

On the Generality of Morality: Accountability and Societal Impracticality of Particularism

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the debate between Jonathan Dancy and Brad Hooker regarding the validity of moral particularism and investigates whether both philosophers have overlooked any important factors in their discussions. According to Jonathan Dancy's ideas of particularism, morality which encompasses our moral thought, judgment, and the possibility of moral distinctions, is independent of the codification of moral principles. He appeals to holism in the theory of reasons to defend his belief that the same property or feature that is a reason in one case can count morally for or against action in different circumstances. Hooker, on the other hand, takes issue with Dancy's account by suggesting that moral particularism is socially impractical, and Dancy's provision of premises ought to be overwhelmingly plausible. Hooker argues that moral particularism fails to provide the moral assurance that is required of a shared commitment to morality that brings about mutually beneficial practices that we can generalize in consideration of the features of contexts in which they take place within the specification of reason(s) for belief and action. By comparing Hooker's example involving theoretical particularist Patty and the Rossian generalist Gerry with Dancy's rebuttal, this paper propounds that Dancy and Hooker both insufficiently address the conceptual relation between moral obligation and accountability within the moral domain. Morality as accountability does not exclusively relate to the valuable consequences of creating and following rules and principles. Rather, it entails our obligations conceptually to hold ourselves mutually accountable if and only if there are existing general rules and principles that are also accessible to all members within the community bounded by such common moral knowledge.

Keywords: Brad Hooker, Ethical Theory, Holism, Jonathan Dancy, Moral Particularism, Rossian Generalism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As humans, we adjudicate on the disputed matter of what makes an action morally right or wrong through the careful consideration of our intentions, as well as the evaluation of the consequences of our decisions in alignment with the general rules of morality. However, questions remain concerning how the covariation between morality and immorality plays a role in the moral principles we know today. Some ethical theorists define morality in terms of moral principles, such as keeping promises and paying back debt, while other philosophers object to such a line of reasoning. For instance, moral particularists offer an alternative ethical theory that focuses on the particularity of moral circumstances. Johnathan Dancy, a philosopher in support of moral particularism, believes that the generality of moral truths is too complicated and ambiguous to serve as the foundation of principled ethics. He also believes that morality, which encompasses moral thought, judgment, and distinctions, does not depend on the abstraction of moral principles. This is because our moral consideration can serve as a reason for our actions, but do not always contribute positively or negatively to the overall virtuousness of our conduct. However, Brad Hooker, a utilitarian philosopher, disagrees with Dancy and has sought to articulate and defend moral rules in relation to moral actions. Hooker argues that moral particularism fails to provide the moral assurance that is required of a shared commitment to morality, which, in turn, fails to bring about mutually beneficial practices. The debate among Dancy, Hooker, and generalists prompts a re-assessment of moral theory and moral practice in order to hold ourselves accountable for the way we act.

In this paper, I will first clarify Dancy's account of moral particularism. Then, I will explain Hooker's argument in opposition to Dancy's ideas before presenting Dancy's response to Hooker. Finally, I will contribute my criticism of them to the discussion.

II. DANCY'S NOTION OF MORAL PARTICULARISM

Dancy finds fault with generalism and suggests that we have no reason to assume that our morality rests upon the supply of its principles because the contributory reasons for our behaviors can count morally for or against what we do in different situations.

According to Dancy,

[G]eneralism is the cause of many bad moral decisions, made in the ill-judged and unnecessary attempt to fit what we are to say here to what we have said on another occasion... It is this sort of looking away that particularists see as the danger in generalism. Reasons function in new ways on new occasions, and if we don't recognize this fact and adapt our practice to it, we will make bad decisions. Generalism encourages a tendency not to look hard enough at the details of the case before one, quite apart from any over-simplistic tendency to rely on a few rules of dubious proven. (1993, p. 64)

There are no defensible moral rules, and moral thought does not apply to situations we encounter in life. Generalist principles that follow the format "if A, then B," in which A represents non-moral feature(s) while B signifies a moral predicate, presume that B supervenes on A at least in the sense that situations that are exactly alike non-morally are alike morally, i.e., no moral difference without a non-moral difference. Thus, we cannot overlook instances in which the ethical valence within A changes by context or discern such moral relevance without the acknowledgment and comprehensive assessment of the entire context and features of our choices of action. For Dancy, morality is too complex to be generalized and codified. Our moral generalizations are not always correct and should never be taken as a necessary assumption for moral deliberation.

Although Dancy does not exclude the possibility of moral generalities, he deems them insufficient and ambiguous for establishing principled ethics. Nevertheless, since his claims of particularism rest upon holistic reasoning that emphasizes the context-dependency of moral thought, Dancy insufficiently addresses the predictability of moral actions or the practicality of moral particularism. We may conduct an action guided by particular judgments that are independent of principles, but in general, acting under the guidance of moral rules denotes a reliable strategy that induces us to carry out rightful behaviors for morally good reasons. Consequently, there seems to be no need for any reciprocal efforts to enhance our moral assurance in action, which eliminates our shared commitment to morality that brings about mutually beneficial practices in society. Unsatisfied with Dancy's diagnosis of the errors of generalism, Hooker takes issue with his particularist analysis and considers moral particularism socially impractical.

III. HOOKER'S COUNTEREXAMPLE TO PARTICULARISM IN DEFENSE OF GENERALISM

In response to Dancy, Hooker deems moral particularism a non-distinct thesis and alleges that Rossian generalism also necessitates the details of cases and contributory contexts that give favorable reasoning in alignment with the ethicality of an action. Hooker notes that Dancy's ideas shed light on the changing valence of moral features with varying conditions, which does not conflict with what the Rossian generalists believe. Based on Hooker's interpretation of Rossian generalism (2000), an irreducible plurality of principles with no strict order of priority constitutes morality (p. 4). These pluralist generalists contend that we make arguments about whether a behavior is morally permissible by appealing to the interaction(s) and application of moral principles, which is extremely prevalent in moral discussions. For example, we ought to comply with the rules against physically harming other people except in cases of self-defense in order to protect ourselves from threats to our physical well-being. In addition, we tend to endorse the generalist principles about not stealing or destroying others' property, keeping promises, being honest and loyal, helping others, and so on. As a result, "switching arguments"—utilizing conclusions about one case to inform judgments in another case—is ubiquitous in ethics when we compare cases and their moral relevance before making decisions to act morally (Hooker, 2000, p. 6). This makes Dancy's thesis of particularism inadequate for relying on the claim that the only predicate shared by morally permissible actions is their morality permissibility. Though Dancy agrees with the Rossian generalists that the details of a particular case determine what moral properties are instantiated and which are most morally relevant, he maintains that "switching arguments" is unsound and dangerous because the very same properties can count morally in some circumstances but trivialize certain actions in others. Hooker, on the other hand, questions Dancy's views with his counterexamples to particularism.

One of Hooker's counterexamples takes account of the moral properties and considerations of producing pleasures by indicating that the moral polarity of sadistic and non-sadistic pleasures remains the same regardless of the peculiarity of each case. Particularists hold that not all pleasure-producing actions are morally right: pleasures can shift valence by making an action morally worse when they are sadistic for inflicting pain, suffering, or humiliation on others. Accordingly, one's conduct can be impermissible despite its provision of non-sadistic pleasure or permissible even if it engenders sadistic pleasure. Responding to the aforementioned propositions, Hooker (2000) states that the Rossian generalists can adhere to *pro tanto* reasoning to demonstrate that generating pleasure "is always a *pro tanto* moral plus, even if the pleasure comes to a wicked and undeserving person" (p. 7). Alternatively, Rossian generalists can also start making distinctions between the benefit of pleasure to the agent and its moral value because sadistic pleasures that embody such moral disvalue might still benefit the sadist. Nevertheless, the moral status of pleasure is contingent on what kind of pleasure it is. We rarely praise or encourage sadistic deeds for personal interests or pleasures and often regard them as morally wrongful and punishable. Hooker recognizes although that sadistic and non-sadistic pleasurable actions may or may not be morally right, this does not change the moral standing of the pleasure itself because we cannot deny the fact that at least all non-sadistic pleasures are moral pluses. Actions that are beneficial to others, as well as behaviors that lead to their non-sadistic pleasure, always count as moral reasons for us to carry them out. If we accept this line of argument, then the model of Rossian pluralism seems perfectly capable of explicating the issues for which particularists seek clarification. Hooker further creates his thought-provoking experimentation, giving his explanation of why moral particularism is nonviable for societal practices and moral education.

IV. PATTY VS. GERRY: THE EXTENT OF PREDICTABILITY AND MORAL CONDUCT

Hooker proposes a thought experiment in which he constructs two characters, theoretical particularist Patty and Rossian generalist Gerry, and compares the predictability of their moral conduct and trustworthiness to elucidate why Rossian generalism is more preferable theory than moral particularism. Suppose Patty is a devoted moral particularist who asks us for help with her crops in exchange for her assistance with our crops next month. Patty needs help growing her crops in order to prevent bankruptcy caused by their spoiling. Assume that the only thing making her keep her promise and commit to behaving morally is her moral outlook. Having no direct or indirect experience with Patty or how trustworthy she is, should we help her without a legal contract and expect that she will help us back, given her self-description as a particularist? For particularist Patty, none of her considerations retain their moral polarity because she has promised to do something that might rationalize her side of the deal in one situation. Meanwhile, her considerations can also function as a reason for breaking her promise in another situation, which can bankrupt both of us. In this way, she has made no guarantee to assist with our crops at all because making a promise does not necessarily give her any reason to fulfill what she has promised. Particularist Patty does not attach weight to her words, nor does she attest to any general norms or rules that specify and distinguish the instances in which a promise would be morally binding from the situations in which it wouldn't. In comparison to Patty, Rossian generalist Gerry possesses drastically different perspectives and believes that physical violence, stealing, property damage, promise-breaking, and lying are all moral minuses whereas promoting justice, helping others, and expressing gratitude are moral pluses. With his pluralist thoughts, he is also aware of the possible scenarios in which these moral considerations can be overridden (Hooker, 2000, p. 19). Partaking in this deal, Gerry makes the same promise as Patty and is motivated to do good solely by his morality. Unlike our encounter with Patty, we know that Gerry assents to the general principle that breaking a non-coercive or moral promise that entails no deliberate deception is always a moral minus, and he will only break the deal in the presence of other imperative moral commitments or responsibilities. Hooker surmises that whether or not particularism is likely to cause Patty's and Gerry's moral mistakes, it is clear that Gerry would be more likely to keep his promise than Patty would.

Hooker's thought experiment about the crops dealing with Patty and Gerry challenges the spectrality of moral particularism, concluding that public conformity to Rossian generalism is more likely to form a society characterized by mutual trust among people who, in return, are trustworthy within that society. Moral particularism is ineffective in practice and does not seem to result in desirable outcomes in our daily lives. This is because working with particularist Patty refrains us from any guidance by moral principles and comes with significant costs of bankruptcy while preventing us from fulfilling our morally valuable promises. For Patty, any fact can be morally relevant depending on the circumstances, which can interfere with the moral status of the promise. Thus, we cannot trust Patty to keep the promise because there is a lack of certainty that the polarity of promise-keeping will remain. We have more trust in Gerry because we can predict how he will behave in regards to the practical argument of Rossian generalism. Since Gerry subscribes to common moral generalities and is not an absolutist about the wrongness of promise-breaking, we have good reason to assure his trustworthiness to act reliably and consistently in accordance with

pluralist generalism. Hooker's thought experiment (2000) illustrates that particularism fails to provide the moral assurance that is required of a shared commitment to morality (p. 16). Our internalization of moral restrictions and exceptions with Rossian generalism ascertains the moral dispositions of others and forges the bond of trust among people, with more predictability about how we will act to sustain mutually beneficial practices. Opposing Hooker, Dancy questions his experimentation with Patty and Gerry and considers it overly pragmatic rather than offering logical justification for Rossian generalism.

I. DANCY'S RESPONSE TO HOOKER

Dancy reiterates that Hooker's emphasis on the comparative trustworthiness of a person gained through predictability of generalism is overrated as there is no direct correlation between moral rules or generalities and our anticipation of how others choose to act. We can generally depend on people to act rightly in the circumstances. Dancy (2004) replies, "We don't need principles to tell them what to do, or to determine what is right, or to tell us what they are likely to do, any more than we need principles of rationality to be in place before we can begin to rely on people by and large to act sensibly" (p. 133). These principles might inform us of which considerations people are likely to take to make a difference in how they should behave, but such contributory features for moral actions are not incontrovertible proofs of their predictability of trustworthiness.

Furthermore, Dancy regards Hooker's contrast between particularist Patty and Rossian generalist Gerry as an even trade-off between the two individuals, for both of them are equally likely to do something wrong depending on whether it is right to keep the promise. In particular, Dancy (2004) argues that if Patty the particularist indeed breaks the promise, then it must mean that the promise is not required by morality; however, while Gerry will be more likely than Patty to keep the promise, he might also have considerable reason to do something else—a reason which he takes to be overridden by the "non-existent reason" to keep the promise (p. 134). In this case, Patty will certainly do the right thing whereas Gerry's behavior is uncertain. Although I want to agree with Dancy that we often expect and trust people to act morally, I find his rebuttals for particularism unsatisfactory, and I believe that Dancy and Hooker insufficiently address the conceptual relation between moral obligation and mutual accountability in the realm of morality.

V. ON DANCY'S ARGUMENT FOR MORAL PARTICULARISM

Dancy's replies to Hooker's "Patty vs. Gerry" example are too broad and quixotic for assuming the moral or immoral behaviors of others due to the counterintuitive particularist conclusions about the changing polarity of moral considerations in different situations. I agree with Dancy that there is no reason to suppose that moral generalities hold truth with no exceptions because of the switching valence of the default reasons for our actions in differing contexts. Additionally, it is unnecessary to allude to moral principles when it comes to trusting that people in our daily lives will be moral. However, as Hooker mentioned, Rossian generalism denies the stringency of moral generalities because qualifications are needed for us to weigh and prioritize certain moral considerations over the less morally relevant reasons. If Gerry breaks our promise and chooses to save another person to whom he upholds personal obligations, then his promise-breaking is less of a moral minus because we are conscious of his overriding moral concerns. Just because Rossian generalism allows us to construct moral standards and generate conclusions from moral and immoral instances does not mean that the specified conditions of our behaviors are always insignificant. Therefore, it is unclear where Dancy's confidence or credibility in our sensitivity to details derives from, for he denies that our pro tanto reasons for doing something that can be overridden by competitive considerations do not disclose invariant moral truths. Moral generalities instantiate moral properties founded upon the particular features of each case that guide the reason for our actions and hold us accountable for their consequences.

Moreover, Rossian generalism implies that as rational agents, each of us is responsible for assessing the moral reasons of a situation and resolving our dilemmas with proper moral judgments that reflect the given circumstances and our beliefs and principles of morality. According to Dancy (2004), "[A] competent moral judge can tell when a feature is operating normally (if it is a default reason) when one feature's contribution is intensified or diminished by the presence of another when the presence of one feature affects the sort of action that another feature favours, and so on" (p. 143). Dancy needs to give a clearer answer to how his notion of default reasons affects the way we act and assures the reciprocity of morality in society in the absence of general moral principles. Unlike particularism, Rossian generalism brings about such socially practical reasoning as we apply our moral knowledge in instigating the contributory factors of an event and grants an overall answer to the pragmatic question of what is the moral thing to do. Incorporating moral rules into our understanding of the situation helps ascertain whether an action will result in wrongdoing, including breaking a promise, destroying property, and lying, or whether an alternative event would harm

someone. I commend Hooker for explaining the comparative trustworthiness of a person with the predictability and inclination of moral actions following Rossian generalism. However, I'd like to extend his ideas by shifting attention toward morality as mutual accountability.

VI. ON HOOKER'S VALUE OF PREDICTABILITY

Contrasting particularist Patty and Rossian generalist Gerry, Hooker's thought experiment presents more convincing claims that principled and structured practices with Rossian pluralism generate various beneficial consequences through the predictability and stable expectations of moral behaviors. Such an empirical point insinuates that particularists attach less moral weight to their words and are more likely to break their promises because they lack the motivation to adhere to principles. I find Hooker's perspective reasonable as one of the main purposes of morality is to increase the probability of conformity with certain mutually beneficial practices. Rejecting this thesis impairs the overall plausibility of a moral view that offers no principled guidance. We are capable of judging how to act case by case, and in a way that will enable us to predict what other people will in fact do, but comparatively, someone who is guided by principles behaves more predictably than those with particularist thoughts and inconsistent reasoning.

One of Hooker's shortcomings is that he barely examines the cases in which some principles are either restrictive or indeterminate and must be supplemented by judgment. Does moral guidance by a combination of hedged and indefinite rules make us more predictable and assuring of others to act morally? This yields flexibility for particularists to doubt the necessity of principles for the predictability of morality. I concur with Hooker that our coordination and collective use of principles allows us to attain morally valuable goods in the form of predictability and assurance of others' conduct, which enhances our willingness to rely on those predictions when making our own choices. This leads to the broader question about whether there is something inherently morally valuable about being a person of principle independent of the content of moral rules and how moral principles influence our actions.

VII. MORALITY AS MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Morality as mutual accountability affirms an equal second-personal authority of all people by holding each member of the moral community answerable to their autonomous decision-making. I acknowledge Hooker's idea that a shared commitment to morality through the implementation of moral generalities in the form of laws will assure people that others will not attack them, rob them, break promises, or lie to them. Similarly, Dancy (2004) suspects that a rationale for generalism rests upon the thought that "morality is [essentially] a description of something like a set of traffic regulations" even though it was not invented by a group of experts in council to serve the purposes of social control (p. 83). However, both Dancy's and Hooker's rule-consequentialist approach underrates the role of accountability in morality. Morality is not solely meant to be the proxy for such predictability of trustworthiness and social regulation. Building upon Dancy's and Hooker's insights, I propose that morality as mutual accountability does not exclusively relate to the valuable consequences of following rules and principles. Rather, it entails our obligations conceptually to hold ourselves mutually accountable if and only if there are existing general principles and agreeable rules to which all members within the community are accessible. Particularists may respond that we may never find this common ground when reckoning with conflict of interests due to our substantial disagreements about what is just and unjust. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that any properties that make an action morally righteous or wrongful have to be able to mediate and seek interpersonal and intrapersonal accountability, which is helpful for achieving consensual resolutions or atonement. Moral generalities allow us to formulate the features that make an action morally obligatory or wrong in terms that mediate open discussions about accountability, which includes moral blame and sentiments of guilt and remorse. Such common moral knowledge holds us addressable for our actions while making others liable for refusing to recognize individual authority from their own vantage point. If this is true, then it is plausible to rule out particularism on conceptual grounds as the generalizability of morality induces mutual responsibility for maintaining and reciprocating second-personal respect, which fosters honesty and transparency in society.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The essence of the dispute about moral generalities between Dancy and Hooker lies in their divergent normative and pragmatic procedures that analyze and contextualize the efficacy of structured moral guidance and its relationship with our moral reasons. Dancy's radical conception of particularism indicates that the contextual details define our particular reasoning to do or not do something, and we ought to inspect the situation first before determining our moral considerations and attaching morally relevant or irrelevant

values to them. The generalist principles of morality supervenient on non-moral properties can be found in more than one instance, but they do not offer efficacious moral guidance because none of us know or hold certainty about what they are. Hooker, on the other hand, dissents from the particularists and defends Rossian generalism by stating that principled guidance produces more predictability of moral actions, and that society is better off with principles of morality that support circumstantial exceptions and pro tanto reasoning that gives rise to individual deliberations of weighing and prioritizing our considerations. Though I deem Hooker's stance more cogent and societally practical, morality as predictability under directives of law and order is not enough. Morality promotes our joint conceptual understanding of mutual accountability as our self-reliance and compassion for others are mutually inclusive. This urges us to act morally and work towards sustaining the overall prosperity and harmony of our society. If the generalizability of morality is feasible through the formulation of comprehensive moral standards and norms, then we are utterly justified in probing the reasons why such principles are required and asking ourselves whether our moral discernment truly depends on them.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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