In his SEP article presenting moral particularism, Jonathan Dancy defended particularism against “absolute” and “contributory” moral generalism. Absolute moral generalism claims that a moral principle is “a universal claim to the effect that all actions of a certain type are overall wrong (or right).” On this view of morality, an absolute moral principle might be to not break a promise; thus breaking a promise, whatever the circumstances, is a moral wrong. Contributory moral generalism sees multiple moral principles as contributing to a moral valuation, with the various principles concerned coming to some net balance. On this view, breaking a promise might count against the moral valuation of a particular action, but it might be counterbalanced by other contributory principles.

The appeal to principles takes both a metaphysical form and an epistemological form. In the metaphysical form, principles are what couple an action to the property of rightness or wrongness; thus the action of taking a piece of candy from a coworker’s desk is coupled to moral rightness or wrongness by the fact of whether the action is stealing, based on whether the coworker has made the candy available for the taking. In the epistemological form, we need a way to know whether an action is right or wrong, and non-moral features of the action determine its rightness or wrongness; on this view, principles are how a competent moral agent can connect the non-moral aspects of his actions to its moral rightness or wrongness.

The differences between moral generalism and moral particularism become clear from Dancy’s description of particularism. The demand of moral generalism is to apply moral principles in the same way in all instances; the principles are invariant in how they apply across circumstances. In sharp difference with moral generalism’s insistence on invariance, “The core of particularism is its insistence on variability.” Various moral features have “variable relevance,” and in what Dancy called the “holism of reasons,” a feature may apply one way in one instance, another way in another instance, and not at all in a third instance. Thus a particularist does not attempt to bring moral principles to bear on a situation, rather, “there is an attempt to work out what matters here and how it matters, in ways that may involve an indirect appeal to the way things were or might be elsewhere.”

I side with Dancy against absolute moral generalism. The absolutist claims lead to counterintuitively contradictory conclusions in situations in which one must break a promise to meet a more morally compelling need. I am less convinced by his argument against contributory generalism. From Dancy’s presentation, contributory principles seem to function something like prima facie moral rules, and I don’t find Dancy’s argument against them compelling.

A specific area of his argument left me less than convinced. In the last paragraph of §3, Dancy discussed generalist and particularist analyses of statements about stealing. The particularist understands “that is stealing, and therefore you should not do it” as an abbreviated argument; the full argument would be “that is stealing and stealing is always wrong; therefore that is wrong,” and the argument has an implicit appeal to a principle. In contrast, the particularist will tend to understand the statement “that is stealing and therefore it is wrong” as “that is stealing and wrong for that reason.” Dancy continued that the particularist sees no argument or inference in that statement; it is simply “an account of the presence of a reason and a statement of what reason it is.”
Dancy’s statement “that is stealing and wrong for that reason” makes no unique claim; the moral generalist can make exactly the same statement: the action is wrong because it is stealing. Actions are not morally wrong simply because they are declared so; the particularist has an underlying reason why the action is stealing, and that reason will have an argument to support it. It seems to me that his statement implicitly appeals to that underlying argument explaining just why the action is stealing, and thus wrong; if this is correct, his statement seems no less an appeal to an argument than the generalist position.

It seems to me that the particularist and contributory generalist positions may have more common points than Dancy’s argument seems to state. What seems missing to me in the contributory generalist position are the arguments why the actions to which the principles apply are wrong (or right.) If general moral principles exist, they are not applied in a vacuum; principles apply to actions for reasons having to do with the nature of the actions themselves, and interpretation and understanding is required to couple the principles with the actions to which they apply. An act is stealing because one takes something that is not one’s own; such an analysis presupposes a system of property and ownership, and rights and wrongs in violating the rules of those institutions. It seems to me that the particularist and the contributory generalist agree on this process.

Where I felt Dancy’s argument weak was in explaining in more detail just how actions came to have moral value. The generalist appeals to moral principles in some form to tag actions with moral value; it is not clear to me how Dancy’s particularist accomplishes that. Stealing may violate a legal statute or a well-established cultural custom, but for that it was not clear to me from Dancy’s argument just how the action acquired moral status. Perhaps I missed something pivotal in his argument, but in that respect I thought he could have presented a more complete argument.


This is adapted from a series of responses I wrote for an independent study in analytic ethics of partiality and consequentialism.