

WHAT DOES HOLISM HAVE TO DO WITH MORAL PARTICULARISM?

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Abstract

Moral particularists are united in their opposition to the codification of morality, and their work poses an important challenge to traditional ways of thinking about moral philosophy. Defenders of moral particularism have, with near unanimity, sought support from a doctrine they call “holism in the theory of reasons.” We argue that this is all a mistake. There are two ways in which holism in the theory of reasons can be understood, but neither provides any support for moral particularism.

Moral particularists are united in their opposition to the codification of morality in purely descriptive terms, but their opposition takes different forms. Sometimes particularists maintain that codifying the moral landscape is impossible. In other contexts particularists argue that moral principles are in any event unnecessary. In yet other contexts particularists contend that the codification of morality is undesirable, perhaps because it would encourage people to look less carefully at the case at hand.¹ These are distinct theses, although particularists often endorse all three. As Jonathan Dancy, citing John McDowell puts it, “Particularism is at its crudest the claim that we neither need nor can see the search for an ‘evaluative outlook which one can endorse as rational as the search for a set of principles.’”² On any interpretation, particularism poses an important challenge for traditional conceptions of moral philosophy

¹ Jonathan Dancy calls this the problem of “looking away.” See Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 63-64.

² Dancy, previously cited, p. 56. Unfortunately Dancy never explicitly provides what he takes to be a less crude characterization or we would cite it instead.

according to which philosophers should provide an accurate, theoretically illuminating and useful codification of morality.

Defenders of particularism have, with near unanimity, sought support from a doctrine they call “holism in the theory of reasons.” For example, Jonathan Dancy claims that holism is “the leading thought behind particularism” and goes on to claim that “if there is a holism of reasons...the prospects for substantial moral principles look bleak.”³ More recently Dancy has claimed that, “A principle-based approach to ethics is inconsistent with the holism of reasons.”⁴ Margaret Little maintains that, “if reason-giving considerations function holistically in the moral realm then we simply shouldn’t expect to find rules that mark out in nonmoral terms the sufficiency conditions for applying moral concepts.”⁵ Moreover, Little suggests that this line of argument is considerably more fruitful than the alternative strategy of arguing that any proposed moral principle is vulnerable to counter-examples:

Obviously, to defend particularism, it is not enough to keep offering counter-examples to proposed principles. Even if they are accepted, just what they suffice to show is precisely what is in question – those attuned to the richness of morality but loyal to the existence of principles will see counterexamples as evidence of complexity, not of irreducible complexity. (Besides, there’s something not a little farcical about measuring dialectical success in terms of who can outlast whom – those who want to refine the principles or those who want to find exceptions) But the particularist’s doubt does not stem from philosophical obsession with counterexamples or lazy extrapolation from

³ Jonathan Dancy, previously cited, pp. 60 and 66 respectively.

⁴ Jonathan Dancy, “The Particularist’s Progress,” in Brad Hooker and Margaret Little, eds. *Moral Particularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 135.

them; it is not brute pessimism floating free of any other philosophical commitment. The particularist doubt is born of reflection about the nature of the moral domain.⁶

It is clear from the context that the further philosophical commitment to which Little refers here is holism in the theory of reasons. So particularists rely heavily on the appeal to holism in the theory of reasons as an especially powerful way of defending particularism. Even opponents of particularism generally concede that holism would provide substantial support for particularism and accept the burden of arguing against holism. Philip Stratton-Lake, for example, rejects particularism but maintains that holism entails that “there cannot be a principled relation between certain natural and moral properties; or, at least, if there is, it can only be by some sort of world historical chance.”⁷

This is all a mistake. Holism provides no support for particularism in any of its guises. There are two ways of understanding holism. On the first conception, holism is an interesting account of the context sensitivity of reasons but does not provide any support for particularism. On the second interpretation, holism is the

⁵ Margaret Little, “Moral Generalities Revisited,” in Hooker and Little 2000, previously cited, p. 284.

⁶ Little, previously cited, 2000, p. 279.

⁷ Philip Stratton-Lake, *Kant, Duty, and Moral Worth* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 129, see also pp. 128-30. Stratton-Lake traces holism to G.E. Moore’s doctrine of organic wholes, and claims that to give a satisfactory reply to particularists, “One must attack the doctrine that is doing the real damage, namely, the doctrine of organic wholes.” Whether Moore’s doctrine is a form of holism or even presupposes holism as the particularists understand that doctrine is a difficult question that would require careful Moore exegesis that would be out of place here, so we simply set that issue to one side. We do note, however, that Dancy explicitly rejects Moore’s doctrine. See Dancy, previously cited, 2000, pp. 139-140.

combination of two theses - an interesting thesis about the context sensitivity of reasons and the thesis that this context sensitivity is uncodifiable. Holism in this sense entails particularism only because the second of these two theses simply *is* a form of particularism. Hence any argument from holism in this sense to particularism begs the question. Moreover, as we explain below, holism in this sense is not a very useful concept because makes some of the most important and interesting questions in this area invisible. To be clear then, the answer to the question posed by our title is “very little.”

Holism usually is characterised as the thesis that what functions as a reason in one case may not be a reason at all or may even be a reason with the opposite valence in another case. Here is Jonathan Dancy:

In this chapter I lay out what I think one commits oneself to if one accepts the general claim that reasons are sensitive to context – a context sometimes called holism in the theory of reasons...I maintain that *all* reasons are *capable* of being altered by changes in context – that there are none whose nature as reasons is necessarily immune to changes elsewhere.⁸

Holism so understood is easy enough to motivate with examples. Suppose my seeing a movie would give me pleasure. Plausibly, the fact that this action would give me pleasure is a reason for me to perform the action in this case. However, in another case that very same consideration might be no reason at all to perform the action. If I would take pleasure in torturing someone then the fact of my potential pleasure is no reason whatsoever to torture the person. There is some temptation in light of the torture case to maintain that the original description of the movie case was mistaken. This is the temptation to be an atomist about reasons – to reject holism in the theory

of reasons. On an atomistic interpretation, my reason to see the movie was not simply that it would give me pleasure but that it would give me non-sadistic pleasure. The main point of holism is to resist this temptation. The holist emphasises that we can instead understand the reason to see the movie as the fact that it would give me pleasure even though its status as a reason is context-dependent.

Particularists do not have a monopoly on holism. Holism is compatible with the generalist view that morality can and should be codified. Moreover, there is no reason to suppose that the generalist could not reap just as many theoretical dividends from holism as the particularist. The clearest way to make this point is with a series of examples. Consider the following moral theory:

(U) The fact that an action would promote pleasure is a reason to perform the action if and only if the pleasure is non-sadistic. 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.

(U) is a utilitarian theory that differs from classical forms of utilitarianism only in that it gives no weight to sadistic pleasures. Pretty clearly, (U) is incompatible with the particularist idea that morality cannot be codified. (U) is a comprehensive codification in purely descriptive terms of the morality of right and wrong. We could append theories of supererogation and virtue as well, but (U) already is just the sort of codification of morality that particularists would reject as either impossible, unnecessary or undesirable. The crucial point is that holism cannot support a

⁸ Dancy 2000, previously cited, p. 130. See also Dancy 1993, previously cited, p. 60.

particularist critique of (U), for (U) presupposes holism.⁹ According to (U) whether the fact that an action would promote pleasure is a reason for performing the action depends on the context – in particular, it depends on whether the pleasure is a sadistic one. Nonetheless, on this theory it is the fact that an action would promote pleasure that is a reason when it is a reason and not the fact that it would promote non-sadistic pleasure. So (U) presupposes holism. (U) does not maintain the status of facts about pain as reasons is context sensitive, but this is compatible with holism. For holism maintains only that a consideration's status as a reason *can* depend on other features of the context, not that it *must*. Dancy is clear on this point, emphasising that holism is consistent with the existence of what he calls “invariant reasons” - considerations that function as reasons with the same valence in all possible circumstances:

I conclude, then, that particularism should accept the possibility of invariant reasons, so long as the invariance is not a matter of the logic of such reasons,

⁹ Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith argue at the end of their paper on particularism and patterns that holism is compatible with a form of “expected value” utilitarianism, but the version of utilitarianism they consider is unnecessarily technical and obscures the basic point. The theory they consider maintains that, “the moral value of A is a weighted sum of the value of each possible world at which A obtains: $V(A) = \sum_w \Pr(w/A) \cdot V(w)$, where $V(w)$ is a measure of total happiness at w . And R is a reason for A if and only if the value of A given R is greater than the value of A, i.e., $\sum_w \Pr(w/A.R) \cdot V(w) > \sum_w \Pr(w/A) \cdot V(w)$, which obtains if and only if $V(A.R) > V(A)$.” (p. 97) Their explication of this form of utilitarianism and its presuppositions may succeed (though this is not obvious), but the basic point should not be thought to depend on the elaborate details of this particular version of expected value utilitarianism. See Jackson, Pettit, and Smith, “Ethical Particularism and Patterns,” in Hooker and Little, previously cited, pp. 79-99, esp. p. 96-99. For a similar point, see Richard Holton, “Particularism and Moral Theory: Principles and Particularism,” *Supplement to the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 76, July 2002, fn.12.

but more the rather peculiar fact that some reasons happen to contribute in ways that are not affected by other features.¹⁰

At this point a particularist might appeal to a much stronger version of holism, according to which all reasons not only can but *must* depend on other features of the context for their status as reasons. This version of holism seems much less pre-theoretically attractive than holism as it is usually understood; Dancy seems right to allow that certain considerations may well turn out to be reason-giving with the same valence across all possible circumstances. However, even this stronger version of holism is compatible with a slightly more sophisticated form of utilitarianism:

(U*) The fact that an action would promote pleasure is a reason to perform the action if and only if the pleasure is non-sadistic. The fact that an action would promote pain is a reason not to perform the action if and only if the person who will experience the pain has not consented to experiencing it. An action is morally right just in case it promotes at least as great a balance of reason-giving pleasure over reason-giving pain as any of the available alternatives; otherwise it is wrong.

(U*) maintains that the status of the fact that an action will cause someone pain as a reason depends on another feature of the context – whether the agent who will experience the pain has consented to experiencing it. On this theory all reasons – pleasure-based or pain-based – depend on other features of the context. So (U*) is a codification of the categories of right and wrong in purely descriptive terms that is perfectly consistent with the very strong form of holism according to which all

¹⁰ Dancy 2000, previously cited, pp. 136-137.

reasons' status as reasons *must* depend on other features of the context. Holism even on this very strong interpretation is compatible with codification in a strong sense.¹¹

Our main point can be illustrated just as easily with Kantian codifications of morality. Kant maintained that the good will and only the good will is unconditionally good, but allowed that other things are good in some circumstances but not others. The opening paragraph of the Groundwork is brimming with things Kant takes to have merely conditional value – intelligence, wit, judgement, courage, resoluteness, perseverance, power, riches, honour, health and even happiness. Indeed among Kant's most central theses is that “the good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition even of worthiness to be happy.”¹² Kantian views may thus accept that while the fact that an action would promote someone's happiness is sometimes a reason, sometimes it is not. On this view, the status of the consideration, “it would promote X's happiness” as a reason depends on another feature of the context - whether X has a good will. Kant's account thus presupposes holism. Nonetheless, Kant's account also aims to provide a very ambitious codification of morality. Once again we have a vivid illustration of the compatibility of holism with the codifiability of morality. Indeed, utilitarian and Kantian theories are perhaps the most influential and interesting systematic codifications of morality. So if plausible utilitarian and

¹¹ Notice that (U) and (U*) claim to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for there being a moral reason and for an action's being morally right or wrong; they do not simply claim to provide mere contingent statistical generalizations. Dancy at one point implies that holism would at most allow for codification only in the weak sense that it would allow for such mere contingent statistical generalizations; see Dancy, previously cited, 2000, p. 135. Our examples show that holism is compatible with a much more ambitious form of codification.

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis Beck (London: Macmillan/Library of Liberal Arts, 1990 originally published in 1785), p. 9 (Academy pagination 393).

Kantian moral theories can be understood in ways that presuppose holism then it is hard to see how holism makes the prospects for substantial moral principles “bleak.”

So far we have seen that both Kantian and utilitarian moral theories can be formulated in ways that are not only compatible with holism but that presuppose it. However, even codifications of morality that do not presuppose holism are compatible with it. For example, the classical utilitarian might maintain that the only moral reason to perform an action is that it would promote happiness. Once it is clear that holism is compatible with invariant reasons it should be clear that this view is compatible with holism. Insofar as it is plausible, holism is a view about the way reasons *can* function, not a view about the way they *must* function. So long as the classical utilitarian (e.g.) admits it is possible for reasons to function in a way that is context dependent, her view is not incompatible with holism. There is no reason the classical utilitarian cannot consistently grant this modal thesis. Indeed, the classical utilitarian could even admit that many non-moral reasons are context-dependent.

Particularists sometimes suggest that if holism were true then it would be a “cosmic accident” if morality were codifiable. As Margaret Little puts it, “The claim is not that such generalities are impossible, but that we have reason not to expect any: any we might come across would be, as it were, philosophically serendipitous.”¹³ Call the thesis that any substantive moral principles would be a cosmic accident the “cosmic accident” thesis. If the cosmic accident thesis were true, we might be led to adopt a sceptical attitude to the question whether there are any such principles and might reassess the historically prominent place of the search for such principles.

¹³ Little 2000, p. 277. Stratton-Lake suggests a similar point; as noted in the introduction he claims that if what he takes to be holism were correct then “there cannot be a principles relation between certain

Why, though, should we think that holism supports the cosmic accident thesis? The argument for the cosmic accident thesis seems to rely on the premises that (a) given holism it would be a kind of cosmic accident if all moral reasons were invariant reasons and (b) morality is codifiable only if all moral reasons are invariant. If this is why we are supposed to accept the cosmic accident thesis then we should not accept it. For whatever might be said on behalf of (a) (and (a) is not obviously true), we have already seen that (b) is manifestly false. The defender of the codification of morality can allow that *all* reasons are context-dependent in a holistic way; holism itself provides no reason to suppose that such context-dependence cannot be codified in finite and useful terms. As we have seen, holism is compatible with codifiability.

So holism does not support the claim that the codification of morality would amount to a cosmic accident, much less that it is impossible. Again, this is most clear when we bear in mind that some codifications of morality actually *presuppose* holism. Nor does holism support the thesis that the codification of morality is unnecessary. We might, for example, need to codify morality to be able rationally to figure out what reasons there are in a given case or what morality demands in such a case. Holism is simply orthogonal to the issue of whether we have this epistemic need. Nor does holism suggest that codifying the moral landscape is undesirable. Indeed, so far as holism goes the decision-making of virtuous moral agents could just be the subsumption of particular cases under appropriate generalisations. The principles must not entail atomism, but the preceding examples illustrate the possibility of such principles. Insofar as it might be useful to get a clear picture of the principles guiding

natural and moral properties; or at least if there is, it can only be by some sort of world historical chance.” (Stratton-Lake 2000, p. 128)

the virtuous moral agent (perhaps to help the less virtuous internalise them), it might be very useful to codify morality. Once again, holism is simply beside the point.

So holism as usually characterised does not provide any support for particularism. However, particularists sometimes characterise holism as the much stronger thesis that whether a consideration counts as a reason depends *in a way that transcends codification* on its context. Here is Little:

Natural features do not always ground the same moral import...the moral contribution they make on each occasion is holistically determined: it is *itself* dependent, in a way that escapes useful or finite articulation, on what other nonmoral features are present or absent. It isn't just that we haven't bothered to fill in the background considerations because they are so complex – holism is not complicated atomism. The claim, rather, is that there is no cashing out in finite or helpful propositional form the context on which the moral meaning depends.¹⁴

Jackson, Pettit and Smith briefly discuss this form of holism:

What is true, though, is that patterned connections are incompatible with what we might call unrestricted holism about moral reasons. Unrestricted holism maintains that, no matter the quantity and nature of the descriptive information you have that provides a reason for some moral conclusion, say, that X is right, more may come to hand that leaves the previous information undisturbed and yet, when combined with it, provides a reason against X being right.¹⁵

¹⁴ Little, previously cited, p. 28.

¹⁵ Jackson, Pettit and Smith, previously cited, p. 99.

Unrestricted holism really amounts to two rather distinct theses. The first thesis is holism in the sense already discussed – the view that the status of a consideration as a reason depends on other features of its context. The second thesis is that the context dependence of reasons cannot be specified in finite or helpful propositional form. Unrestricted holism certainly does entail particularism, but it should by now be clear that this is because the second clause just *is* the statement of a very strong form of particularism. For the second thesis directly entails that whether a consideration counts as a reason cannot be codified in finite terms. So unrestricted holism cannot figure in an argument for particularism without gratuitously begging the question. Furthermore, it is unhelpful to define holism in this way, since it renders important questions invisible by implicitly suggesting that these two theses are some sort of “package deal,” so that anyone who accepts the context-dependence of reasons must also accept their uncodifiability. Whereas we have argued that the sensible advocate of the codification of morality should perhaps accept the first of these theses but of course reject the second.¹⁶

It might be suggested that even if context-dependence and uncodifiability are not a “package deal”, those who concede that reasons can be context dependent should feel considerable pressure to accept unrestricted holism. After all, once we begin to notice some of the specific ways in which reasons can be context dependent, we may suspect that they are so many and so various as to escape codification. While we will not attempt to rebut this argument, it is one in which holism plays no essential role. The force of the argument, whatever it is, lies in the extent to which examples

¹⁶ To be fair, Little does not appeal to holism as a premise in an explicit argument for particularism but seems more interested in characterising holism/particularism in a favourable light. To be fair to the

that reveal the rich complexity of morality constitute evidence of uncodifiable complexity. That is, we have here a version of the argument from cases, and not, as particularists have claimed, an improved alternative to the argument from cases. Moreover, whatever the force of the argument, holism is not essential to it. An atomist about reasons could just as well be impressed by a diet of examples and conclude that moral reasons are not codifiable. Such an atomist will not, of course, see reasons as context dependent. He will simply take an examination of examples to suggest that the things that can be reasons are so many and so diverse that codification is impossible.¹⁷

other side, though, Little's discussion of holism is also couched as a reply to those who accuse particularists of "forgetting to provide any argument for their position." (Little 2000, p. 277)

¹⁷ One interesting related issue is that atomism plus the thesis that reasons are uncodifiable arguably undermine the idea that a person can ever perform an action for a genuine reason, since this combination of views entails that reasons are indefinitely complex. Even if this were so, it would provide an argument from uncodifiability to holism rather than the other way around, while our primary concern in this paper has been to respond to those who argue from holism to uncodifiability. Nor is it obvious that indefinite complexity of individual reasons does follow from atomism plus uncodifiability. The terrain of reasons taken as a whole might be uncodifiable even though each individual reason is finite and could be grasped by an agent in her circumstances as a reason in much the same way that a holistic particularist thinks agents come to grasp such reasons. For example, perhaps the agent just sees that the relevant consideration bears an irreducible "favouring relation" to such-and-such action in these circumstances, a la Jonathan Dancy's broader meta-ethical conception. For uncodifiability might stem from the fact that there are indefinitely many different kinds of reasons and no way of reducing them to some common coin, rather than from the indefinite complexity of individual reasons taken individually.

Moreover, even if the atomist did hold that individual reasons were indefinitely complex, this would be compatible with a person's reliably acting in response to particularly salient features of their situation that partly constitute their reasons; or, rather, atomism plus uncodifiability can make as much

In sum, particularists have done a great service by highlighting the importance of holism, which is an interesting and previously much neglected thesis. Particularism is also an important position and its apparent intelligibility should awaken the friends of codification from their dogmatic generalist slumbers. Nonetheless, these two interesting positions are not related in the way particularists suggest. Holism provides no support for particularism.¹⁸

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sense of this possibility as holism plus uncodifiability, since in each case reliably tracking and acting in accordance with reasons requires sensitivity to an indefinite range of features of one's situation. On either interpretation, it seems, an atomist can distinguish the virtuous agent who reliably responds to the relevant reasons in this sense from a less virtuous agent who does not reliably respond in these ways. The more virtuous person acts for good reasons in that his motivations reliably depend on the features that partly constitute his reasons, and if such features ceased to partly constitute his reasons he would reliably cease to be motivated by them. Arguably, this is enough to make sense of the somewhat theory-neutral and intuitive idea that people can act for good reasons. In any event, we must put this interesting and difficult issue to one side to avoid getting side-tracked from the more central question addressed in the text – whether there is a good argument from holism to uncodifiability (rather than the other way around).

¹⁸ Many thanks to Jonathan Dancy and an anonymous referee at *Ratio* for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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