

# A Defense of a Particularist Research Program\*

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Abstract: What makes some acts morally right and others morally wrong? Traditionally, philosophers have tried to answer this question by identifying *exceptionless moral principles*—principles that capture all and only morally right actions. *Utilitarianism* and *Kantianism* are paradigmatic examples of such attempts. In recent years, however, there has been a growing interest in a novel approach—*Particularism*—although its precise content is still a matter of controversy. In this paper I argue that some of the most common objections to particularism result from a misconception of the nature of particularism, and I offer a new formulation of the view. I argue that particularism is best understood as a *research program* characterized by the core hypothesis that morality can be explained without appeal to exceptionless moral principles, and I explicate some of the advantages of this formulation. Finally, I argue that particularism shows enough promise to warrant further exploration.

## I. Introduction

Particularism is a controversial new movement in moral philosophy. It is not uncommon to hear philosophers say that particularism is a “crazy view” or that it amounts to giving up on moral theorizing. The most prevalent objections to particularism are that particularism is demonstrably false and that particularism is unmotivated.<sup>1</sup> I believe that these negative assessments of particularism result from a misconception of the nature of particularism. I hope to show that particularism, properly understood, is a well-motivated project that should not be dismissed out of hand.

I will proceed as follows: first, I will outline a recent version of the standard argument against particularism and explain why it is based on a misconception of particularism (section II). Next, I will offer a new formulation of particularism as a *research program*, and I will explicate some of its advantages (sections III & IV). Finally, I will explain why I believe that particularism shows enough promise to warrant further exploration (section V).

## II. The Standard Debate over Particularism

Recent interest in particularism has given rise to a plurality of distinct views that go under this heading. Particularism has been identified as a claim about moral psychology,<sup>2</sup> a statement about the nature of reasons,<sup>3</sup> a view about the relationship between descriptive and evaluative predicates,<sup>4</sup> a thesis about the

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\* My thanks to Gareth Matthews for many helpful conversations and insightful comments. Thanks to Daniel Doviak, Fred Feldman, Pete Graham, Kristen Hine, Felix Koch, Hilary Kornblith, and Andrew Sepielli for comments on earlier drafts. I would also like to thank the audience at the UMass-Amherst colloquium, the audience at the 7<sup>th</sup> annual NYU/Columbia graduate conference, and the audience at the 8<sup>th</sup> annual Rutgers/Princeton graduate conference for helpful questions and comments.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Sinnott-Armstrong (1999), Irwin (2000), Hooker (2000), Crisp (2000), McKeever & Ridge (2005a, 2005b, 2006), Raz (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Dancy (1983), McNaughton (1988), Dworkin (1995).

<sup>3</sup> Hooker (2000), Little (2000), Richardson (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, Pettit & Smith (2000).

*normative priority* of particular moral judgments,<sup>5</sup> a denial of the existence of exceptionless moral principles,<sup>6</sup> the theory that morality cannot be codified by any finite set of principles,<sup>7</sup> and as the claim that the possibility of moral thought and judgment does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles.<sup>8</sup>

The common feature of all particularist theses is often identified as the denial of (some feature of) principle-based moral theories. For example, McKeever & Ridge claim that: "Different forms of particularism are defined by the different negative claims they make about moral principles."<sup>9</sup> And that "The different species [of particularism] are united in that they all assert what intuitively is a negative thesis about moral principles." They go on to propose a classification of particularist theories based on the negative thesis each version advocates, and they add that "each form of particularism which falls out of our taxonomy corresponds neatly to a form of generalism which is the negation of that particularist thesis."<sup>10</sup> Consequently, particularism is typically understood as a negative thesis, and the dialectic between particularists and their generalist opponents is often construed as follows: generalists propose moral principles or principle-based accounts of morality, and particularists object to these principles/accounts.<sup>11</sup>

After identifying the common feature of *all* particularist theses, M&R go on to argue that all particularist theses are false. In Chapter Six of their recent book, M&R present what I take to be their main argument against particularism:

[O]ur judgments about all things considered moral verdicts, insofar as those judgments constitute knowledge, suffice to ensure the availability of a suitable moral principle, namely a default principle. So moral judgment, insofar as it constitutes knowledge, does presuppose the availability of a suitable stock of moral principles. [Particularism] about hedged principles is thus false. (120-121)

I propose the following two-step reconstruction of their argument:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Irwin (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Shafer-Landau (1997), McNaughton & Rawling (2000), Dancy (1983), Raz (2006).

<sup>7</sup> Holton (2002).

<sup>8</sup> Dancy (2004). See Appendix for a discussion of Dancy's recent formulation.

<sup>9</sup> McKeever & Ridge [henceforth M&R] (2006) P. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> M&R are not the only philosophers to identify particularism as a negative thesis. Lance and Little (2006) claim that particularism "hangs its hat on" rejecting *classical principles*. They identify classical principles as "exceptionless, explanatory interrelated moral generalization that are capable of serving key epistemic functions," (571) and they individuate each variety of particularism based on the component of the *classical principles* framework it rejects. Likewise, Joseph Raz (2006), in a recent critique of particularism, considers (and rejects) several possible particularist theses. In each case he characterizes the particularist thesis by identifying a generalist thesis it denies (see esp. pp. 113-117). See also Shafer-Landau (1997), McNaughton & Rawling (2000), and Dancy (1983).

<sup>12</sup> In the first half of the book M&R argue that there are no good arguments in favor of particularism. In the second half they argue more directly against particularism. In chapter six, they try to establish only that particularism about *hedged moral principles* is false; in chapter seven they argue that we can "trim the hedges"—that we have reason to be confident that there are non-hedged moral principles that can codify the entire moral landscape. M&R do not mention any philosopher who defends particularism about hedged moral principles, so I am not sure what view they want to reject. Nevertheless, it seems to me that their argument against particularism about hedged moral principles illustrates a standard misconception regarding the debate over particularism. I will argue

### The Knowledge to Principles (KP) Argument:

1. There are instances of moral knowledge.
2. If there are instances of moral knowledge, then there are exceptionless (hedged) moral principles.
3. Therefore, there are exceptionless (hedged) moral principles.

### The Principles to Generalism (PG) Argument:<sup>13</sup>

4. There are exceptionless (hedged) moral principles.
5. If there are any exceptionless (hedged) moral principles, then particularism is false.
6. Therefore, Particularism is false.

M&R spend most of chapter six defending premise (2). They claim that premise (2) is demonstrably true, and indeed, they argue for its truth by constructing a method for generating exceptionless moral principles.<sup>14</sup> According to M&R, moral knowledge is based on the identification of purely descriptive facts that are moral reasons for and against performing a certain action.<sup>15</sup> Given the limitations of our perceptual faculties, cases of moral *knowledge* must be cases in which the number of morally relevant features is limited—otherwise, we will not be able to register all the morally relevant facts, and our knowledge claim will be defeated. So in cases in which we have moral knowledge we can, at least in principle, list all the morally relevant facts.

If one accepts *Atomism* in the theory of reasons—that a feature that is a (primary) reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity, in any case<sup>16</sup>—then one has a recipe for generating exceptionless moral principles: (1) consider any particular morally right action; (2) list all the relevant moral reasons; call the conjunction of all these reasons (RC). The following principle, then, is an exceptionless moral principle:

- (K) For any action, *A*, if *A* instantiates (RC) and no other reasons are present, then *A* is morally right.

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that the issue is not whether there are hedged or non-hedged moral principles, but rather whether there are principles that are both explanatory and exceptionless. For simplicity, then, I will describe M&R's argument in the main text as an argument for the conclusion that particularism is false.

<sup>13</sup> In the introduction I have said that I will consider one standard argument against particularism. The standard argument is the (PG) argument. The (KP) argument is, to the best of my knowledge, an original contribution by M&R.

<sup>14</sup> Since M&R assume that all participants in the particularism-generalism debate accept premise (1), they do not argue for it.

<sup>15</sup> They write: "[I]n a standard case knowledge that a given action is wrong is based on a recognition of the relevant moral reasons, where these reasons are themselves simply descriptive facts which favor not performing the action." (115)

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Dancy (2004) p. 7. See also Shafer-Landau's discussion of *The Delimiting Thesis* in Shafer-Landau (1997) esp. pp. 591-597.

However, particularists reject atomism; instead, they favor *holism* in the theory of reasons—a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another.<sup>17</sup> For example, that a job applicant really wants the job may be a reason to hire her in one context—say, in a context of hiring a new faculty member to a philosophy department, and a reason not to hire her in another context—say, in a context of hiring a new guard for Abu Ghraib prison.<sup>18</sup> Thus if holism is true, then even if an action instantiates (RC) and no other reasons are present, the action may be morally wrong because (RC) can change its polarity in different contexts in which it is instantiated. But since the polarity of (RC) is *determined* by features of the context, then there are some features of the context that explain why (RC) changes its polarity when it does. Consequently, even if holism is true, the following is an exceptionless moral principle:

(K') For any action, *A*, if (a) *A* instantiates (RC) and (b) No feature of the situation explains why (RC) would fail to be a reason to perform *A*, and (c) No other (moral) reasons are present, then *A* is morally right.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, even if holism is true, the possibility of moral knowledge, according to M&R, guarantees that there are exceptionless moral principles. Therefore, premise (2) of the (KP) argument is demonstrably true.

But is (K') really a moral principle? Moral principles are supposed to identify an exceptionless relation between non-moral properties and moral properties.<sup>20</sup> But arguably, not *any* relation of this sort qualifies as a moral principle. For example, consider the following claim:

(GR) For any action, *A*, if (and only if) *A* is a member of *Group-R*, then *A* is morally right.

Let *Group-R* be the set of all (and only) morally right actions.<sup>21</sup> If moral properties supervene on non-moral properties, then all members of *Group-R* can, in principle, be described in purely non-moral terms.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Dancy (2004) pp. 73-78.

<sup>18</sup> One might be suspicious of this example because one might think that the reason considered here—that the applicant really wants the job—is neither a primary reason nor a moral reason. My goal here is not to defend holism, but only to provide some examples of considerations that motivate this view. Nevertheless, here's another example offered by Dancy (1993:61) in which the polarity-changing reason seems to be a (primary) moral reason: that a certain policy will bring about pleasure to many may be a reason in favor of a policy in one context and a reason against a policy in another context. So, for example, if tax cuts would bring about pleasure to many, it may be a reason in favor of tax cuts; but if public executions would bring about pleasure to many—spectators, executioners etc.—it may be a reason against public executions.

<sup>19</sup> M&R statement of this principle is slightly different (pp. 117-8). They consider a case in which someone has killed a rational agent and no other feature of the situation is morally relevant. In this situation the person's action was wrong in virtue of the fact that it was a killing of a rational agent. From this they derive the following principle:

(K') For all action (*x*): if (a) *x* is an instance of killing a rational agent and (b) No other feature of the situation explains why the fact that *x* is the killing of a rational agent is not a moral reason not to perform the action and (c) Any reasons to do *x* do not (when taken collectively) outweigh the fact that *x* is the killing of a rational agent, then *x* is wrong in virtue of being an instance of killing a rational agent.

It seems to me that my version of (K') is a simple generalization of their statement of it.

<sup>20</sup> One might be satisfied with moral principles that identify exceptionless relation between thick moral properties and thin moral properties. See, for example, McNaughton & Rawling (2000). However, since (K') is supposed to identify an exceptionless relation between non-moral properties and moral properties, the possibility of principles from thick to thin will not concern us here.

Consequently, (GR) identifies an exceptionless relation between non-moral properties and moral properties. But it may seem odd to call (GR) a moral principle. (GR), though true and exceptionless, is uninteresting—it identifies the wrong *kind* of relation between non-moral and moral properties. The worry is that (K') also identifies the wrong kind of relation between non-moral and moral properties, so it may not qualify as a genuine moral principle. I do not offer here an account of the kind of relation between non-moral and moral properties that is required in order to qualify as a genuine moral principle. My point is only that not *any* such relation will do, and consequently, that we may doubt whether (K') is a genuine moral principle.

Moreover, (K') seems to amount to the claim that there must be some non-moral difference between any two actions that differ in moral status; that is, that moral properties supervene on non-moral properties. But particularists admit that the moral supervenes on the non-moral.<sup>23</sup> In addition, particularists acknowledge that the supervenience relation entails that there are true exceptionless statements of the form:

$$(SP) \forall x(Gx \rightarrow Mx)$$

[ $x$  ranges over actions,  $G$  is a non-moral property, and  $M$  is a moral property]

(SP) is true and exceptionless when  $G$  describes a complete world state. Yet particularists deny that (SP) is incompatible with particularism,<sup>24</sup> and M&R said nothing to counter this claim. If this is right, then (K') has no dialectical force in an argument against particularism.

Opponents of particularism have typically focused their efforts on trying to establish that there are exceptionless moral principles. So far, I have claimed that it is debatable whether M&R's (KP) argument establishes that there are such principles. But suppose that it does—that is, suppose that (K') is a genuine moral principle. Or alternatively, suppose that we can just “see” that there are some exceptionless moral principles. For example, one might think that no one should object to the following principle:

(TBF) For any action,  $A$ , if  $A$  involves torturing babies for fun and no other reasons are present, then  $A$  is morally wrong.

If (K') and/or (TBF) are genuine exceptionless moral principles, is this a problem for particularists?

It has often been taken for granted that if there are *any* exceptionless moral principles, then particularism must be false. In other words, premise (5) of the (PG) argument has been thought to require no support. I suspect that this premise has been accepted as a result of the interpretation of particularism as the

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<sup>21</sup> I am assuming some form of moral realism here. But since M&R assume that all participants in the particularism-generalism debate are moral realists, nothing hangs on this.

<sup>22</sup> For ease of exposition I use properties and predicates interchangeably throughout this paper.

<sup>23</sup> For example, although Dancy says that he does not “insist in advance that all moral properties exist in virtue of, or result from, non-moral properties” (1999:25) he does insist that particularism is compatible with the supervenience of moral properties on non-moral properties. (See Dancy (2004) especially. p. 85)

<sup>24</sup> See Dancy (2004) pp. 85-93.

denial of all principle-based moral theories. The thought, perhaps, is that if there are *any* exceptionless moral principles, there is no reason to oppose a principle-based approach. Particularists, on this interpretation, are committed to the claim that *all* moral principles are objectionable.

However, particularists should resist this construal of their thesis for several reasons. First, if particularism is understood as the denial of the existence of any exceptionless statement of the form  $\forall x(Gx \rightarrow Mx)$  then particularism is clearly false. As we have seen, (GR) and (SP) are obvious counterexamples to this claim. So particularists will have to specify which *kind* of statements of this form qualify as genuine principles.<sup>25</sup> However, the philosophical import of marking this distinction, independent of the particularism-generalism debate, is far from obvious. Moreover, it would be a mistake to reduce this exciting debate to a debate over the proper application of the term *moral principle*.

Second, it is hard to imagine how particularists could succeed in showing that there are no unobjectionable principles. Proofs of non-existence are notoriously difficult, and in the absence of a proof for the non-existence of exceptionless moral principles, the particularist conclusion would always be tentative—perhaps the correct moral principles have not yet been discovered or formulated. Thus, identifying particularism as a negative thesis—that is, as the claim that *all* moral principles are objectionable—places the particularist at a dialectical disadvantage. Particularism could be refuted, on this construal, by one example of an unobjectionable exceptionless moral principle.

Finally, even if particularists could establish that *all* conceivable principle-based moral theories are problematic, it might still be rational to retain a principle-based approach to morality. Theory choice is a comparative task—we adopt the theory that has the best overall balance of advantages over disadvantages. So if particularists want to argue that the principle-based approach to morality should be abandoned, they need to do more than to just argue that a principle-based approach is problematic; they must also offer a plausible *positive* non-principle-based account of morality. Understood as a negative thesis, then, particularism is essentially only a partial story.

But if particularism is not a negative thesis, if it is not the denial of (some form of) principle-based moral theories, then what is it?

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<sup>25</sup> It is noteworthy that this question—what *kind* of statements of the form  $\forall x(Gx \rightarrow Mx)$  qualify as genuine principles—is equally pressing for the generalist, since no one thinks (and M&R do not claim) that principles like (GR), (SP), (K') and (TBF) are the kind of principles that will partake in a generalist account of morality. It should, I think, seem surprising that statements like (SP), (GR), (K') and (TBF) can refute particularism despite being entirely unhelpful in constructing a generalist account of morality.

### III. What is a Research Program?

I propose to understand particularism as a *research program*. Research programs, according to Imre Lakatos, consist of theories and methodological rules that specify which paths of research to avoid (*negative heuristic*), and which paths to pursue (*positive heuristic*).<sup>26</sup> Research programs are individuated by their “hard core”—the set of commitments that cannot be abandoned without abandoning the research program altogether. Lakatos writes:

All scientific research programmes may be characterized by their ‘hard core’. The negative heuristic of the programme forbids us to direct the *modus tollens* at this ‘hard core’. Instead we must use our ingenuity to articulate or even invent ‘auxiliary hypotheses’, which form a protective belt around this core, and we must redirect the *modus tollens* to these...[The] ‘core’ is ‘irrefutable’ by the methodological decision of [the proponents of a research program]: anomalies must lead to changes only in the ‘protective’ belt of auxiliary...hypotheses.” (1970:48)

The following example should help us get a sense of what a research program is.<sup>27</sup> In 1781 William Herschel discovered planet Uranus. By the early 1800’s it became clear that the planet’s observed location did not match the path predicted by Newton’s laws. Despite the discrepancies between theory and observation, very few astronomers doubted the truth of Newtonian theory. They believed that this anomaly could be resolved without relinquishing Newton’s laws. Some astronomers, for example, suggested that observations that were incompatible with the predicted path should be discarded. Others—most notably, Le Verrier—suggested that the discrepancy in Uranus’ motion was due to the existence of an unknown planet, and that once the gravitational force on Uranus due to this planet is taken into account, Uranus’ motion will comply with Newton’s inverse-square law. We can say that these astronomers were pursuing a Newtonian research program. The hard core of the program—the set of protected commitments, as it were—included Newton’s laws, and the negative heuristic of the program forbade directing a *modus tollens* against this hard core.

Nevertheless, some astronomers were willing to question the accuracy of the Newtonian framework; they suggested that the discrepancies in Uranus’ orbit lie with Newton’s law of gravitation. These astronomers, we can say, were pursuing an alternative research program. The hard core of their research program included all available observations of Uranus, and perhaps the rule that one should not posit the existence of unseen entities. Proponents of this research program had to explain the motion of Uranus without Newton’s law of

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<sup>26</sup> Lakatos (1970) introduced the term *research program* in his account of the rationality of scientific progress.

<sup>27</sup> Here, again, I take inspiration from Dancy: “If one cannot explicate a philosophically significant concept, there may be other ways of giving people a sense that the concept is itself in good order and that they have a reasonably clear grasp on it. One way of doing this is to work through a range of examples, showing how the concept applies to them and showing that there is a graspable distinction between cases in which it applies and cases in which it does not apply.” (2004:38) However, due to length considerations, I will here have to make do with only one example.

gravitation.<sup>28</sup> For example, some proposed that Newton's laws become different at a great distance from the sun.<sup>29</sup>

In 1846 the planet Neptune was observed at the location predicted by Le Verrier.<sup>30</sup> Le Verrier assumed that Newton's law of gravitation was true, and calculated an orbit of the yet-unknown planet that together with Newton's theory would account for the motion of Uranus. And indeed, when the gravitational pull of Neptune on Uranus was taken into consideration, Uranus's observed motion harmonized with its predicted orbit. The discovery of Neptune was a great triumph not only for the Newtonian research program, but also for Le Verrier himself; he was deemed by his contemporaries as "a sage" and "a genius" for having "discovered a star with the tip of his pen."<sup>31</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that Le Verrier was a passionate devotee of to the Newtonian research program, and that upon considering the anomalous motion of The Planet Mercury in 1849 he proclaimed: "If the tables [of Mercury's position] do not strictly agree with the group of observations, we will never again be tempted into charging the law of universal gravitation with inadequacy."<sup>32</sup> In 1859 Le Verrier published his report on the anomalous motion of Mercury, and offered the hypothesis that the anomaly is due to a yet-unobserved mass orbiting between Mercury and the Sun.

Here, again, we can distinguish between those pursuing a Newtonian research program, and those who were willing to question the adequacy of Newton's laws. Proponents of the former research program began looking for the missing mass. Sure enough, various sightings of Vulcan—the intra-Mercurial planet—were reported, but all predictions of Vulcan's location based on these observations were disconfirmed. Nonetheless, Le Verrier's belief in the existence of an intra-Mercurial mass never wavered. In 1874 he wrote: "There is, without a doubt, in the neighborhood of Mercury, and between that planet and the Sun, matter

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<sup>28</sup> A notable difference between these two competing research programs is that the former, and not the latter, had a clear positive heuristic: "[T]he positive heuristic consists of a partially articulated set of suggestions or hints on how to change, develop the 'refutable variants' of the research programme, how to modify, sophisticate, the 'refutable' protective belt." (Lakatos 1970:50) Proponents of the Newtonian research program worked on either figuring out the location of the unknown planet, or on determining which observations, if discarded, would allow for a good fit between theory and observation. The non-Newtonian research program had no comparable *positive heuristic* or research plan at the time.

<sup>29</sup> In 1847, after the discovery of Neptune, John Couch Adams wrote: "[some] had even supposed that, at the great distance of Uranus from the sun, the law of attraction becomes different from that of the inverse square of the distance...the law of gravitation was too firmly established for this to be admitted till every other hypothesis had failed, and I felt convinced that in this, as in every previous instance of the kind, the discrepancies which had for a time thrown doubts on the truth of the law, would eventually afford the most striking confirmation of it." (Quoted from Baum & Sheehan 1997:91)

<sup>30</sup> John Couch Adams made similar predictions regarding the location of the unknown planet a few months earlier, but he did not publish his prediction or calculations.

<sup>31</sup> See Baum and Sheehan (1997) esp. p. 118.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted from Baum and Sheehan (1997), p. 133.



hitherto unknown. Does it consist of one, or of several small planets, or of asteroids, or even cosmic dust? Theory alone cannot decide this point.”<sup>33</sup>

In contrast, we can characterize a competing non-Newtonian research program by its hard core—that the motion of Mercury can be explained without appeal to a yet-to-be-found intra-Mercurial mass. For example, in 1894 one astronomer suggested a modification to the law of gravitation in order to explain Mercury’s motion; instead of inverse-square, he proposed that the exponent ought to be 2.00000016.<sup>34</sup>

The puzzle of the motion of Mercury was resolved in 1915, when Einstein showed that his General Theory of Relativity explains the observed motion of Mercury. Consequently, the Newtonian research program was abandoned.

#### IV. Particularism as a Research Program

Surely there are numerous dissimilarities between science and moral philosophy (methods, goals, language, etc.) Nevertheless, there is at least one thing they have in common. Moral philosophy, like science, is in the business of *explaining* certain features of the world.

Suppose we observe that actions  $A_1, A_2 \dots A_n$  are morally right.<sup>35</sup> We may want to explain these observations. We may ask, for example, (Q1) what is it that makes these actions morally right? We can think of various ways of approaching this question—or alternative research programs. According to one research program—*generalism*—a satisfactory answer to (Q1) must be in the form of an exceptionless principle that identifies features that  $A_1, A_2 \dots A_n$  have in common. The generalist research program appeals to a familiar notion of *explanation*—explanation as subsumption under exceptionless principles.<sup>36</sup> So one advantage of the generalist research program is that *if* we find an exceptionless principle that gives the right verdict about  $A_1, A_2 \dots A_n$  we will thereby have a satisfactory answer to (Q1).

According to an alternative research program—*particularism*—we can answer (Q1) without presupposing that there are exceptionless principles that will give the right verdict about  $A_1, A_2 \dots A_n$ . Proponents of this research program do not search for features that all and only  $A_1, A_2 \dots A_n$  have in common. Instead, they try to come up with an explanation of the rightness of  $A_1, A_2 \dots A_n$  that does not appeal to

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted from Baum and Sheehan (1997) pp. 173-4.

<sup>34</sup> See Hall (1894).

<sup>35</sup> I do not intend to commit to any particular account of moral epistemology or any specific theory about the nature of moral properties when I say that we *observe* that  $A_1 \dots A_n$  are morally right. One could replace this “observation statement” with whatever one thinks is the source of the relevant data for moral theorizing: e.g., that people take  $A_1 \dots A_n$  to be morally right, or that we tend to believe that  $A_1 \dots A_n$  are morally right etc.

<sup>36</sup> In the hard sciences it is typically thought that a phenomenon is explained by showing that it can be subsumed under an exceptionless law of nature. For example, the motion of Uranus was explained when the observed orbit was shown to be derivable from Newton’s inverse-square law.

exceptionless principles. Proponents of this research program can point out that in some areas of inquiry we are used to, and comfortable with explanations that do not appeal to exceptionless principles. For example, when we explain the aesthetic status of an artwork we do so without mentioning exceptionless aesthetic principles.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, explanations in the special sciences—e.g., psychology, economics and history—seem to conform to a different model of explanation than the model of subsumption under exceptionless principle.<sup>38</sup>

The particularism-generalism debate, I propose, is best understood as a debate over which research program we ought to pursue. Generalism is a research program characterized by (at least) this core hypothesis: in order to explain morality, and especially the rightness and wrongness of actions, we must appeal to exceptionless principles. Utilitarians and Kantians, for example, are generalists; despite their disagreement about the content of the correct moral theory, they both strive to identify exceptionless moral principles in order to explain the moral status of actions. Particularism, in contrast, is an alternative research program characterized by (at least) this core hypothesis: morality—including the rightness and wrongness of actions—can be explained without appeal to exceptionless principles.

We are now in a position to see why particularists need not argue that all moral principles are objectionable, or why premise (5) of the (PG) argument is false. Strictly speaking, research programs are not *true* or *false*. Research programs consist of theories and methodological rules. Theories may be true or false, but methodological rules require a different mode of evaluation. Lakatos suggests that instead of truth and falsehood we should evaluate research programs for their success. In order to explain what makes for a successful research program, Lakatos introduces the following terminology:

Let us say that...a series of theories is theoretically progressive (or 'constitutes a theoretically progressive problemshift') if each new theory has some excess empirical content over its predecessor...Let us say that a theoretically progressive series of theories is also empirically progressive (or 'constitutes an empirically progressive problemshift') if some of this excess empirical content is also corroborated...Finally, let us call a problemshift progressive if it is both theoretically and empirically progressive, and degenerating if it is not. (33-4)

With the notions of *progressive problemshift* and *degenerating problemshift*, Lakatos states the criterion for success of research programs as follows: "A research programme is successful if [it] leads to a progressive problemshift; unsuccessful if it leads to a degenerating problemshift." (48)

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<sup>37</sup> Dancy (2004) writes: "I know of nobody who has ever suggested that one could erect a principle-based structure for aesthetic judgments in the sort of way that almost everyone thinks one can do for moral judgment." (76). For more on the similarities between ethical judgment and aesthetical judgment see Little (2000:280).

<sup>38</sup> One might think that the "laws" of the special sciences are best understood as *ceteris paribus* laws, and that so construed, these "laws" or principles are exceptionless. I will not address this issue here.

Clearly, some modifications are required in order to import these definitions to our discussion in moral philosophy.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, the key point should be clear enough: a research program provides a strategy for modifying theories in the face of anomalies; if by employing this strategy we generate better theories—that is, theories with greater explanatory power—then the research program is successful. So perhaps instead of premise (5) we should consider the following premise:

(5') If there are any exceptionless moral principles, then particularism is unsuccessful.

However, premise (5') is clearly false. Even if there were exceptionless moral principles, it would not *entail* that the particularist research program is unsuccessful, since it is surely possible that several research programs would lead to progressive problemshifts. For instance, even if there were no counterexamples to the principle of utility, it would not entail that the particularist research program is unsuccessful, or that competing non-principle-based explanations of morality are impossible.

Perhaps the availability of exceptionless moral principles undermines the *motivation* to pursue the particularist research program. The thought is that if we had a satisfactory principle-based account of morality, then there might well be no reason to pursue the particularist research program, since there would be no need for alternative explanations. This seems right to me. Nevertheless, not *any* exceptionless principle will undermine the motivation to pursue the particularist research program, but only exceptionless moral principles that provide an *adequate account of morality*. So, I think that the following premise is true:

(5'') If there are exceptionless moral principles that provide an adequate account of morality, then particularism is unmotivated.

But principles like (K'), (GR), (SP) or (TBF) clearly do not provide an adequate account of morality. Indeed, no one has ever claimed that they do.

I take this to show that the standard debate concerning the availability of *any* exceptionless moral principles is misguided. For example, Sinnott-Armstrong (1999) claims that generalists have the dialectical upper hand in the particularism-generalism debate. He writes:

Consider the dialectical situation: A generalist holds a theory with a long list of defeaters shaped into groups. A particularist comes up and claims, "This example shows you need another item on your list." A generalist can always respond, "No, it doesn't. Your moral judgment about the example is incorrect." Alternatively, a generalist can respond, "OK, I'll add another item to my list." A Particularist can then come up with more examples, but a generalist again has these two possible responses—and so on...[it seems possible] in principle for generalists to keep adding qualifications and defeaters until no more are needed. (7-8)

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<sup>39</sup> It should be interesting to work out whether/how Lakatos's terminology can be "translated" into terms that are appropriate for moral philosophy. For example, it would be interesting to figure out what (if anything) in the moral realm corresponds to "excess empirical content" and how (or whether) this "empirical content" can be "corroborated." However, I will not pursue this route here.

Generalists, according to Sinnott-Armstrong, can always accommodate counterexamples offered by particularists by adding these counterexamples to the list of defeaters to a proposed principle. Eventually, one might hope, the particularist will run out of counterexamples, and so the generalist will be able to offer the following exceptionless principle:

$$(AH) \quad \forall x[(Gx \& \neg C_1x \& \neg C_2x \dots \& \neg C_nx) \rightarrow Mx]$$

[ $x$  ranges over actions,  $G$  is a non-moral property,  $M$  is a moral property, and  $C_1 \dots C_n$  are the known defeaters to the principle  $\forall x(Gx \rightarrow Mx)$ ] But even if (AH) is exceptionless—that is, if it were possible to list *all* defeaters<sup>40</sup>—it is hardly an *explanatory* principle, since it is manifestly *ad-hoc*. And since (AH), like (K'), (GR), (SP), and (TBF) plays no role in a generalist account of morality, the question of whether (AH) is exceptionless is tangential to the debate over particularism.

To the best of my knowledge, no one has yet presented an argument against particularism based on the availability of exceptionless *explanatory* principles. I suspect that the reason no such argument has been offered is that all exceptionless explanatory principles that have been formulated thus far are, at best, controversial and as a result they have no dialectical force in the context of the particularism-generalism debate. Consider, for example, the following argument:

7. If there are exceptionless moral principles that provide an adequate account of morality, then particularism is unmotivated.
8. The principle of utility is an exceptionless moral principle that provides an adequate account of morality.
9. Therefore, particularism is unmotivated.

In order to defend this argument one would have to argue for the claim that the principle of utility provides an adequate account of morality. And likewise, if one replaces the principle of utility in line (8) with any other comprehensive moral theory—e.g., Kantianism, Rule Utilitarianism or Rossianism<sup>41</sup>—one would have to defend that particular theory in order to demonstrate that particularism is unmotivated. But debates over the adequacy of such theories have occupied center stage in moral philosophy for many years, and the prospects for a conclusive argument for the adequacy of any one of these comprehensive moral theories, at least at present, look grim.

It is not surprising, then, that opponents of particularism have tried to argue against particularism without arguing for the truth of any specific principle-based moral theory. For example, M&R describe the

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<sup>40</sup> See Robinson (2006) for some worries concerning the possibility of listing all defeaters (esp. pp. 349-50).

<sup>41</sup> Ross (1930).

project of their book as follows: "This book is a defense of moral principles, yet it is not a defense of any specific moral principle. Although we are as interested as anyone in determining the specific content of morality, we here address the prior question of whether morality is principled at all." (3) M&R, like all other opponents of particularism, try to undermine particularism *without* defending any specific comprehensive principle-based moral theory. But once we understand particularism as a research program, we can see that without defending a specific comprehensive principle-based account of morality, the prospects for a demonstrative argument against particularism are extremely bleak.

## V. The *Positive Heuristic* of a Particularist Research Program

So far, I have suggested a way to reconceive particularism and, on that conception, I have claimed that the standard objections to particularism are unsuccessful. Nevertheless, in order to motivate particularism it is not enough to show that the standard objections are ineffective; particularists must also indicate what a particularist account of morality could look like. That is, particularists must answer the following question: if one wants to pursue the particularist research program, what should one do? Or in other words, what is the positive heuristic of the particularist research program? The positive heuristic of the generalist research program is well known—try to formulate a principle that is not susceptible to counterexamples, and when faced with a counterexample, adjust the principle (in some acceptable way) so that it yields the correct verdict about the proposed counterexample. Can particularists recommend any comparable positive heuristic?

In this section I will suggest two research paths particularist could pursue. These paths by no means exhaust the research possibilities open to particularists. Nevertheless, identifying these two alternatives should be enough to demonstrate that particularism offers a positive heuristic and that there are promising research paths for particularists to explore.

Jonathan Dancy—the philosopher most associated with particularism—initially thought that holism in the theory of reasons simply entails particularism,<sup>42</sup> and consequently, a large portion of his work was dedicated to the development and defense of holism in the theory of reasons.<sup>43</sup> However, as M&R pointed out, holism is *compatible* with the existence of exceptionless moral principles.<sup>44</sup> Recall that holism in the theory of reasons is the thesis that a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another case. M&R propose the following principle in order to demonstrate that holism doesn't entail the non-existence of moral principles:

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<sup>42</sup> For example, in his (2000) Dancy claimed that particularism is "merely one expression" of holism in the theory of reasons.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Dancy (1993), (2000), (2003), and (2004).

<sup>44</sup> See M&R (2005b) and (2006).

(U) The fact that an action would promote pleasure is a reason to perform the action if and only if the pleasure is nonsadistic. The fact that an action would promote pain is a reason not to perform the action. An action is morally right just in case it promotes at least as great a balance of reason-giving pleasures over pain as any of the available alternatives; otherwise it is wrong.<sup>45</sup>

Principle (U) is compatible with holism since it allows that a certain feature—namely, that an action would promote pleasure—is a reason in favor of performing an action in some contexts (i.e., in contexts in which the pleasure is nonsadistic), and it is no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in other contexts (i.e., in contexts in which the pleasure is sadistic). We should note, however, that M&R do not argue that (U) is an exceptionless moral principle, but only that one could formulate principles that are compatible with holism, and that for all we know some such principle may be exceptionless.

M&R are surely right about this much—holism doesn't *entail* that there are no exceptionless moral principles. And indeed, Dancy now acknowledges that "one cannot argue from holism directly to the conclusion that moral principles are impossible." (2004:82) His current view is that if holism were true then "it would be a sort of cosmic accident if it were to turn out that a morality could be captured in a set of holistic contributory principles." (82)<sup>46</sup>

Recently, several philosophers have argued that holism is of no help to the particularist. Joseph Raz (2006), for example, questions Dancy's 'cosmic accident' thesis. He argues that since "claims [about principles] are conceptual or perhaps metaphysical, if principles are possible and have a role then it would seem that there are principles. After all conceptual or metaphysical truths are not a domain in which accidents are possible." (117) According to Raz, then, Dancy cannot appeal to the 'cosmic accident' thesis to support particularism because "to succeed Dancy must show that principles are impossible; not even a universal accident can bring them about." (117) But since holism is compatible with the existence of exceptionless principles, as Dancy admits, Raz concludes that "Dancy's [holism] lends no support for particularism, because it cannot show (and Dancy himself does not claim) that true [exceptionless] principles are impossible." (117) Similarly, M&R (2006) also doubt Dancy's 'cosmic accident' thesis: "holism about reasons does nothing to support the thought that the finite and useful codification of morality would be metaphysically mysterious." (35) And so they conclude: "Holism about reasons provides no positive support for particularism. Holism neither implies that there are no [exceptionless] principles nor that any principles there might be would be 'cosmic accidents.'" (45)

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<sup>45</sup> See M&R (2006) p. 29.

<sup>46</sup> For similar theses see Little (2000) and Stratton-Lake (2000) pp. 128-130.

The 'cosmic accident' thesis is, to my mind, an interesting thesis well worthy of further exploration. However, I will not inspect it further here because for our purposes it will not be necessary. Indeed, once we understand particularism as a research program, we can see that the question of whether holism is compatible with the existence of principles, or whether holism entails that the availability of exceptionless moral principles is extremely unlikely—that is, that given holism a principled morality would be a 'cosmic accident' or a "world historical chance"<sup>47</sup>—is *tangential* to the particularism-generalism debate. The relevant question, I claim, is whether holism contributes to a particularist account of morality.

To see this, consider again the case of The Planet Vulcan. Suppose that the theory of relativity is compatible with the existence of a mass orbiting between Mercury and The Sun. Suppose, further, that the theory of relativity doesn't even entail that it is *unlikely* that some intra-Mercurial mass exists. Nevertheless, it would seem odd to argue that since the theory of relativity doesn't imply that Vulcan does not exist, or doesn't entail that its existence is unlikely, it offers no support for the non-Newtonian research program. The theory of relativity provides a good explanation of the motion of Mercury without assuming that there is a yet-to-be-found intra-Mercurial mass. Therefore, the theory of relativity undermines the motivation to search for Vulcan, since it solves the puzzle that was the impetus for positing the existence of Vulcan in the first place.<sup>48</sup>

Analogously, even though holism is compatible with the existence of exceptionless principles, and even if holism doesn't make the existence of such principles unlikely, it can nevertheless provide support for the particularist research program. If holism makes possible a plausible non-principle-based account of morality, it will undermine the motivation to search for exceptionless principles in much the same way that the theory of relativity undermines the motivation to search for The Planet Vulcan. So far, philosophers have failed to formulate exceptionless explanatory principles. It seems that the quest for such principles is motivated by the thought that such principles are necessary for an adequate account of morality. However, if an adequate non-principle-base account of morality were available, then we would no longer have reason to assume that such principles exist, and thereby we might no longer have reason to try to find and formulate exceptionless principles. Therefore, if holism in the theory of reasons contributes to the development of a successful particularist account of morality, then holism does provide positive support for the particularist research

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<sup>47</sup> Stratton-Lake (2000) p. 128.

<sup>48</sup> In fact, some astronomers kept searching for an intra-Mercurial mass well into the 20th century. However, the motivation for this quest was no longer the puzzle of the anomalous motion of Mercury, but rather the puzzle involving the various alleged sightings of The Planet Vulcan by reputable astronomers. At this point, the question that motivated this quest—the puzzle that the existence of an intra-Mercurial mass was supposed to resolve—was this: what did those trustworthy astronomers see when they claimed to have seen Vulcan? See Baum and Sheehan (1997) esp. p. 243 and pp. 253-4.

program regardless of whether it is compatible with the existence of exceptionless principles, and regardless of whether the 'cosmic accident' thesis is true.

I suspect that holism in the theory of reasons will play an important role in a particularist account of morality. Dancy's pioneering work on this topic is commendable. Nevertheless, developing an account of holism is still in its early stages and the details of the theory need to be worked out in much more detail before we can determine whether a particularist account of morality based on holism is superior to its generalist competitors.<sup>49</sup> So a *positive heuristic* of the particularist research program is to develop and defend a comprehensive account of holism in the theory of reasons.

Another—perhaps complementary—path particularists could pursue is to develop a particularist-friendly virtue ethics. It is noteworthy that in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes no reference to exceptionless moral principles.<sup>50</sup> Since generalists insist that one *must* appeal to exceptionless moral principles in order to explain the rightness/wrongness of actions, there seem to be three interpretative strategies available to generalists who attempt to understand Aristotle's project in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: they can try to identify an exceptionless principle to attribute to Aristotle; or they can argue that Aristotle wasn't interested in explaining the normative status of actions; or alternatively, they can claim that Aristotle was just hopelessly confused and that his whole project was misguided.

To the best of my knowledge no one pursues the third option. However, the two former interpretative strategies can be easily identified in the work of some neo-Aristotelians and contemporary virtue ethicists. For example, some philosophers propose a virtue-based criterion of moral rightness of the following form:

(VE) An act is right if and only if a fully virtuous agent would perform it in the circumstances.<sup>51</sup>

Others claim that Aristotle was not interested in solving moral quandaries or in identifying a criterion for the rightness/wrongness of actions; instead he was interested in providing a regimen for a good life or in questions concerning the nature of good moral character.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> For a recent criticism of Dancy's holism, see Raz (2006).

<sup>50</sup> Irwin (2000) claims that Aristotle asserts several exceptionless generalizations such as "one ought always to be willing to face great danger if some important cause is at stake, and one ought never to be willing to face it for some trivial reason." (111) However, I doubt that terms like "great danger", "important cause" and "trivial reason" can be cashed out without appeal to the judgment of the man of practical wisdom.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Hursthouse (1999), Swanton (2001), and Oakley (1996).

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Pincoffs (1971) and Taylor (1988). Two interesting examples of the second interpretative strategy are: (1) Irwin (2000) who claims that Aristotle did not try to formulate exceptionless moral principles because he believed that ethical theory essentially has a practical aim, and formulating exceptionless principles—though possible—will not serve this aim; and (2) Broadie (2006) who claims that the reason Aristotle did not try to formulate exceptionless principles is his epistemological naiveté—that he wasn't thinking about the possibility of cultural relativism. I classify these with the second interpretative strategy because in both cases the author attributes to Aristotle a goal other than explaining the rightness/wrongness of actions, and thus excuse him from the requirement to formulate exceptionless principles.



However, with the particularist research program in mind a new interpretative strategy becomes available: we can try to interpret Aristotle as offering a particularist account of morality—that is, we can interpret him as giving an explanation of the normative status of actions which is not based on the availability of exceptionless moral principles. Indeed, several passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are as close to an explicit endorsement of the particularist research program as one may hope to find in a two-thousand-year-old text.<sup>53</sup> So another *positive heuristic* of the particularist research program is to develop and defend a particularist reading of Aristotle, or to try to construct a neo-Aristotelian particularist-friendly virtue ethics, including, among other things, an account of moral education and moral development that is compatible with particularism.<sup>54</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

Moral philosophy in the past few hundred years has been dominated by generalism. Philosophers have assumed—without argument—that a successful explanation of morality must be grounded in exceptionless principles. Perhaps the commitment to generalism was influenced by the remarkable progress in the sciences spawned by the scientific revolution. Perhaps the thought was that a successful explanation of morality should be modeled after an explanation in the sciences, and that moral philosophers should seek exceptionless moral principles that would play a similar explanatory role to the role played by laws of nature in the sciences. Yet despite the fact that many outstanding philosophers have spent their careers trying to find and formulate exceptionless explanatory moral principles, such principles have not yet been found.

It would be a mistake to argue from the persistent failure to formulate satisfactory principles, to their non-existence. After all, it was Le Verrier's unwavering commitment to the Newtonian research program in the face of persistent failures that led to his celebrated discovery of The Planet Neptune. However, it was his unwavering commitment to the Newtonian research program that led him on a wild goose chase in search of The Planet Vulcan.

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<sup>53</sup> Here are two examples: (1) "We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs." (1094b20-27 Ross trans.) (2) "[A]ll law is universal but about some things it is not possible to make a universal statement which shall be correct. In those cases, then, in which it is necessary to speak universally, but not possible to do so correctly, the law takes the usual case, though it is not ignorant of the possibility of error. And it is none the less correct; for the error is in the law nor in the legislator but in the nature of the thing, since the matter of practical affairs is of this kind from the start. When the law speaks universally, then, and a case arises on it which is not covered by the universal statement, then it is right, where the legislator fails us and has erred by oversimplicity, to correct the omission—to say what the legislator himself would have said had he been present, and would have put into his law if he had known." (1137b12-24 Ross trans.)

<sup>54</sup> For an account of moral development that is friendly to particularism see Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1990).

Despite the surge of interest in particularism in recent years, we must not forget that particularism is a budding research program—it promises an account of morality, but it has not yet delivered a full fledged theory. At present, then, it would be rash to endorse particularism. However, we should also keep in mind that generalism is only a promise of a theory as well. A full fledged generalist theory will consist of a principle, or a set of principles, that provide an adequate account of morality. At present, I submit, such principles are not available. So it is, perhaps, equally rash to endorse generalism for the very same reasons it is rash to endorse particularism, and consequently, the claim that particularism is only a promise of a theory has no dialectical force in the context of the particularism-generalism debate.

Nevertheless, even though at present it may be rash to endorse particularism, it may well be rational to explore its strengths and weaknesses. As Laudan observes, one can *pursue* a research program without endorsing it. He writes:

[There are] many historical cases where scientists have investigated and pursued theories or research traditions which were patently less acceptable, less worthy of belief, than their rivals. Indeed, the emergence of virtually every new research tradition occurs under just such circumstances...it would be...mistaken to refuse to pursue [a budding research program] if it has exhibited a capacity to solve some problems (empirical or conceptual) which its older, and generally more acceptable rivals have failed to solve. (1977:110-1)

We cannot yet determine whether the particularist research program will produce a better account of morality than competing principle-based theories. Nevertheless, the persistent failure to formulate exceptionless explanatory principles should motivate us to explore new routes and particularism shows enough promise to warrant further exploration. Particularism, I submit, is worthy of pursuit.

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