *themselves* would have to be as randomly related as the set of shapes that trigger the light in our example earlier in the paper. When we look at an act itself, independently of the response-dependent role it plays, it is all a 'mess'. But this would violate the platitude about moral argument that, in debating controversial moral issues, a central role is played by various similarity claims, claims of the form 'Given you say that about this case, the onus is on you to explain why you do not say the same about this other similar case,' where it is often clear

---

[10] Our qualified suggestion is that restricted particularism is the view McDowell defends in 'Virtue and Reason'. Our evidence for this is McDowell's assimilation of values to secondary qualities, as opposed to primary qualities, in Ted Honderich (ed.), 'Values and Secondary Qualities', *Morality and Objectivity* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985). Our suggestion must be qualified, however, because in the latter paper McDowell does appear to back away from the idea that we could give a purely descriptive characterization of moral features as dispositions to elicit responses in us: 'we make sense of fear by seeing it as a response to objects that *merit* such a response' (p. 119). We must admit that this does sound like the postulation of a *sui generis* Moorean moral property of *being meritworthy*. The problem, of course, is that if McDowell does postulate such a property then it is difficult to see what the assimilation of values to secondary qualities, as opposed to primary qualities, really amounts to.

[11] For the record, Mooreans can allow that there are descriptive patterns *in* the right acts themselves. They are simply committed to denying that the descriptive pattern provides us with a semantics for 'right'. As proof of this, witness the example of Moore himself who was, after all, an ideal utilitarian, and hence, in one perfectly good sense, a principle-ist.

that the similarities in question are descriptive ones *in the acts themselves*, as opposed to similarities in the response-dependent role they play. For example, defenders of abortion are challenged to explain why they oppose infanticide; those who oppose contraception on the grounds that it is unnatural are asked to explain why they do not oppose the wearing of spectacles; and meat eaters who oppose sexism and racism are asked about speciesism. While the force of this kind of challenge is always open to debate in any given case, it is incredible that there is something in principle wrong with making it. It is, surely, a platitude that, in any discussion that counts as being about morality, one who claims that acts of a certain sort are right while claiming that acts of a similar but not identical sort are wrong is required to justify themselves; it is a platitude, that is, that descriptive similarities and differences in acts are relevant to moral similarities and differences in acts. But, if the connection between the descriptive nature of acts themselves and the moral is random, it is random. To think that descriptive similarities and differences in acts have something to do with moral similarities and differences would be like thinking that, in our shape example, shape similarities and differences are relevant to similarities and differences over whether or not they trigger the light. (Moreover, we had better have some idea of which descriptive similarities matter, otherwise we would be at a complete loss to know which to appeal to.)

Particularists sometimes appeal to the idea that there can be patterns that only become visible at certain levels of generality. They say, in effect, that similarities can *emerge*, and cite the famous Putnam 'round hole, square peg' example. They argue that when a square peg fails to go through a round hole whose diameter equals the side of the peg, although there will always be an explanation in terms of proton positions, what unites the phenomena is invisible at the level of protons and their positions. This is hard to believe. Surely what unites the phenomena at the level of proton positions are how far apart various protons are from one another and the rigidity of the lattices they make up. It is true, of course, that what unites the phenomena will be harder to spot if we are restricted to framing our information in terms of proton positions, but the question concerns what is possible in principle, not degrees of difficulty. But, in any case, the crucial point here is that if it really were true that what unites the phenomena is invisible as a matter of principle at the level of protons, then it would be a fundamental mistake to argue from similarities at the level of protons to similarities at the level of round holes and square pegs. If it really is a complete 'mess' at the proton level, the best one could ever do would be to argue from *identity* at the level of proton positions, to identity in behaviour

of the macroscopic objects. In the same way, the doctrine that moral similarities emerge from the descriptive facts would not help the restricted particularist explain the relevance of descriptive similarities in acts to ethical debates; rather, it would mean that such similarities were irrelevant except in the case where they amount to exact similarity in every descriptive respect. It is this that is so hard to believe.

A variant on restricted particularism which allows that there are pertinent descriptive similarities in the acts themselves holds that items that fall under some moral classification form regions that display intra- but not inter-descriptive similarity. The situation is diagrammed below in Figure 2 for the case of right actions. Inside the circles are items that are suitably descriptively similar—how similar might well vary from one case to another—but there is no similarity between items in different regions. Would this possibility be one where there was no pattern in all the right acts? It depends on whether there are indefinitely many such regions. If there are only finitely many, we have the situation envisaged by some pluralists about value and we have automatically a pattern—a pattern made up, in effect, by a finite number of disparate disjuncts. It is a pattern because it is projectible—it is like the pattern we grasp when we grasp how to use the phrase 'is a rock or a number or a tiger'. Moreover, to refuse to count it as a pattern would simply reduce particularism to a version of pluralism about value which has principles linking the descriptive and the ethical that have, on the descriptive side, a finite disjunction with disparate disjuncts. If, on the other hand, there are indefinitely many such regions, we may have a case where there is no pattern in all the right acts. We would, nevertheless, have a view which respects the platitude about moral argument that similarities in acts are relevant to moral conclusions. This is because, for any right (wrong, etc.) act, there is a region of descriptive similarity around that act which contains only right (wrong, etc.) acts.
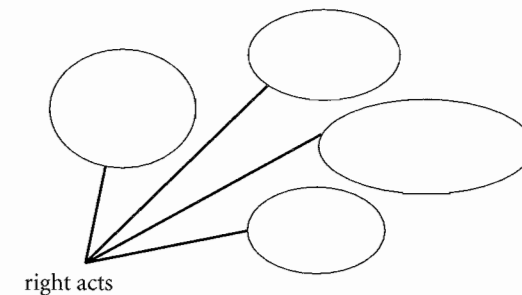

right acts

Figure 2

However, in view of the fact that we are finite beings, it is very hard to see how the needed unifier for all the right acts—the unifier we need by the semantic argument—could consist solely in some response to those acts. There is a limit to how many differences we can register. Sooner or later, the differences between the regions cease to matter and we can lump all regions after that point is reached together to get a finite set of 'super' regions, which returns us to the case just discussed.

Before we leave the question as to whether there is a descriptive pattern in the right acts over and above the pattern given by the response-dependent role they play, we should emphasize that this question is separate from the question as to whether we can see the *interest* or *point* of the pattern independently of the role played. Dancy sometimes seems to be arguing that there need be no 'relevant shape or similarities' in the 'resultance base' (his term for the relevant descriptive information) for some moral property; sometimes that the shape or similarity would only be visible to one who had the relevant moral concept; and sometimes that the point or rational interest of the shape or similarity would be unavailable to anyone who lacked the relevant moral concept.[12] We can agree with the last claim. Although we hold that there is a pattern in the resultance base, we can agree that much of its interest lies in the role it plays. Analogy: there is a pattern in the class of comic situations over and above their effect on us, but much of this pattern's interest lies in its effect on us. Only those who know about this effect understand the point of going to see a Chaplin film.

On the Particularists' Argument from Holism about Moral Reasons

We have argued that there must be patterned connections between the descriptive and the moral, that the moral cannot be shapeless with respect to the descriptive. If our argument succeeds, there must be something wrong with any argument that there is no such pattern, including the particularists' argument from the holism of moral reasons.[13] Can we, though, say something more illuminating than this?

Holism about moral reasons holds that any reason R for A being the right thing to do can be defeated by setting it in a wider context. Moreover,

---

[12] See, e.g., Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, 79f. The middle claim is essentially the one we argued earlier does not express a claim distinctive of particularism on the ground that it is part of, for example, analytical utilitarianism.

[13] See, e.g., Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, ch. 4.

it need not be the case that R retains its earlier 'valency'. It may be that, in the wider context, R is now a reason against doing A. In this kind of case, the wider context does not deliver additional reasons that weigh more heavily against A than does R in A's favour; it delivers reasons that turn R into a reason against A, that reverse R's valency, as it is put. Thus, it is argued that the pleasure arising from an action is often a reason for doing it, but if we learn that the action is torturing someone, then the pleasure becomes an *additional* reason against doing it. The pleasure is not a reason for that gets overwhelmed by the dreadful nature of torture; it makes the torture even worse. Let's grant this (undeniably attractive) way of viewing the matter.

Little observes that a similar situation obtains with inductive reasons. E may be a reason for H, while E conjoined with E^* may be a reason against H. But it need not be the case that E is a reason for H that gets overwhelmed in the sense that E^* is a stronger reason against H than E is for H. It may be that, in the context of E^*, E is a reason against H. Formally, the situation may be represented by the following inequalities:

$$Pr(H/E) > Pr(H); Pr(H/E.E^*) < Pr(H); Pr(H/E.E^*) < Pr(H/E^*).$$

Little refers to this as the holism of inductive reasons.

This analogy should make particularists pause. Because it is known that there are patterned distributions of prior probability—perhaps the most famous is Carnap's in terms of structure descriptions—which deliver inequalities like those listed. However, we will make the crucial point directly. We will show how an expected-value utilitarian approach to moral reasons delivers the kind of holism about reasons in question. And, of course, utilitarianism is perhaps the most famous principle-ist moral theory.

According to expected-value utilitarianism, the moral value of A is a weighted sum of the value of each possible world at which A obtains: $V(A) = \sum_w Pr(w/A).V(w)$, where $V(w)$ is a measure of the total happiness at w. And R is a reason for A if and only if the value of A given R is greater than the value of A, i.e., $\sum_w Pr(w/A.R).V(w) > \sum_w Pr(w/A).V(w)$, which obtains if and only if $V(A.R) > V(A)$.

On this model, it is easy to get cases where R_1 is a reason for A, $R_1.R_2$ is a reason against A, but not because R_2 outweighs R_1. It may be that, in the context of R_2, R_1 is a reason against A. The situation may be as follows:

$$V(A.R_1) > V(A); V(A.R_1.R_2) < V(A); V(A.R_1.R_2) < V(A.R_2).$$

How can this happen? If the value in the A worlds is mainly in the A worlds which are also R_1 worlds, R_1 will be a reason for A. This is consistent with the value in those $A.R_1$ worlds mainly being in the worlds where R_2 is not the case, so that $R_1.R_2$ is a reason against A. Further, provided that $R_1.R_2$ is an unlikely way for either R_1 or R_2 to be realised, this in turn is consistent with the $R_1.R_2$ worlds being especially bad, so that R_1 is a reason against A in the context of R_2. Here is a diagram (Figure 3) illustrating the key point. The first number in each region is the value of that region given that A obtains; the second number is the probability of that region obtaining given that A obtains. $V(A) = 3 \times 0.5 + 4 \times 0.2 + 1 \times 0.1 + 2 \times 0.2 = 2.8$; $V(A.R_1) = (4 \times 0.2 + 1 \times 0.1) \div 0.3 = 3$; $V(A.R_1.R_2) = 1 \times 0.1 \div 0.1 = 1$; $V(A.R_2) = (1 \times 0.1 + 2 \times 0.2) \div 0.3 = 1.67$. These figures deliver the inequalities.
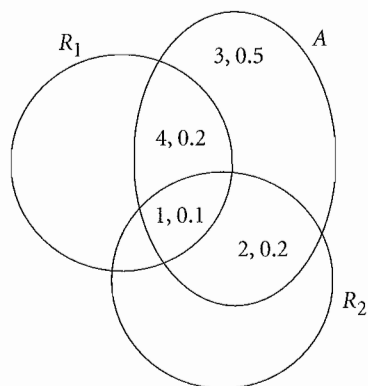

Figure 3

So, holism about moral reasons in the sense of variable valency is compatible with patterned connections—in particular, the patterned connections endorsed by utilitarianism—between the descriptive and the moral. What is true, though, is that patterned connections are incompatible with what we might call unrestricted holism about moral reasons. Unrestricted holism maintains that, no matter the quantity and nature of the descriptive information you have that provides a reason for some moral conclusion, say, that X is right, more may come to hand that leaves the previous information undisturbed and yet, when combined with it, provides a reason against X being right. Believers in principles that run from the descriptive to the moral must deny this kind of holism. For they believe that there are necessary truths of the form 'D→E', and if 'D→E' is necessary, so is

'D.I→E'. Once you have to hand the descriptive information that makes up the antecedent of some necessary principle that runs from the moral to the ethical, the only way that new information can undermine the moral conclusion is by undermining the original information.

What we principle-ists must say, and are happy to say, about the particularists' argument from the holism of moral reasons is that, sooner or later, as more and more descriptive information of the right kind comes to hand, the phenomenon they point to washes out.

Conclusion

Particularism is the view that the evaluative is shapeless with respect to the descriptive: there is no descriptive pattern unifying the class of right acts. Against this we argued that, absent a Moorean appeal to the *sui generis*, particularism falls to a semantic argument. The only plausible explanation of our capacity to use evaluative predicates to mark distinctions in the ways things are is the existence of a descriptive pattern unifying all cases of right action. On our view, an important part of that pattern is provided by the response-dependent role played by moral features. This allows us to separate out a more restricted version of particularism, a version which holds that right acts are only united by the response-dependent role that they play; there is no descriptive unity *in* the right acts themselves. Against this, we argued that it contradicts the platitude that it is always appropriate to ask why descriptive similarities and differences *in* the right acts themselves fail to match up with moral similarities and differences. Restricted particularism makes the appropriateness of such appeals inexplicable.