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Another Particularism: Reasons, Status and Defaults

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Abstract This paper makes the non-monotonicity of a wide range of moral reasoning the basis of a case for particularism. Non-monotonicity threatens practical decision with an overwhelming informational complexity to which a form of ethical generalism seems the best response. It is argued that this impression is wholly misleading: the fact of non-monotonicity is best accommodated by the defence of four related theses in any theory of justification. First, the explanation of and defence of a default/challenge model of justification. Secondly, the development of a theory of epistemic status and an explanation of those unearned entitlements that accrue to such status. Thirdly, an explanation of the basis of epistemic virtues. Finally, an account must be given of the executive capacity of rational decision itself as a ‘contentless ability’. This overall set of views can accommodate a limited role for generalizations about categories of evidence, but not such as to rescue a principled generalism. In particular, the version of particularism defended here explains why one ought not to accept the principled “holism” that has proved to be a problem for Dancy’s form of particularism. Ethics certainly involves hedged principles. However, principles cannot be self-hedging: there cannot be a “that’s it” operator in a principle as Richard Holton has claimed that there can be. Practical reasoning is concluded by the categorical detachment of the action-as-conclusion itself.

Keywords Moral particularism · Moral reasons · Non-monotonic reasoning

Particularism is the view that our ethical judgement cannot be captured by any finite set of finite principles.¹ In this paper I present one line of argument for this claim that focuses on

¹To be precise, I am committed to the strongest possible form of particularism in which a finite set of finite principles cannot model our ethical judgement, so is not a sufficient condition of our capacity for judgement, nor is it implicated in how we do judge, so it is not a necessary condition of that capacity either. For further explanation of this distinction in terms of an analogy with knowledge of grammar see Thomas (2010a).

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the fact that practical reasoning is typically *non-monotonic*.² Informally, non-monotonic reasoning is such that any arbitrary addition of evidence to the premises that support a conclusion could change the cogency of that support. I will argue that non-monotonicity is the underlying rationale for a central claim of particularism, namely, that a moral principle may be vulnerable to *supersession*. Furthermore, the best explanation of our capacity to reason practically given its non-monotonic character is that practical reasoning is the exercise of, as Jonathan Dancy once put it, “a contentless ability” (Dancy 1993, p.50).

What, then, is supersession? An example of supersession is the following: the principle “Killing is wrong”, plus the premise that a particular act is a killing, yields the conclusion that the act is wrong. But add a superseding fact, such that the proposed killing is in justifiable self-defence, and the conclusion reverses: the act is not wrong. I will argue that supersession is the guise taken in the debate over particularism by the fact that reasoning about practice as a whole is typically non-monotonic.

My argument proceeds as follows: I first present a *prima facie* case for the non-monotonicity of practical reasoning. I then note that non-monotonicity seems to pose a challenge to the plausibility of moral particularism because it threatens to overwhelm the judging subject with too much potentially relevant information.³ I then describe two strategies that are responses to such complexity.

The first is a general default/challenge model of epistemic justification. This model highlights the important role played in justification by the idea of an epistemic subject’s status and of the unearned entitlements that accrue to such status.⁴

The second strategy focuses on our executive capacity for verdictive decision and its expression in action. Taken together, both strategies offer a way of dealing with the problem of informational complexity as a general problem of epistemology. However, I conclude that the composite case for using these strategies as a response to informational complexity supports, as a corollary, moral particularism.

It seems to me an advantage that this form of particularism can acknowledge a role for general principles in ethical reasoning. Indeed, it goes to some lengths to highlight the role played by hedged principles in all our materially sound reasoning as helping to form the background knowledge from which we defeasibly reason.⁵ Hedged general principles are

² I have titled this paper “Another Particularism”, but the version of particularism defended here is not a rival to Dancy’s particularism but picks up on one strand in his ideas. That strand is clearest in Dancy (1993) when he refers to ethical judgement as a “contentless ability” in the way I have noted. In more recent work Dancy has foregrounded his argument from reasons holism in a way that has proved inconclusive against his generalist opponents; the argument strategy here is a return to an aspect of his earlier approach. For the view in the literature closest to my own see Garfield (2000). But I will also note the various passages in Dancy (2004) that continue to highlight the conception of sound practical reasoning as a “contentless ability” and Dancy’s endorsement of the Aristotelian thesis that practical reasoning is terminated by action. Dancy, ‘Practical Reasoning and Inference’, unpublished manuscript.

³ I will call this the problem of “informational complexity”. Arguments from informational complexity to an unrestricted generalism are prominent in Ridge and McKeever (2006). They claim to respect the finite and limited resources of creatures like us while also setting us the cognitive task of grasping a principle that would dictate a practical verdict for all actual and counterfactual circumstances in which it might be applied. I do not think this does take our cognitive limitations seriously but a detailed consideration of their views requires a separate paper, Thomas (2010b).

⁴ A focus on informational complexity also suggests a rationale for why some of the epistemic agent’s competences take the form of epistemic virtues.

⁵ Of course there is a substantive argument with those who also acknowledge the role played by hedged principles in ethics (and who deny that there are any strict principles in ethics) such as Lance and Little, Robinson and Väyrynen. For those theorists my view is calculatedly superficial: I have identified merely the form of good practical reasoning. But there must be content, too, and we need to start from the substantively “correct” hedged principles that exhibit either deontic kinds or the correct explanatory basis of a true verdict. I will touch on some of the issues here in section 4, below.

another means of dealing with informational complexity. There are compelling examples of plausible, hedged, principles of evidential salience that play an important role in ethical deliberation. However, this apparent concession to the truth of generalism is, I shall argue, actually no concession at all.⁶

At this point I explicitly contrast my strategy with that of Dancy. For wider reasons in the philosophy of mind the thesis on which he bases his version of particularism, “reasons holism”, does not place any great emphasis on non-monotonicity.⁷ That means that he cannot appeal to non-monotonicity in order to rule out the idea of a principled holism of the kind introduced by Richard Holton and further developed by Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge (Holton 2002; Ridge and McKeever 2006). I am, then, in a much better position than Dancy to explain why this kind of “principled holism” does not succeed in resurrecting ethical generalism and I will explain why this is so.

The principled holist claims that that which Dancy identifies as reasons holism is, in fact, the context relative nature of reasons. More specifically, those aspects of reasons that Dancy wants to locate as their enablers and defeaters ought to be removed from the presuppositions of the reasons and bootstrapped into their content to yield a complete, fully specified, reason that is invariant in its function. If Dancy’s opponents are right that this alternative strategy can be carried through, then his argument from reasons holism to moral particularism fails completely (Ridge and McKeever 2006, chapter two). You can acknowledge the data that reasons holism attempts to describe while still taking ethical thought to involve general principles, hedged on some views, strict and exceptionless on others.

Since I do not base my argument on the truth of reasons holism, this critique does not threaten the alternative strategy that I pursue here. Moral particularism remains the true account of ethical judgement, in spite of the apparent plausibility of principled holism, because of the role played by the provision that any arbitrary additional piece of information can change the degree of support for a conclusion. The role of the agent’s particular judgement about the individual case remains ineliminable (See also Garfield 2000).

It is only by acting that you show what you have concluded when you reason practically. By your action, even when justified by hedged moral principles, you remove the *ceteris paribus* clause, as it were, and demonstrate that all else *was* equal (Tenebaum, 2007a; b; Thomas 2010c). This kind of view explicitly draws attention to the role played in reasoning by hedged principles. But it rules out *self-hedging* principles and that remains a key difference with Holton and those generalists who want to exploit his central insight.

Holton inserts a “that’s it” clause within the content of materially good reasoning itself. His proposal works by inserting a “stopping” clause in the reasoning that declares that that very argument cannot be superseded by further considerations. However, I will argue that you cannot bootstrap into the content of good reasoning involving “*ceteris paribus*” clauses a representation of the fact that all else is equal. Any such strategy puts a presupposition of detaching a categorical conclusion in practical reasoning into the reasoning for that conclusion itself (Tenenbaum 2007a, b). In doing so it mistakenly runs together the implementation of reasoning and the meta-representation of reasoning in a way that leads to a regress.

⁶ One formulation of Dancy’s particularism is this: “A particularist conception is one which sees little if any role for moral principles”; later in the same passage he claims that you can be a “full moral agent” and not have any such principles at all (Dancy 2004, p. 1).

⁷ Dancy’s only consideration of a view of the kind defended here, his consideration of the work of Robert B. Brandom, views it as a failed attempt to defend generalism. That is because Dancy’s reason holism forces him to view the existence of even hedged principles as a problem for this version of particularism and as demanding a concession to the generalist that he cannot make. See Dancy, (2004) pp 8–9, 60–63.

I suspect it is partly Holton's recognition of that fact that explains why he offers no theory of practical decision. He offers, rather, a capacity to reconstruct moral reasoning *ex post facto* so as to show that any true verdict can be derived from a suitably formulated principle. The particularist part of his view is that one cannot codify morality in the form of a finite set of finite principles; clearly, I agree, and that part of Holton's view is an insight gratefully acknowledged by the particularist. However, motivated by an analogy with Gödel's account of the incompleteness of first order arithmetic, Holton also wants to show that for any true moral verdict one can demonstrate that it was derived from a principle notwithstanding the uncodifiability of morality. I will argue that this putative demonstration fails because of the problem posed to ethical judgement by its typically non-monotonic character and that only the particularist component of Holton's view is defensible.

1 Practical Reasoning and Non-monotonicity

An assumption that I will use in this paper, but not defend here, is that practical reasoning is essentially first personal (Williams, 1985, pp 67–68; Thomas 2010c). I mean something specific by this that can be unpacked in three distinct ways. First, that practical reasoning is, as Aristotle, Anscombe and Davidson argue, concluded by what an agent actually does. The conclusion of practical reasoning is an action presented to the agent under an essentially indexical mode of presentation (Dancy, 'Practical Reasoning and Inference', unpublished manuscript; Tenenbaum 2007a, b; Thomas 2010c). Secondly, in practical reasoning one has to acknowledge that downstream from deliberation (evaluation) is an executive phase of thought, namely decision, that is expressed by actions-as-conclusions. Finally, actions can be interpreted as the *expression* of such verdictive practical conclusions (Thomas 2010c).

This view is opposed by the more orthodox view that practical reasoning is reasoning that gets as close to action as thinking can without extending to the event that is the action itself. I call this a "hybrid" view of practical reasoning. Reasoning terminates at the limit of thought and is followed by a physical event. The first personal view, by contrast, sees practical reasoning as concluded by the event that is the action itself and that event expresses your practical verdict. I have defended this thesis elsewhere and do not want to rehearse those arguments here.⁸ However, I do want to focus on that which, in the previous paper, emerges as the strongest rationale for favouring the first personality thesis and its view of practical reasoning over the competing hybrid view. That is the typically non-monotonic character of practical reasoning. The arbitrary addition of new information to the premises of an instance of practical reasoning can alter the cogency of that reasoning. It can do so by altering the degree of support that the premises offer to the conclusion.

Robert B. Brandom has emphasized the importance of this fact about practical reasoning. Reasoning of this general kind is modeled by formal systems in which the consequence relation lacks the property of monotonicity. Informally, good reasoning in non-monotonic domains is sensitive to the arbitrary addition of new information to one's premises in a way that can affect the cogency of the conclusion (Brandom 1998; Horty 2001). It follows directly from the property of non-monotonicity in materially good practical reasoning that we need to take seriously the claim that any arbitrary addition of information can change the degree of support for a verdictive conclusion to practical reasoning (Thomas 2007).

⁸ See Sergio Tenenbaum (2007a; b), Philip Clark (1997) and (2001) and Thomas 2010c.

One might further appeal, in support of this point, to Gilbert Harman's much-discussed distinction between logics and reasoned changes in view (Harman 1986). Principles concerning reasoned changes in view are only indirectly connected to a logic. The exercise of judgement in the determination of belief leaves it open whether, for example, commitment to one's evidence and inferential principles leads one to a conclusion, or leads one, in the light of the unacceptability of the conclusion, to reject an assumption in one's evidence or the principle of reasoning.

Furthermore, this general point is bolstered by a specific thesis about practical reasoning. The *point* of reasoning about practice is to act. The role of "ceteris paribus" clauses in specimens of practical reasoning leading to action is not to remove its non-monotonic character, but explicitly to mark it (Brandom 1998). This claim will prove important to what follows: to act we need to detach a categorical conclusion from our practical reasoning. Not all thinking in general about the desirable ends of action is categorical; much of it is implicitly hypothetical.⁹ However, as Sergio Tenenbaum remarks:

The 'job' of practical reasoning cannot end at a conditional conclusion...the relevant notion of a 'conclusion' here is the notion of something that can be regarded as a real *terminus* of reasoning that is indeed practical (as opposed to something that could be the end point of idle speculation" (Tenenbaum 2007a, b, p. 332).

That is one of the grounds for Tenenbaum's argument that practical reasoning is terminated by an action itself. This detachment of a categorical conclusion from principles involving ceteris paribus clauses involves determining that all else is equal:

There is no question here of a ceteris paribus clause; since the conclusion is the action itself, either it is justified, and thus there was nothing that made it unwarranted, or it is not justified and hence the inference is invalid. (Tenenbaum 2007a; b, p. 340)

This is perfectly compatible with the non-monotonicity of the inference to this particular action as conclusion (Brandom 1998; Tenenbaum 2007a, b, p. 342). That is because justification of the conclusion is not directed to a general description of an action that this particular action token happens to satisfy. Another token action that met the same general description might *not* be a justified conclusion.¹⁰ Here is an example: if you have been rescued after being lost in a forest for several days with a little water but no food, your first reaction on being rescued might be to eat. It might, indeed, be to eat ravenously. But, in fact, if you eat ravenously in this situation you will make yourself sick. So you have a good reason to eat moderately, but no good reason to eat ravenously even though you are very hungry. Indeed, you have good reason *not* to eat ravenously. The action that is cogently supported by your reasons, then, is acting in the determinate way in which you act when your reasoning crystallizes in the verdict expressed by what you do. That is one, very powerful, ground for an Aristotelian particularism. The particularist draws attention to an ineliminable role for practical judgement as expressed by what one does. I shall argue in what follows that such judgment has to be construed as the exercise of a capacity, not the addition of a further premise to one's reasoning.

⁹ I may think, for example, about the desirability of my learning Spanish, undoubtedly valuable as an end, but suppress the condition "if it is, at the time, what I most want and is a reasonable end given the costs" and so on.

¹⁰ The basic difference between Tenenbaum (2007a; b) and Thomas 2010c is that Tenenbaum contrasts the generality of thought with the particularity of action. But, it seems to me, some thoughts can be particular, such as singular thoughts. So I express the distinction between the indeterminacy of one's premises and one's determinately doing that which, in fact, one does. That still allows one to acknowledge the typically non-monotonic character of practical reasoning.

It is also important to the bearing of this issue on the problem of particularism that the character of *ceteris paribus* clauses in practical reasoning be understood. Brandom notes that the problem that they pose to judgement is not that a *ceteris paribus* clause might be infinitely long. The problem is that such a clause is indefinitely long: we do not know, in advance, what a defeating condition to our reasoning might turn out to be.¹¹ (Brandom 1998, p. 133) This looks like a general epistemological problem and one, indeed, that encourages the philosophical sceptic. I will describe why I do not think that we need to draw this sceptical moral, but I also want to emphasize that you cannot eliminate the role of *ceteris paribus* clauses by placing a representation of the fact that all else is equal in the deliberating agent's premises. This cross-classifies the implementation of reasoning by an agent and the representation of reasoning in an agent in an unhelpful way and seems to lead to precisely the same kind of regress that C. L. Dodgson described in 'What Achilles Said to the Tortoise' (Carroll 1895). You cannot model the detachment of a conclusion from a piece of reasoning using a premise that is inserted into the reasoning. A description of an action, even a mental action of drawing a conclusion, is a description, not an action.¹² It therefore goes into the premises of a stretch of reasoning. It thereby merely defers the drawing of the relevant conclusion that it sought self-referentially to describe.

2 Any Reason, or Any Relevant Reason?

Drawing attention to the non-monotonicity of practical reasoning invites the response that it is a problem for everyone, but it might be *more* of a problem for the ethical particularist than the generalist. Particularists ought not to be drawing attention to the problem posed to judgement by overwhelming informational complexity. That is, on the contrary, a vulnerability in any particularist view. It is the generalist who is well placed to explain why rational decision is not overwhelmed by cognitive complexity because of the essential role in reasoning of general principles that cut down this complexity into a manageable form (Brand-Ballard 2007). The whole point of such principles is to make the problem of judgment tractable for finite and limited cognitive agents.

The challenge, then, is this: if materially good inference is prior to formally good inference and a great deal of the former is non-monotonic, literally any item of information might be relevant to the cogency of a piece of practical reasoning. In noting this one has certainly located a role for practical judgement, but a role in which it runs the risk of being simply overwhelmed by the amount of information that is potentially relevant to decision. Qua particularist I ought not to be drawing attention to a sceptical threat that swamps ethical decision with overwhelming informational complexity. Generalism seems a more reliable bulwark against this uncontainable informational complexity than particularism. However, I think that latter claim is a mistake. My own view is that, on the contrary, focusing on informational complexity forms part of the case *for* particularism.

This point requires some further clarification as it seems as if the fact that practical reasoning is non-monotonic is simply too strong a premise for my purposes. I have identified the central problem that particularism seeks to explain as the problem of

¹¹ This is important because one important form of strict generalism, the regulative generalism of Ridge and McKeever, takes it that since ethical judgment must involve strict principles, given that we do come to verdicts then we must have succeeded in quantifying over all the exception clauses implicit in the principle involved. For further discussion see Thomas (2010b).

¹² For a related argument and, indeed, a compressed version of an argument to the Aristotelian thesis that practical reasoning is terminated by an action as its conclusion, see Dancy (2004), pp 22–23.

supersession. But that problem is posed by the fact than an argument comprised by reasons derived from principles might be superseded by a *relevant* reason, not by any reason whatsoever.¹³ However, my appeal to non-monotonicity is excessively broad in scope in precisely that way: it refers to any reason, not any relevant reason. By appealing to the fact of non-monotonicity to support particularism I am making far too sweeping a claim.

Secondly, the generalist can rest content with the thought that by ignoring this issue of relevance any supposed advantage to my proposal will be balanced by the disadvantage of opening the floodgates to scepticism. I am vulnerable to the sceptical thought that practical judgement will be overwhelmed by the amount of information potentially relevant to decision. My victory over the generalist, if it is one, will certainly be Pyrrhic. Particularism will have been defended solely at the cost of paving the way for a scepticism that exploits the fact that any reason could be relevant to materially good practical reasoning to develop a sceptical thesis about our power to make such judgements at all.

My response to these two concerns is that is perfectly true that the thesis of non-monotonicity is a thesis of too broad a scope, covering any reason, and not merely any relevant reason. But, since no one has a fully satisfactory theory of relevance, at the very least that places both my generalist opponents and me in the same unhappy situation. It is problem for everyone that any reason might prove to be relevant in non-monotonic reasoning. Relevance is, after all, a material and not a formal fact about your knowledge. That there is a meteorite dropping on your head as you read this paper has a material bearing on whether you ought to stop and go down the road for a coffee. It has that relevance without regard for the “closeness” of that relevant belief to your existing beliefs: it is a material fact about the belief.

However, while I cannot definitively solve the problem of relevance, I think I am far better placed than my generalist opponents to make some progress on it. Finite and cognitively limited creatures like us use a capacity for sound practical intelligence to deal with the problem of relevance in the light of their background framework of beliefs that are taken as unquestioned in that context.¹⁴ To make progress on the problem of relevance we need a Copernican Revolution in how we think of intelligent behaviour: it is not a matter of reasoning over representations but intelligent coping by acting directly on the world (Brooks 1991).¹⁵ My aim in the next section is to offer some plausible considerations that show that while the problem of relevance is a difficult one, the combination of practical intelligence and a default/challenge epistemology is the most plausible response, overall, both to that fact and to the challenge of scepticism. So while I initially place both the particularist and the generalist in the same unhappy situation the particularist does a far better job of extricating himself (or herself) from it.

3 A Default-Challenge Model of Epistemic Justification

The priority of materially good to formally characterisable reasoning in non-formal domains was emphasized by Wilfred Sellars. Unsurprisingly, then, an associated model of justification intended to reflect this fact is largely the work of the two contemporary epistemologists most influenced by Sellars, namely, Robert B. Brandom and Michael

¹³ I am grateful to Krister Bykvist, Larry May and Brad Hooker for pressing me to clarify this point.

¹⁴ I hope to connect this approach to relevance to the inferential contextualism defended in Thomas, (2006) on another occasion.

¹⁵ As the theorist of Robotics Rodney Brooks points out, the cheapest and most efficient model of the world that you can give to a machine is—the world. (It certainly saves on a lot of memory.) (Brooks 1991)

Williams. Both have defended a default-challenge model of epistemic justification. It seems to me both independently plausible and to represent the best response to the challenge posed by informational complexity. In an ordinary context of enquiry people reason from presupposed sets of beliefs, or contexts, that are individuated by the problem solving task to hand. This model of the general structure of enquiry is known as inferential contextualism; it radically differs from the currently popular forms of contextualism in epistemology as it is not a thesis about the relativity in the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions. It is a thesis about the structure of enquiry itself. Developed out of the pragmatic tradition, an inferentially contextualist view sees inquiry as devolved into problem solving contexts where sets of beliefs are structured by their functional roles in addressing a particular question (Thomas 2006, chapter 7). Those background beliefs work partially to determine what counts as relevant to the particular problem to hand as an initial filter.

The pressing question for any view of this kind is what explains the most “fundamental” of these beliefs themselves? Some beliefs function to structure the problem-solving context in a manner akin to those framework propositions discussed in Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*. But are those beliefs justified or not? If not, how can they generate evidential support *ex nihilo* (Thomas 2006, pp 189–191)? To use a convenient piece of terminology, such beliefs seem to function as unearned entitlements. The judger is entitled to reason from them but has, it seems, done nothing to earn them. How is this so much as possible?

Developing a proposal of Sellars’s Michael Williams has argued that the answer to that question is epistemic *status*. It is epistemic status, or standing, that metaphorically “places” an epistemic subject in Sellars’ “space of reasons”. Status is a result of habituation and training that inculcates people into an epistemic status. That status gives you a range of beliefs from which you reason that are unearned entitlements. They are unearned, that is, unless challenged but the appeal to status explains the presence of these epistemological “unmoved movers”. Williams takes Chisholm’s foundationalism as representative of the different approach that requires the prior authorization of any of one’s beliefs, including those from which one reasons. This prior authorization requirement plays a vital role in generating a theoretically motivated case for radical scepticism.

The basic idea underlying this appeal to status is that in addition to passing judgements on the particular knowledge claims of others we also, less commonly, assess their epistemic status. We ordinarily assume a strong correlation between status and a set of competencies. Those two ideas of status and competence are distinct: you can have status of an interlocutor in the space of reasons and yet, through a run of bad luck, fail to deliver reliably in way consonant with your competence. However, if your failures are of a particular kind they may cast doubt on whether you possess the appropriate status at all.

Williams emphasizes one important part of presupposed status, namely, that an agent with the right kind of status has an implicit grasp of presupposed normal conditions of making judgements. Asymmetrically, though, you do have an explicit grasp of abnormal conditions. It is no part of the competence involved in judging there is a bittern in your garden to be able to state all the presupposed normal conditions of your ability to make that judgement. But, by contrast, it is an aspect of epistemic status to knowing when conditions are *abnormal*. You ought to hedge your statements if there is a bright golden haze on the meadow, or you are very near sighted and have forgotten your spectacles or the local ornithological society has been placing fake bittern replicas in local gardens to encourage bittern migration. This is an open-ended competence that is not finitely specifiable: there is a potentially indefinite range of “excusing conditions”. (This dovetails nicely with Brandom’s point that we do not know in advance what a defeating condition to our hedged principle may turn out to be.)

Once again, I see no way of accommodating this point in a generalist theory of ethical competence, even one which involves self-hedging principles which explicitly flag up their own restrictions. There cannot be any finite specification of the restrictions on the application of principles. They have to be supplemented by a competence, which is an aspect of implementation of reasoning in an agent, not by a representation of that competence in the agent. That competence is an unanalysable ability that necessarily has an open-ended character (Baker and Hacker 1984; Dancy 2004, pp 104ff).

Overall, then, the Default-Challenge model helps with the challenge of informational complexity by establishing that questions are raised and answered within particular problem solving contexts. Corresponding to such a context is a set of beliefs, some functioning as presupposed, some functioning as unearned entitlements, some functioning as topic-specific truisms and some functioning as up for evaluation in that context.¹⁶ Those expert in a field of inquiry have a sense of relevance and salience that makes particular problems tractable. All of these aspects of your cognitive situation work to cut down the relevant range of considerations and give us traction on the problem of informational complexity. But why does this lead to particularism? Because of a meta-philosophical moral that you cannot model these considerations as a set of general principles that are inserted into the context of good reasoning to make it tractable. These are tasks that general principles could not discharge.

A supplement to this consideration of aspects of practical deliberation that general principles simply could not capture is the existence of epistemic as well as ethical virtues. My aim is not, here, to question whether or not a virtue based ethical competence could be modeled by ethical principles as I have addressed that issue elsewhere (Thomas 2005). However, the aspect of that discussion with a direct bearing on the argument here is this: why do some of our competences take the form of epistemic virtues at all? I have in mind an argument of Adam Morton's that explicitly connects epistemic virtue to the issue of informational complexity:

A creature with immense computational power could have fixed and precise routines for checking and repair. If its computational power was...immense...it just might have a chance of building checking and repair into acquisition. But real creatures are not like this.(...)they will need approximations and heuristics which within their limits of time, working memory and other resources will catch enough contradictions and fix enough of those that are caught to allow the creatures to survive and, if they are scientific creatures, to accumulate true and useful beliefs...real creatures will need the (epistemic) virtues (Morton 2004).

Many of our views about reasoning can be formulated indifferently for both ideal and non-ideal reasoners, such as claims about the consistency and completeness of axiomatic systems, Church's thesis, and so on. But there is a much wider range of claims about reasoning where one is forced to take into account what Russell called our "merely medical" limitations. It matters a great deal, for the theory of practical reasoning, that it is a theory for finite and cognitively limited agents. That is because this is the local application of a more general epistemological truth that creatures such as us have to have a range of

¹⁶ There are two key epistemological ideas put to use in the D/C model: that of status and of unearned entitlement. In *Value and Context I* (in effect) added a third that seems to me also pertinent to the particularist versus generalist debate, namely, the role played by topic-specific truisms. I will not discuss this at any length here as Thomas (2007) shows why I think the alleged "flattening of the normative landscape" is not a problem for particularism.

competencies that cannot themselves be explicit representations on pain of regress. If they were representations and not competencies this would not make the problem of relevance any easier: it would simply exacerbate it by simply adding to the list of representations for which the issue of relevance arises.

4 A Role for Hedged Moral Principles

As I have already noted it was no part of Brandom's view to deny a role for principles in ethics (this is why Dancy treats him as a generalist). Similarly, the view I present here does not rule out a role for general principles in ethical thinking. On the contrary, it goes to some lengths to highlight the role played in moral reasoning by hedged principles that contain *ceteris paribus* clauses. One important role for such principles is to model background knowledge in any psychologically realistic agent engaged in defeasible reasoning generally, including practical reasoning (Horty 2007). My aim, like Brandom's, is not to deny the existence of such principles, but to argue that recognizing the importance of non-monotonicity forces us to treat such principles in a particular way. Furthermore, in a sense yet to be explained, my concession does not extend to self-hedging principles.

I have noted a crucial difference in strategy between my defence of particularism and Dancy's recent focus on reasons holism. I think John Horty has shown conclusively that all the data that Dancy wants to model within his holism can receive an alternative representation in a theory of defeasible reasoning (Horty 2007). The methodological moral I want to draw from this is that Dancy's dispute with his generalist opponents turns on how one identifies and individuates reasons. It is essential for the defence of reasons holism that Dancy can show that one and the same reason can reverse its "polarity" or "valence" (or cease to be a reason at all) across different contexts. His generalist critics repeatedly insist that each such instance has a different interpretation where the context sensitivity of reasons can be stripped away by further specification. If this specification is complete, then the resulting complete reason is invariant across its roles in reasoning in the way that Dancy denies. My own view is since we are talking here about the content of a folk psychological mental state, our ordinary discourse about reasons lacks the strict criteria for identity and individuation that would allow us to award victory in this discussion to one side rather than the other (Thomas 2010a). We could, of course, sharpen those criteria, but then each disputant does so in a way that favours his or her own view.

What we can do, however, is to model all the data that Dancy wants to model in our established theories of defeasible reasoning, well entrenched as they are in AI and cognitive science. And at that point we are in a position to note that if the point of this dispute was to establish whether or not there are any "invariant" reasons in the sense Dancy sought to identify, then we can say he was correct and his generalist opponents were wrong. Horty points out why:

We both acknowledge that the principles guiding practical reasoning cannot usefully be taken to express universally generalized material conditionals; the practical principle that lying is wrong cannot mean that every action that involves lying is wrong. What Dancy suggests instead, as we have seen, is that these principles should be taken to specify considerations that play an invariant role as reasons. The principle that lying is wrong is supposed to mean that lying always provides some reason for evaluating an action less favorably, even in those cases in which our overall evaluation is favorable....Now, given this understanding of general principles, it

follows at once—it is obvious—that reason holism must lead to their rejection. If holism is correct, so that what counts as a reason in one situation need not be a reason in another, then, of course, any principle that identifies some consideration as playing an invariant role as a reason has to be mistaken (Horty 2007, p. 23).

But the point is that Dancy is no longer interestingly right: this is simply a truism about defeasible reasoning. (Horty, *ibid.*) Furthermore, since such reasoning must involve a background context of hedged, defeasible principles, then there is some role in ethical thinking for principles of that form.

So Dancy's attempt to derive particularism from reasons holism in one sense lapses; we can explain all that he wants to explain using a model involving reasoning from hedged principles. But his main thesis that there are no invariant reasons is simply a truism about defeasible reasoning generally and truisms are very hard plausibly to reject. Yet generalists insist that it is an embarrassment for Dancy, and for particularists generally, that particularists cannot accommodate the intuition that it is always ethically relevant that an act causes pain and never ethically relevant that a person's shoelaces are a certain colour. So much the worse for generalist intuitions!¹⁷

At this point, however, there are three distinct models of what a hedged principle that forms part of our background knowledge is supposed to be. My view, like Dancy's and Garfield's, is that these are statistical generalizations about which considerations have figured in past decisions. Lance and Little hold a view in which these background hedged generalizations must be the "right" ones: the ones that exhibit the nature of the underlying deontic kind (Lance and Little 2004, 2006a, b, 2007, 2008). Finally, Väyrynen and Robinson require principles that articulate the normative and explanatory basis for particular judgements that also explain why what could be an exception to this case is not operative (Väyrynen 2004; Väyrynen 2009; Robinson 2006, 2008). For reasons of scope I cannot go into all the issues about the nature of explanation that would allow me to resolve the dispute between these three views; that is a task for another occasion (But see Dancy 2004, pp 85–93, 113–116.). My more limited aim is to establish that nothing in the phenomenology of ethical judgement forces us to accept one view rather than another. Those for whom the background knowledge to defeasible reasoning in ethics is as weak as possible, such as Dancy, Garfield and myself, have an explanation as to why there *seem* to be invariant reasons in ethics when the whole notion is misconceived because of the non-monotonic character of defeasible reasoning. We have an explanation of why there are true generic sentences in ethics even though there are no underlying deontic kinds. My modest aim is to show that any basis in ethical phenomenology for the truth of moral generalism is undercut. Our use of such principles has an alternative explanation.

All of this dovetails with another explanation of the *prima facie* appearance that there are invariant reasons that I have presented elsewhere. We substantiate the reasonableness of our ethical interlocutors via their grasp of topic-specific truisms (Thomas 2007). The idea of a topic-specific truism is that in the context of a specific argument, characterizing the reasonableness of a person depends on interpreting him or her as sharing some basic substantive truisms that are directly relevant to the question at issue. (An example might be debating animal welfare with an orthodox Catholic-cum-Cartesian who literally believes that animals are comparable to biological clockwork toys that lack a soul.) We normally presuppose reasonableness on the part of our interlocutors and thereby presuppose grasp of

¹⁷ Unless, of course, all that you mean by invariance is that it is statistically true that a certain reason has tended to favour certain actions in the past. Dancy, Horty, Garfield and I all think that is true but of no theoretical interest.

these truisms. But, in particular cases, they may be lacking. The point is that, once again, this treats the idea of a “default” or “invariant” reasons in way that does not offer any support to the generalist.

Overall, then, none of this data need be explained in a way that invokes ethical generalism. The hedged, defeasible, moral principles from which we reason are only a part of a moral agent’s ethical competence. They must, necessarily, be supplemented by the other aspects of competence that I have described: status, unearned entitlement, epistemic virtue and a capacity for executive decision. There is only one view in the literature that disputes this conclusion and that is the “principled particularism” of Richard Holton. It attempts to model an agent’s ethical competence *ex post facto*, by introducing the idea of *self-hedging* principles. I will now examine this ingenious and influential proposal as it represents the most important challenge to the view presented here.

5 Executive decision and “That’s It” Principles

A misleading aspect of the contemporary debate over moral particularism is the view that all parties have called a truce on the nature of practical decision. Moral particularists and moral generalists alike are supposed to have agreed that there is no “algorithmic” account of a moral decision procedure so there is now nothing at stake between them over this issue. That seems to me not entirely true. To the extent that it is true it can only be because both parties have accepted a false view of practical reasoning. On the view presented here we have a basic capacity for executive decision that expresses our practical verdicts by acting.

I have accepted that there are true generic statements in ethics and that there are true hedged moral principles. But that is not, in my book, any concession to the truth of generalism given the fact of non-monotonicity. Much more threatening to my view is the putative existence of self-hedging principles which go beyond being restricted in *content* to doing the functional work of restricting their own *operation*. That seems to me illegitimately to cross the two categories of the practical derivation of verdicts by our capacity for the rational control of action and the role in our deliberation played by evidential principles.¹⁸ The paradigm case of this is Richard Holton’s ingenious idea of a “that’s it” principle (Holton 2002). The inspiration for his view is Gödel’s incompleteness theorem for first order arithmetic: it is correct that for any truth of first order arithmetic there is a set of axioms from which it follows. But that does not imply that there is a single finite axiomatization for the whole of first order arithmetic; Gödel demonstrated that, indeed, this conclusion does not follow.

Holton begins his argument by noting that there are many versions of particularism but that no version of that view can exclude an important role for principles of a certain kind “in justifying moral verdicts”. He understands particularism as the claim that no finite set of finite moral principles could ever suffice to capture our moral competence: “On this... interpretation the particularists’ claim is that there is no one set of principles that can be used to determine the correct moral verdict in a situation” (Holton 2002, p. 192). But, as Holton notes, it is one thing to be committed to the view that no one set of moral principles that entails each true moral verdict; it is something else again to infer that, for each true moral verdict, we cannot see it as derived from a principle:

¹⁸ This is Philipa Foot’s distinction between verdictive and evidential considerations. See Foot (1978), p. 182

The idea is that different moral verdicts will be entailed by different sets of principles; but there is no one set that entails them all (Holton 2002, pp 194–195).

Holton calls this his version of “principled particularism”. Importantly, he concedes that this view is not much help prospectively in course of deliberation. It always works retrospectively as we reconstruct the derivation of a true ethical verdict from a self-hedging principle *ex post facto*. That is, however, in his view a non-negligible justificatory achievement: we can always show that a verdict was derived from a true principle and “the non-moral facts” (Holton 2002, p. 196).

My interpretation of the basic motivation for Holton’s position is that he identifies very clearly that the strongest argument for particularism appeals to non-monotonicity. But he has abandoned any attempt to defend a principled account of how we reason to practical verdicts. His reconstructive efforts are *ex post facto* and he wants to justify a certain kind of response to the particularist claim that any sound moral argument could be *superseded* by another that introduced a new morally relevant feature:

In defending (principled particularism) we want to say that certain features of the world, together with certain principles, make a certain action right. The worry then is that there could be certain other features of the world which, together with other principles, which could undermine that verdict by making the action not right. But at that point we want to say something like this:

So what? Why be worried by hypotheticals? If there were these other features they would make the action not right. But there aren’t. We are concerned with the features that actually do obtain, and they, together with the principles, make the action right. (Holton 2002, p. 198)

Supersession, I have argued, is the guise taken by non-monotonicity. When an argument is concluded, and the particularist notes that some further item of information could have been relevant, Holton responds that in fact it was *not* relevant and the argument was not superseded. The possibility of supersession ought not to trouble those who believe that it is still true that all correct moral verdicts are derivable from a true moral principle (admittedly of a somewhat unusual kind).

Holton’s proposal is to include in the premises of a good moral argument a context specific, self-referential pair of premises. One is a “that’s it” premise whose function is to assert that the argument is complete and cannot be superseded. The second is a corresponding clause in the principle itself. A specimen of the kind of argument Holton has in mind is this:

- I P1 This is a killing.
 P2 $\forall x ((x \text{ is a killing} \ \& \ \textit{That's It}) \rightarrow \text{you shouldn't do } x)$
 P3 *That's It*
 You shouldn't do x

The particularist protests that, because of the fact of non-monotonicity, any practical verdict could have been superseded by the addition of any arbitrary piece of information. To which Holton responds that merely raising a possibility is not enough: a valid argument may indeed supersede one of the form that he identifies but a *sound* argument does not supersede one of the form that he identifies. If a sound argument supersedes an argument that uses Holton-style moral principles then the sample argument specified cannot be sound as its “that’s it” premise was, in fact, false.

This introduces a new category of a self-hedging principle that figure in self-hedging arguments of a particular kind. The moral principle itself contains a “that’s it” clause and the premises include one premise that inserts the claim that indeed, one’s evidence is complete and that that *is* it. The only true generalism, given the fact of non-monotonicity, has to include principles of this very peculiar kind.

I have two reactions to this highly original and deservedly influential argument. Has Holton really found a way for the generalist to live with the fact of non-monotonicity? He discusses at length a worry put to him by Timothy Williamson that a “that’s it” clause trivializes any argument (Holton 2002, pp 202, fn 19). For any true moral principle in Holton’s proprietary style it should be easy to formulate a false one. Put in a negation sign and now put the false principle back in a sound argument to generate an unsound one. That gives an example of an unsound argument like example (1):

- (1) P1 This is a killing.
 P2 $\forall x ((x \text{ is a killing} \ \& \ \textit{That's It}) \rightarrow \text{you should do } x)$
 P3 *That's It*
 You should do x

In Holton’s account the logical form of a moral principle is a conditional and like any such conditional a principle is falsified only by an instantiation where its antecedent is true and its consequent false. Therefore, both the conjuncts in the antecedent must be true. So, the special “that’s it” clause must be true. It self-referentially asserts that the argument in which it figures cannot be superseded. But, as Holton expresses Williamson’s objection, it seems that “every argument might be trivially superseded”. Here is an argument that supersedes (1):

- (2) P1 This is a killing.
 P2 $\forall x ((x \text{ is a killing} \ \& \ \text{Grass is green} \ \& \ \textit{That's It}) \rightarrow \text{you should not do } x)$
 P3 Grass is green.
 P4 *That's It*
 You should not do x

This argument is sound. Therefore, it supersedes argument (1). So the principle in (1) does not have true antecedents so *the principle is not falsified*. The threatened trivializing result is that “every moral principle will be true: either substantially true, in virtue of featuring in sound moral arguments, or trivially true, in virtue of this supersession trick” (Holton 2002, p. 204).

It is no small embarrassment to Holton’s view that, if he is correct, every moral principle that we can formulate is true. That certainly does not match up to our intuitive convictions as to how true moral principles operate. We have an intuition that amongst all the true moral principles generated by Holton’s procedure some are the real ones and others are gimmicky. But how are we to separate them?

This is, Holton recognizes, a powerful challenge and one that has to be met. So he tightens up his account of a moral principle: we need to exclude gerrymandering where we throw true but irrelevant junk into the moral principle and add it is a premise (as Williamson suggested as a means of deriving trivial supersession):

We need to be more restrictive: moral principles are minimally contentful. Weaken a moral principle by adding an unnecessary clause to its antecedent, and what you get is not a moral principle at all. It’s not obvious quite how the details of this proposal would be worked out (Holton 2002, p. 204).

It seems to me that at this point the fact that practical reasoning is typically non-monotonic re-asserts itself. Yet that is the very thesis that Holton was trying to show us how to live with. The whole appeal of his view was that it recognized the problem posed to generalism by non-monotonicity and showed us how to work around it. But there is, in the light of Williamson's worry about the trivializing impact of the "that's it" clause, no longer any such "work around" available as we now need an account of which clauses are unnecessary in principles. That takes us back to square one: it is the problem of non-monotonicity in another guise. We need a "no true junk" meta-rule for the formulation of principles but what, in the light of the fact that practical reasoning is non-monotonic, could such a rule be? I concede that non-monotonicity is a property of the consequence relation and that is a relation between a set of premises and a conclusion. Holton's problem is with the insertion of unnecessary clauses to the antecedent of principles that are conditional in form: this is a problem *within* one of his premises. But it seems to me arbitrary how the information is regimented in the specific context of an argument and the bump has simply moved to another place under the carpet.¹⁹

My second comment on this argument for generalism is that there is one sense in which Holton's view is undeniable: we do, in the face of the non-monotonicity of practical reasoning, draw practical conclusions. (My view is that we do so by the acting.) For any such categorical detachment of a conclusion we can say that it shows that "that was it" so it looks as if a Holton-style reconstruction is always available. Note, however, that Holton presents his conclusion this way: we might want an account of how reasoned changes in view lead to decision and action or we could talk about justification. The "principled particularist" does not give you an account of the former but can reconstruct the latter.

This does not seem to me entirely accurate: a Holton style view does not give you an account of the determination of actions by principles because it cannot do so and that impossibility is an inherent part of the view. (Perhaps, indeed, it is the part of the view that motivates Holton to call himself a particularist.) The claim that a principle based view cannot suffice to determine practical decision seems to me an independently interesting claim. Furthermore, it is one that represents so significant a concession to the particularist that one might think that the particularist had already done enough to carry the day.

It seems to me much more interesting than Holton seems to think to have identified the impossibility of self-hedging principles playing a role in forward looking reasoned changes of view on the part of a deliberating agent. How one would engineer a Holton-style cognitive agent that used self-hedging principles? Here I concede my belief that practical reasoning is terminated by the act itself plays a distinctive role. In the view I have described in this paper, the non-monotonicity of practical reasoning is compatible with the point of practical reasoning being to act. Aristotle's thesis is not directed to general thinking about ends but to the detachment of the conclusions of practical reasoning by actions. If, in advance of the completion of the action-as-conclusion, you attempt to insert a "that's it"

¹⁹ Holton appeals to the idea of a relevant logic as one response to this problem. Logics of this kind precisely tag formulae with indices so as to constrain the introduction of premises to avoid the addition of true junk of the kind that generate true supersession. But all three of the leading interpretations of relevance logics appeal to the idea of information to characterize the accessibility relation over worlds that is characteristic of this family of logics: "The ternary accessibility relation needs a philosophical interpretation in order to give relevant implication a real meaning on this semantics. Recently there have been three interpretations developed based on theories about the nature of information." Mares, Edwin, "Relevance Logic", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/logic-relevance/>>. Mares describes all three versions; I simply want to note that each interpretation involves characterizing worlds in terms of information which simply takes us back to the problem of non-monotonicity.

premise into the reasoning of a practical agent the result would be self-defeating. If you take a presupposition of the detachment of a categorical conclusion and putting it in the reasoning itself that is terminated by that detachment, then the result is an infinite regress.

Even if we accept that Holton does not attempt any forward looking contribution to deliberation but always the *ex post facto* reconstruction of those principles which actually played a role in justifying a conclusion then once again it seems to me that the non-monotonicity of practical reasoning presents an insuperable obstacle to the formulation of the meta-rule necessary to avoid the trivializing result that all self-hedging moral principles come out true. I think, then, that the balance of reasons tells against Holton's proposal. It is built around a recognition of the typically non-monotonic character of practical reasoning but it seems to me unsuccessful both as an account of the forward looking guidance of action by hedged principles and as an *ex post facto* reconstruction. Given that it is also the most sophisticated and ingenious version of moral generalism hitherto devised I think it is safe to conclude that the arguments marshaled in this paper have demonstrated that we have good reasons to be particularists.

6 Conclusion

It is time to draw together the threads of the argument. The implementation of good reasoning in cognitively limited epistemic agents demands an array of methods of coping with complexity. A recognition of epistemic status, acquired from habituation and training and which involves a tacit grasp of the presuppositions of judgment, including, importantly, a grasp of (ab)normal conditions is one such method. The particularist also appeals to the complementary idea of unearned entitlements and the default/challenge model of enquiry (modulo a context of normal conditions). The central claim of this paper is that none of these aspects of how we cope with cognitive complexity is capturable by any role that could be played by general principles. This epistemic case for particularism converges on an ethical model of agency and responsibility for character that are independently attractive.²⁰

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