



Intuition, Theory, and Anti-Theory in Ethics

Sophie Grace Chappell (ed.)

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198713227.001.0001>

Published: 01 March 2015

Online ISBN: 9780191781650

Print ISBN: 9780198713227

Search in this book

CHAPTER

4 Should Generalism Be Our Regulative Ideal?

p. 54

Alan Thomas

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198713227.003.0004> Pages 54–75

Published: 01 March 2015

Abstract

This chapter considers an important challenge to arguments from particularism from Ridge and McKeever's claim that generalism is our 'regulative ideal'. They argue, from a dialectically neutral starting point, that the truth or otherwise of reasons holism has no bearing on the truth of generalism. The truth of generalism can be established from the fact that we possess ordinary moral knowledge either by a transcendental argument or by an inference to the best explanation. This chapter examines both of these arguments and argues that neither of them is successful. Generalism has no role in an account of sound ethical judgement, not even as a regulative ideal.

Keywords: [particularism](#), [generalism](#), [regulative ideal](#), [moral knowledge](#), [ethical judgement](#)

Subject: [Moral Philosophy](#)

Collection: [Oxford Scholarship Online](#)

Moral particularism, in the epistemological version that I favour, is the view that our ethical judgement cannot be captured by any finite set of finite principles. In my view the main basis for this claim is a truism about practical reasoning, namely, that such reasoning is typically a form of non-monotonic reasoning (Thomas, 2011). Informally characterized, non-monotonic reasoning is such that any arbitrary addition of evidence to the premises that support a conclusion could change the cogency of that support.

I take recognition of the fact that practical reasoning is non-monotonic to explain why any putative moral principle is vulnerable to *supersession*. An example of supersession is the following: the principle 'Killing is wrong', plus the premise that a particular act is a killing, yields the conclusion that that act is wrong. But add a superseding fact, such that the proposed killing is in justifiable self-defence, and the conclusion reverses: the act is not wrong. In my view supersession is a direct consequence of the fact that reasoning about practice as a whole is typically non-monotonic. It explains the defeasible nature of such reasoning and its susceptibility to counterexamples.

p. 55

It follows directly from the definition of non-monotonicity that, in reasoning of this kind, anything could count as a reason bearing on a decision. Gunpowder residue on a suspect's hands usually has a bearing on the guilt or innocence of a murder suspect; the depth to which parsley has sunk into butter on a hot day usually does not. However, Sherlock Holmes solved the Abernethy murder case by noting the depth to which parsley had sunk into the butter on a hot day. There is, then, no a priori restriction on what could count as an important piece of evidence in any context of enquiry. That is certainly true for theoretical reasons and \hookrightarrow I see no reason to treat practical reasoning as anything other than theoretical reasoning at the service of practice, just as Anscombe claimed.

This line of argument picks up on one strand of Jonathan Dancy's argument for his versions of both epistemological and metaphysical particularism, namely, his emphasis on practical reason as a 'contentless ability'. This thesis was more prominent in his earlier work than in his later, where a different thesis called 'reasons holism' has come to the fore as the primary ground for particularism. That may prove to be an advantage given that some generalists, such as Michael Ridge and Sean McKeever, have argued that Dancy's holism offers no support for his particularism *at all* (Ridge and McKeever, 2006, chapter 2). They do not have to contest the truth or falsity of reasons holism as, in their view, even if it were true it would offer no support to particularism. However, it is not hard to identify the disagreement between my version of (epistemic) particularism and their defence of generalism as a 'regulative ideal'. The crux of the dispute between us is over whether anything can be a reason. This issue will prove central to what follows.

In my view, that truistic claim follows directly from the equally truistic view that practical reasoning is non-monotonic. But, in deriving any defence of moral particularism from the fact of non-monotonicity, I have to enter a significant caveat to that derivation. That is because the claim that particularism rests on the non-monotonicity of practical reasoning looks far too strong an assumption for anyone to make. In my view, the problem that grounds particularism is that any principle used in an argument can be superseded by a reason. But that is not, strictly speaking, correct. The more precise thesis is that any principle used in an argument can be superseded by any *relevant* reason. The class of 'any reason' is far too wide for my purposes and simply invites a generalized scepticism. The generalist is not troubled by the thought that an argument could be superseded by any reason at all; it has to be a relevant reason.¹

In response to this concern I have argued that the particularist has a much better story to tell than the generalist about the nature of relevance (Thomas, 2011). This is for three reasons. First, the best explanation of why finite and cognitively limited agents such as ourselves solve the problem of relevance appeals to the nature of the epistemic virtues. As Adam Morton has argued:

p. 56

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

Many of our views about reasoning can be formulated indifferently for both ideal and non-ideal reasoners. Such claims would, paradigmatically, be claims such as Church's thesis, consistency and completeness proofs for axiomatized systems, and so on. But there is a much wider range of claims about reasoning where one is forced to take into account what Bertrand Russell once called our 'merely medical' limitations. It matters a great deal, for the theory of practical reasoning, that it is a theory for finite and cognitively limited agents. That is because this is the local application of a more general epistemological truth that creatures such as us have to have a range of competencies that cannot themselves be explicit representations on pain of regress. If they were representations, and not competencies, this would not make the problem of relevance any easier: it would

simply exacerbate it by adding to the list of representations for which the issue of relevance arises. Everyone agrees that, given the potentially overwhelming amount of information confronting our capacity for judgement, we do not solve the problem of *which* representations are relevant by inspecting each one and classifying them as relevant or irrelevant. Second, any set of virtues, including the epistemic virtues, requires an overriding master virtue of sound practical intelligence. It is on that basis that I, like the Jonathan Dancy of *Moral Reasons*, appeal to a conception of practical judgement as a 'contentless ability'. This is the particular application of a non-modular capacity for general intelligence (Baker and Hacker, 1984).

Third, this account of the epistemic virtues and our capacity for practical judgement is embedded in an epistemological model that I believe has a wider appeal as a moral epistemology (Thomas, 2006). Inferential contextualism sees moral enquiry as a cognitive process structured by belief contexts, which are, in turn, individuated by the problem that the agent is trying to solve. We have cumulative moral knowledge in the form of evaluative beliefs, not principles, and those prior commitments determine what count as a relevant reason in the problem-solving context to hand. Relevance is a material property of beliefs.

This general model does not say anything in particular about an individual's epistemic responsibility for his or her own beliefs. However, I think a simple extension of the model suggested by Sellars and refined by Brandom and Michael Williams does give us norms for the individual (Brandom, 1998; Williams, 2001). At the individual level, justification follows what Williams calls the 'default/challenge' model. An individual is default entitled to a belief unless it is challenged, reflecting the fact that in this pragmatist tradition the object of justification is not belief but changes in belief. These default entitlements accrue to a subject with the right kind of status, where a presupposed epistemic status is a matter of training and acculturation into Sellars's space of reasons. An important part of status is a merely implicit grasp of the normal conditions for making reliable judgements, but an explicit grasp of the indefinite range of defeaters for a judgement. (I will return to the importance of the word 'indefinite' later in this chapter.)

p. 57

These responses, taken together, form a way of dealing with the fact that the majority of our good inferences in non-formal domains are non-monotonic. We are indeed, as finite and cognitively limited agents, threatened with overwhelming informational complexity. But we solve that problem by reducing the information to the relevant information using the strategies I have described. It is noteworthy how this strategy dovetails so well with Dancy's argument from reasons holism. Sorting considerations into reasons, enablers, defeaters, and a broader set of enabling and defeating conditions is to be sensitive to the relations of relevance between these items, and to be sensitive to them in the right way.

Nevertheless, if the basis for my form of particularism is the fact that the practical use of reason ranges over a non-monotonic domain there are two very powerful challenges to my view. One comes from Richard Holton's principled particularism. The other comes from McKeever and Ridge's conception of generalism as a regulative ideal. I have discussed Holton's view in detail elsewhere so I will not discuss his views here (Thomas, 2011). But I will engage at some length with McKeever and Ridge's views and I will begin by summarizing their arguments.

1 The Case for Generalism as a Regulative Ideal

Noting that Dancy has shifted his attention in his more recent work to denying the transcendental claim that our ordinary moral knowledge *requires* the existence of underlying principles, McKeever and Ridge attack that argument directly. The first point to note about their overall position is that they dispense with any kind of privileged epistemic source for the general principles that they take to underpin our ordinary moral judgements.² They argue that a commitment to such principles can, instead, be regressively derived from this dialectically neutral starting point: *we do possess significant amounts of moral knowledge*. Their regressive argument proceeds in two stages: first, they argue that any instance of \hookrightarrow moral knowledge requires at least hedged principles in which we quantify over all known defeaters to moral judgements. Second, it is then established that all hedged principles have to be interpreted as strict and exceptionless principles presented to us in a misleading guise.

p. 58

The canonical form of this regressive argument strategy is the method of transcendental arguments. The general problem with transcendental arguments, from a rhetorical point of view, is that unless they simply unpack the contents of a phenomenological fact to which all parties agree, all such an argument can achieve is to cast doubt on its starting point. Looking ahead, I will argue that this is the case here: it turns out at the end of McKeever and Ridge's cumulative argument that their starting point is not the assumption that there is moral knowledge. They begin, rather, from the claim that there is moral knowledge of a kind that could be explained only by its derivation from moral principles. And if that is your starting point it is hard to see how these arguments could be described as anything other than a sustained exercise in begging the question both against Dancy and against the kind of view I have defended.

Another way of interpreting their overall strategy is not that it is a transcendental argument but, rather, that it is an inference to the best explanation. Principles are to be regressively inferred from the claim that there is moral knowledge in an argument analogous to an inference to the best explanation. I will return to these two ways of characterizing their argument (if these are, indeed, distinct methods) later in my argument.

Let me temporarily set aside these worries about their starting point. How does the argument develop from the assumption that there is moral knowledge? The key thought motivating their argument is that everything Dancy says about holism is compatible with their position.³ They simply take every possible defeater to a moral judgement and bootstrap it into the content of the covering principle. (You do not have to do the same for enablers). Their core argument runs as follows:

p. 59

- (1) There is moral knowledge. [Assumption]
- (2) We are finite and cognitively limited agents. [Assumption and Constraint on Solution]
- (3) So the cognitive achievement represented by (1) must be achievable by finite agents. (Combining (1) and (2)).
- (4) \hookrightarrow A rational commitment of an agent entitled to knowledge is that there are no known defeaters of that knowledge and that the reasons that express that knowledge are not overridden. (There are no parallel requirements for enablers.)
- (5) The list of defeaters is either infinite, in which case (3) is false, or finite, so as to meet the demands of (4), therefore it is finite.
- (6) If atomism is true, then the presence of a resultance base for a particular judgement suffices for a verdict, grounding a principle.
- (7) If holism is true, then the presence of a resultance base for a particular judgement suffices for a verdict if

one can quantify over all the defeaters (and non-overriders) mentioned in (4).

So we can infer from this exposition how the argument will proceed: even if one grants to Dancy his claim that holism is true, this does nothing to undercut generalism. That is because the truth of reasons holism is conceded, *arguendo*, in premise (7). It is of the very nature of a competent moral agent to be a person who can quantify over all the defeaters/non-overriders of a moral claim. And, in a crucial passage, McKeever and Ridge assert that this is possible only if the number of defeaters to a candidate judgement is finite. This assumption is made explicit in their premise (5) above:

The best explanation of the possibility of such reliability [of the person of practical wisdom] is that the number of potential defeaters is finite and manageably short. (Ridge and McKeever, 2006, p. 142)

From the fact that there is moral knowledge McKeever and Ridge believe that their core argument gets you at least as far as this further claim: that any particular instance of knowledge requires the use of a hedged principle that captures the competence of the practically wise person. The next, crucial, stage in the argument is their claim that the appearance that there are hedged principles in ethics has to be precisely that—a mere appearance. There only ever seem to be hedged principles; that appearance makes sense only if, in fact, there are necessarily true principles where the ‘hedging’ is removed. I am going to focus on this aspect of their view in some detail, when I consider the crux of the dispute between us over whether anything can be a reason. So I will just note this part of their view at this point.

But they also need to address the concerns that even if there are such principles there may be too many of them, making the codification of morality impossible (a theoretical possibility left open by Holton’s principled particularism). Furthermore, within each principle there is the challenge of ensuring that we do not face a potentially infinite number of defeaters, each to be covered by a hedging clause. To address these issues about unmanageable complexity, McKeever and Ridge appeal to a more local transcendental argument from the very possibility of reliable, sound, practical judgement.

Given that we are finite and cognitively limited, there has to be only a limited number of possible defeaters that we have to check:

The best account of the possibility of practical wisdom entails that the person of practical wisdom is a person of principle ... in so far as practical wisdom is possible. (Ridge and McKeever, 2006, p. 139)

It is of the very nature of the practically wise that they can detect reasons and their defeaters, *modulo* an implicit grasp of enabling conditions and thereby come to a verdict. This is what reliably making good judgements in this domain comes to:

The possibility of practical wisdom so understood is best explained by the hypothesis that the person of practical wisdom already knows and indeed can articulate *all* of the potential reasons, defeaters, etc. which *might* be in play in order to ask the right questions even in extraordinary cases. (Ridge and McKeever, 2006, p. 142)

They then engage in some tactical undermining of the opposition; the particularist has some gambits to which he or she typically appeals to in order to make the scale of this task more feasible by his or her own lights. The particularist typically either places agents in local contexts structured by different repertoires of thick ethical concepts, or else the particularist would be forced (according to McKeever and Ridge) to concede that ‘anything might count’. McKeever and Ridge take that latter claim to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of particularism as it commits the agent to checking an infinite list of defeaters.

They also evaluate the particularist gambit of restricting the scope of practical wisdom merely to ‘local’ cases by claiming that, on their view, the person of sound practical wisdom (the ‘*phronimos*’) can do better in

transcending local context than this putative particularist agent. Several aspects of our practice with concepts seem to suggest a kind of local restrictedness to our grasp of concepts: our concepts are open textured, relative to a context. Furthermore, so-called 'thick' ethical concepts seem restricted to a local way of going on, one form of ethical life amongst others that are equally valid but structured by a different repertoire of concepts.

p. 61 McKeever and Ridge think that this overall account of our capacity for moral judgement is false. The *phronimos* is not restricted in any of these ways. To show this, they appeal to two different kinds of reductionism: the first is a reduction of the heterogeneity of rational considerations in ethical argument to a limited set of principle types. The other is a reduction of the evaluative to the descriptive. The latter argument plays a very important tactical role in their argument ↪ because it supports the claim that competence with moral concepts extends to any new circumstance, including unusual cases in fiction, or very alien cultures. Given that our thick concepts are always reducible to a descriptive base, we can always descriptively specify any remote situation, any particular context, or any thick concept to enrich the descriptive resources of the person of sound practical wisdom. The *phronimos* is armed with a set of reductive biconditionals that will always allow the *phronimos* to arrive at the correct verdict; it is always possible to domesticate apparently alien ethical judgments that use thick ethical concepts by reducing such concepts to a descriptive base and an associated, but independently specifiable, evaluation.⁴ I think this reflects the rationalism of their overall position and the general rationalist claim that greater abstraction has the advantage of greater scope of application.⁵

McKeever and Ridge think that we ought to take encouragement from the fact that we have a contingent tradition of reflection on morality that seems to be making progress in reconstructing the principles that inform the competence of the practically wise person, the *phronimos*. They find it prima facie implausible that this tradition should be so wildly off track in the way that particularism implies. When Ross theorizes a list of prima facie duties it is a finite, short, and manageable list. Similarly, when we intuitively try to think of standard defeaters in any particular case it is a short and manageable list.⁶ While our actual historical tradition of ethical reflection cannot claim to have identified the final truth, the form that it takes suggests both that there are true ethical principles and that the task of identifying the defeaters of such judgements is making equally good progress.

p. 62 They concede that we need to go further: the traditions of moral reflection we have inherited may be on track to identify the set of true principles, but we are ↪ certainly not at that point yet. Further moral progress must take the form of deepened insight into the defeaters and enabling conditions of our knowledge. Deeper unifying principles than those we currently have are worth identifying in themselves. Furthermore, they offer us progress on moral problems, old and new, by giving us a 'provisional checklist of reasons, defeaters and metadefeaters':

The fact that such lists are nothing like a logical guarantee against overlooking still further reasons or defeaters does nothing to suggest that such lists may not still be helpful. (McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p. 189)

We should look for deeper principles to help us discern salient patterns. This explanatory depth can be local, so there can still be truth to a Ross-style pluralistic formulation of a principle-based view. It is simply an open question how many true ultimate principles there are and how the set of such principles may be internally regimented:

Our position is a sort of compromise between constitutive generalism and particularism. On the one hand we insist that moral theory really is a work in progress. We reject the constitutive generalist's assumption that morality is a finished work. ... that competence with moral concepts is sufficient for a full descriptive codification of the moral landscape. ... On the other hand, we reject the particularist's claim that moral thought and judgement do not presuppose the availability of a suitable stock of moral principles. For although moral theory is a work in progress, it is a work in progress the

legitimacy of which is presupposed by moral thought and judgement themselves. (McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p. 194)

McKeever and Ridge's argument culminates in an explanation of why regulative ideals work well as practical guides. Ordinary agents, it is true, seem to get by with quick and dirty heuristics in their moral reasoning, just as they do in their reasoning more widely. But the reason for appealing to the 'ultimate standards' in ethics is, ultimately, a moral reason. Hare's level of critical moral thinking is superior to other approaches precisely because it avoids special pleading and tainted partiality in the way it construes the ethical questions involved.

p. 63 That, then, is my necessarily compressed account of the main parts of McKeever and Ridge's sophisticated, very clear, and rigorously presented central argument. I am going to organize my response to it in the following way: first, I will focus on the key dispute between us over whether anything can be a reason. That is an issue of independent interest as I think McKeever and Ridge offer an intriguing argument as to why there is no compromise position available between particularism and their form of generalism. Secondly, I will then explain why I find their attempts to deny that anything can be a reason implausible. I will then argue that they begin their explanation of moral knowledge by \hookrightarrow posing a false dichotomy. That undermines their transcendental argument that moral knowledge could *only* work in the way that they describe. Thirdly, I will then note that, given their rejection of any intermediate form of hedged principle generalism, if we are to take their inference to the best explanation at face value we get the odd result that all known moral principles are, and have always been, false. The problem, obviously, is that false principles cannot explain anything. Fourthly, I will examine some responses that they might develop to the kinds of criticism that I develop here.

2 The Problem of Vacuous Principles

The regulative generalist's principles take the form of universally quantified conditionals so any guaranteed falsification of any conjunct in its antecedent is going to cause a problem. If the antecedent is false, then the conditional is going to come out as vacuously true. But, intuitively, we think that in the class of putative ethical principles there are some which are substantively true, and some which are substantively false. Insightfully, McKeever and Ridge note explicitly that if anything can be a reason, then the antecedents of their hedged principles are going to be falsified. The upshot would be that the principles themselves would be rendered vacuous.

Their principles take this general form:

For all actions (x): IF (a) *x is an instance of the killing of 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 the killing of a rational agent.⁷

p. 64 Clause (a) is the reason specification clause; clause (b) is the 'no defeaters' clause and clause (c) is the 'no overriders' clause. Consider what would happen if McKeever and Ridge conceded that anything 'could be a reason'. In the case of some consideration that sometimes is, and sometimes is not, a reason then there would always be an explanation, in terms of some contingent feature of a situation, as to why it is or is not a reason. For example, take a 'junk', false reason that is not a reason and put it in the reasons specification clause of the hedged conditional sentence. Clause (b) says that 'no other feature of the situation explains' why the reason is junk. But there will always be an explanation of *why* the junk \hookrightarrow is junk here, but not junk in a different context. That clause will, then, always be false. So the conjunction is false, the antecedent false, and all these hedged principles come out as (vacuously) true.

This is *not* a problem for McKeever and Ridge's position, because there are two assumptions in their view that are very closely related. Taken together, they allow them to evade this vacuity problem. First, on their view, moral principles are necessarily true so they apply in all situations. Secondly, those principles partition reasons into the possible and the impossible. They see clearly that, on their view, impossible reasons cannot receive a merely contingent explanation, in terms of specific features of situations, as to why they are reasons in any particular case, but that is a point they willingly accept. The necessity of their principles generates an explanation of the right kind: not simply that this is not a reason, but also that it *could* not be a reason.

My interpretation of their defence of this claim that not everything can be a reason is the following: on the McKeever and Ridge picture, theoretical explanations depend on laws and scientific laws are necessary. By analogy, moral explanations depend on moral principles and moral principles are necessary. As they apply to every situation, they make an explanation available in any situation in a way that does not depend on the contingent truths about *that situation*. So there is always an explanation of why something is or is not a reason that is independent of such contingencies. If something could *not* be a reason (because the necessarily true principles make it the case that it could not) how could a mere contingency explain that?

But suppose, as I believe, that this is false and that anything can be a reason. Sometimes considerations are reasons and sometimes not. Now we can always contrastively explain why something is a reason here, and not a reason there, by citing other contingent truths about particular circumstances. That prospect implies that whether something is, or is not a reason, always has an explanation that itself cites further contingent truths. If McKeever and Ridge are right, then that undermines the 'no defeaters' clause and makes all the hedged ethical principles vacuous. So I can only thank McKeever and Ridge for giving us an excellent reason to reject the view of those who believe in irreducibly hedged moral principles! A wide range of philosophers hold this position including Mark Lance, Margaret Little, Pekka Väyrynen and Luke Robinson (Lance and Little, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008; Väyrynen, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2009; Robinson, 2006). If practical reasoning is non-monotonic, and anything can be a reason, then those putative, hedged, principles will all prove to be vacuously true.⁸

p. 65 So, from my perspective, McKeever and Ridge have established a really interesting result. It is this conditional: there can only be hedged principles in ethics if they are backed up by necessary, strict, and exceptionless principles. Only the latter can stop anything being a reason in a way that makes all the hedged principles vacuous. Hedged principles look like the truth seen through a glass darkly; actually, for McKeever and Ridge, they are not true at all.⁹ But their insight is that anyone who is committed both to hedged principles and to the idea that anything can be a reason faces a problem: all the candidate principles will be vacuously true.

So I can conditionally agree with McKeever and Ridge that there is no stable resting place between my view (and Dancy's) and theirs. Those who believe that there are irreducibly hedged ethical truths that are 'for the most part so' are going to fall foul of this vacuity objection, unless they take McKeever and Ridge's tack and make a principled distinction between moral reasons and other 'kinds' of reasons. So I think McKeever and Ridge's discussion of the vacuity objection has raised the stakes in this discussion. Those committed to the non-monotonicity of practical reasoning, and to the fact that there is no way of demarcating practical from theoretical reasons, will treat all generalizations in ethics as merely 'Humean' generalizations. McKeever and Ridge want to treat them as law-like necessary truths. So the argument from vacuity takes away any middle ground where there are irreducibly hedged moral 'laws'. McKeever and Ridge are right: it is all or nothing. Superficially hedged explanatory principles depend on a set of higher-order principles that carve up the space of possible and impossible reasons.

So it is true that for there to be any hedged explanatory principles there must be necessarily true laws. And, as Mark Schroeder and Daniel Star have noted, that makes all the hedged principles that we seem to have in ethics examples of false principles (Star, 2007; Schroeder, 2009). I noted in my exposition that even McKeever and Ridge think that we are on our way to the ultimate set of true principles but we are not there yet. So a striking

p. 66

consequence of their view is that every moral principle that moral philosophers have devised so far is false. Recall that another aspect of their epistemic modesty is their historically grounded fallibilism. We know that there must be true principles (their transcendental argument) but the inference to the best explanation has not identified what is *in fact* the best explanation at this point, so we cannot identify which principles these actually are. (It is worth recalling, at this point, that they eschew any privileged epistemic basis for their view.) This is not an inconsistent position, but it is certainly an odd one as a defence of generalism. Our traditions of ethical reflection are, on the one hand, in good shape but, on the other hand, have only ever involved false principles.

Recall that McKeever and Ridge sought a relatively dialectically neutral starting point for their argument in the assumption that there is moral knowledge. Now it turns out that their actual starting point was this: there is moral knowledge, such that it could only be explained by covering necessary principles. That affords them a basis for their transcendental argument and it also supplies the weaker ‘argument to the best explanation’ for free. But it is no longer a relatively neutral starting point. Neither Dancy, nor I, nor anyone occupying the moderate position in which there are irreducibly hedged moral principles will accept it.

In sharp contrast the particularist believes that an unprejudiced phenomenology of our practice shows that it is non-monotonic, appeals to the ordinary understanding of a reason, does not use some special proprietary notion of a moral reason, and never gets us any further than hedged truths, for the most part so. The hardened particularist, such as Dancy, Garfield, and myself, then tries to undermine even *those* latter kind of hedged principles as, in fact, merely Humean generalizations with no binding force on new cases. This description seems to me enough to undermine McKeever and Ridge’s claim that their argument is a successful transcendental argument. Theirs can hardly be the *only* explanation of our ordinary practice. You might also wonder about their claim of dialectical neutrality now that it turns out that both the particularist and the moderate generalist will be equally opposed to the assumptions packed in to this putatively neutral starting point.

What, then, of the alternative line of argument that appeals, not to a transcendental argument, but rather to an inference from the best explanation? This is certainly a distinct argument: my particularist explanation of our ordinary practice, and Dancy’s, needs to be set alongside McKeever and Ridge’s explanation. McKeever and Ridge predict that our explanations will fail and theirs will pass the test of being the best explanation of our current practice. I have three responses to that supplementary line of argument.

p. 67

The first response is the ‘*tu quoque*’ argument that I have already noted. McKeever and Ridge are commendably honest in their claim that we are on our way to finding the true principles, but we are not there yet. So they are committed to a best explanation of our practice in which all of our current principles are false, and a narrative of the history of our practices of our ethical reflection in which there has never been a true one.¹⁰

Secondly, I do not accept their claim that they have successfully explained how the *phronimos* actually engages in practical reasoning for three reasons. First, the task they set the *phronimos* is a task she could not possibly discharge and, secondly, they ignore another explanation of how we do discharge the task that is more in line with our finite and limited nature. Thirdly, they are committed to abandoning a central aspect of our existing practice, which is that it is a non-monotonic domain where anything could be a reason. I will discuss these objections in reverse order.

3 McKeever and Ridge’s Critique of Unrestricted Reasons

Knowing very well that their argument requires there to be a restriction on what can count as a reason Ridge and McKeever state they will not simply rely on that assumption. They will also ‘verify’ it. They consider three ways of undermining the *prima facie* claim that anything can be a moral reason.

First, they argue that people only mistakenly believe that anything can be a reason, because they fail to distinguish between reasons for belief and reasons for action. McKeever and Ridge claim that reasons for belief are all evidence and evidence reliably indicates the truth of the belief. That is, they think, simply an inappropriate model for practical reasons.

On the contrary, I think the problem with this response is that there are models of practical reasoning as ordinary, theoretical reasoning at the service of practice that make this restriction unwarranted. It is up to McKeever and Ridge's opponents to spell this out, and I have tried to do so elsewhere (Thomas, forthcoming). However, at least one can respond to their claim beyond noting its question-begging character at this juncture of their argument, as both Dancy and Mark Schroeder have done (Dancy, 2004; Schroeder, 2009). Consideration of the complex ways in which reasons of all kinds interact surely make it implausible to draw the kind of sharp demarcation between practical and theoretical reasons that generalism now seems to require. (Require in the strong sense that, if they deny it, their putative principles will come out as all vacuously true.)

p. 68 McKeever and Ridge are more concerned with the problem that any promise can work to transform any 'ordinary' reason into a moral reason. If I promise to buy you a plaid cap, then the fact that it is a plaid cap is a reason to buy it. Each promise generates two reasons: that you buy it and that I promised. I do not find their response to this problem, that this leads to 'too many' reasons, at all convincing. Ridge and McKeever address this problem by considering an objection to their view which takes this form: a virtuous agent keeps her promises *de dicto*, as it were, and not *de re*. The objection challenges that distinction by pressing them to explain why a virtuous agent cannot do both: keep her promise to buy you a plaid cap (*de dicto*) by buying a plaid cap (*de re*). McKeever and Ridge interpret this as a version of the primary versus secondary reason strategy and they object to it as follows:

The deeper problem with [this] ecumenical account is that it simply yields too many reasons ... [It] entails that the promise generates at least two reasons—the fact that buying the cap would fulfill the promise and the fact that buying it would be the buying of a plaid cap. (Ridge and McKeever, 2006, p. 133)

That seems to them to generate a further problem, namely, that promises get to double their 'normative force'.

Suppose I am trying to decide whether to buy the hat, and I tentatively arrive at the conclusion that the balance of reasons is evenly divided. On the one hand buying the hat would fulfill a promise but on the other hand buying the hat would leave me with no bus fare to get home ... I then suddenly realize I have overlooked a reason. ... Having found an additional reason for action, I conclude that it is clear after all that I must buy the hat. What initially seemed to be a balanced set of reasons turned out not to be so evenly balanced overall. Though absurd, this train of thought seems to follow inevitably from the proposed distinction between primary and secondary reasons. (Ridge and McKeever, 2006, p. 133)

But presumably the answer to this is that how we count reasons, and how much importance the reasons have in deliberation, do not simply correlate one to one. This is so even if one accepts, as I must say I am not inclined to do, that promising to buy you a plaid cap gives me two reasons for action.¹¹ The merely formal sense in which I now have 'two reasons' does not double its importance to deliberation. Only the atomist claims that reasons travel around with a fixed quantum of 'weight' in possible deliberative contexts and McKeever and Ridge began their argument by claiming that their view is fully compatible with holism. They cannot, therefore, bolster their argument, at a crucial point, by appealing to assumptions that are the sole property of the reasons atomist.

p. 69

4 Rejecting the Transcendental Argument

McKeever and Ridge's transcendental argument is this: there is moral knowledge, so in spite of our finitude and contingency we complete a cognitive task when we come to overall moral verdicts. Either we do this by assuming, as the particularist does, that any reason can count or by assuming, as the generalist does, that not any reason can count. Specifically, their claim is that the particularist believes that an epistemically responsible decision involves checking an infinite list of defeaters. But that task is not completable. So we have to adopt the generalist view that the list of defeaters is finite.

If that transcendental argument is true, then this is the only way to explain our ethical competence. But then, to force that conclusion, McKeever and Ridge's account of the options has to be complete and it is not. Responsible decision, given that practical reasoning is non-monotonic, involves sensitivity to an *indefinite* range of defeaters as defined by our prior sense of relevance. An argument that works by eliminating the alternatives cannot simply omit one of the main alternatives.

I noted above McKeever and Ridge's characterization of their particularist opponents of making the task of practical wisdom more tractable either by placing the agent in local contexts of justification or, if they fail to do so, being forced to concede that anything might count. Interestingly I manage to combine both of these unappealing aspects (from their perspective) of the particularist view in my own position. In my view agents are located in particular problem-solving contexts individuated both by a stock of conceptual resources and by a set of background beliefs. If Brandom and I are correct about the nature of reasoning in this domain, namely, that it is non-monotonic, then this fits nicely with the claim that the list of defeating conditions is indefinitely long. The claim is not that strict principles may be infinitely long, such that they are beyond our cognitive grasp. The claim is, rather, that the principles we actually work with are indefinitely long such that we don't know, in advance, what a defeating condition to our reasoning might turn out to be (Brandom, 1989, p. 133). I have argued that the best solution to this problem of cognitive complexity equips an agent with a set of defeasible principles and an open-ended ability for sound practical judgement. At the very least, I think, this option undermines McKeever and Ridge's main transcendental argument. But I also think it suggests a promising line of counter-attack for the particularist.

p. 70 In order to show that the generalist practical agent is sensitive to a wider range of conditions than the particularist agent McKeever and Ridge make some strong claims about the context transcendence of practical wisdom. But this pulls their overall argument in two directions at once in a way that detaches their reliability condition on moral knowledge from their epistemic responsibility condition.

That is because of their claim that the decisive edge that their model of the practically wise person has over the particularist appeal to an 'unanalysable ability' is that their model does better in 'unusual circumstances'. As I noted this is a payoff from their rationalism and the specific form this takes, notably, in being equipped with a reductionist view of thick ethical concepts (Ridge and McKeever, p. 139). If an ideal agent could be equipped with the kinds of principles they envisage, then such an agent could deliver sound moral judgements in the way that they describe. Their version of the *phronimos* can give you the right verdict across all scenarios, including fictional or science fictional scenarios where the background conditions to our concepts are radically varied. Their *phronimos* is untroubled by the local texture of forms of life structured by particular sets of thick concepts. But this is a highly idealized view of a cognitive agent who is reliable across too wide a range of contexts. It seems to me to be a view that does not take our cognitive limitations seriously, in a way that makes this ideal agent look reliable, but in a way that outstrips our limited ability to be epistemically responsible.

Let me note once again that McKeever and Ridge are robustly realist about reasons: their view is about the metaphysics of the reasons that there are. But given their emphasis on the cognitive achievability of moral knowledge they have at least to make some contact with the ordinary, epistemic use of the term 'reason' that connects it being potentially graspable by an agent (Thomas, 2006, chapter 4; Finlay, 2009).

On the alternative picture that I have described, the person of sound practical wisdom has an unanalysable, open-ended ability to be sensitive to an indefinite, not an infinite, range of defeaters. No responsible agent is required to quantify over all possible defeaters to what she knows. She operates instead, in a structured context of enquiry and *modulo* a set of normal background conditions and a stable set of conditions for concept use, deploying Austin's criteria of 'reasonable sufficiency' and 'definite lack' (Austin, 1961a). As Michael Williams has argued, only the default/challenge model of justification ties epistemic responsibility to epistemic reliability in the right way (Williams, 2007). This view keeps the *prima facie* plausible claim that practical reasoning is a non-monotonic domain but compensates for the apparently sceptical challenge that this brings in its train by connecting reliability and responsibility via the default/challenge model of justification.

p. 71 I think we can grant that McKeever and Ridge's super-*phronimos* is more reliable than us. But this reliability is secured only in a way that does not take our 'merely medical' limitations seriously. We could not act responsibly in that way. Grasp of the set of true principles unsurprisingly make the super-*phronimos* reliable, but only by setting us an epistemic ideal that outstrips our finite nature. From my perspective—and from my perspective I do not expect McKeever and Ridge to agree to this characterization—they are offering what Nozick called a 'law defective explanation', a just-so story about how things would ethically be were a certain kind of Platonism about the ethical true and knowable (Nozick, 1974, p. 7). And, like Nozick, I agree that law defective explanations can be interesting and informative. So I think we can accept that the super-*phronimos* would be more reliable than us, but in a possible world that is not our own. There are, of course, thought experiments like this in the history of moral philosophy, notably Kant's image of the 'Holy Will', an idealized agent who simply does the right thing (with feelings of love for the Moral Law). But Kant emphasizes that we are not, and cannot be, agents of this kind.

5 Conclusion

So the overall situation seems to me to be this. I have argued that my view preserves the data better than McKeever and Ridge's: moral reasoning is practical reasoning and that is simply reasoning at the service of practice. It does not involve any special, proprietary notion of a reason. Further, this domain is non-monotonic, so anything can count as a reason. There is a first choice point here, then, as to whether this view is true.

It seems to me to do justice to the appearances, but I have also argued that it does not have the absurd consequence—that McKeever and Ridge claim it does—of undermining the moral knowledge that we actually have by asking us to check an infinite list of defeaters. There is a plausible account of moral epistemology in which finite and limited agents have to possess an open-ended capacity to be sensitive to an indefinite range of defeating conditions. If I have offered a plausible account of the connection between epistemic reliability and responsibility, then I have also undermined their transcendental argument that claimed that the only way to explain moral knowledge appealed to hedged principles that are ultimately cashed out as unhedged ones.

p. 72 If the transcendental argument does not work, that seems to leave the option of treating McKeever and Ridge's argument as an inference to the best explanation. But, by their own lights, all our current principles are false and so cannot explain ↪ anything. (There seems to me to be little advantage to appealing, at this point, to the discredited idea of verisimilitude (Sjoerd and Franssen, 2007)).

A third strategy might be to link the transcendental argument and the inference to the best explanation: the first tells us that there *have to be* true principles, but the latter is also necessary to tell us what they are. But with the antecedent false—with no plausible transcendental argument in this case—this argument does not even get off the ground.

A fourth strategy invites us to take more seriously McKeever and Ridge's invocation of Kant. Generalism is, after all, supposed to be a regulative ideal just as Kant claimed that his unrealizable Ideas of Reason could find

proper employment as regulative ideals. My objection is an old one: that Kant's ideals are only good advice for the conduct of our intellectual inquiry if they are true, just as it is good advice when I warn you not to step in the road because there really is a car coming that would otherwise hit you. McKeever and Ridge's ideals are only valuable as regulative ideals if they are true. That takes us back to the initial problem that we have no reason to believe that they are true.

Finally, then, McKeever and Ridge might drop their epistemic modesty and radically change their strategy. They might offer direct support for their principles via a privileged epistemic source for them. This drops the claim that their starting point is dialectically neutral; we need to argue, like Sidgwick or Hare, that the structure of practical reasoning or language gives us direct insight into true moral principles to which we are inescapably committed. But not even that claim, were McKeever and Ridge to advance it, gets them off the hook. I have argued here that we have a perfectly good explanation of our ethical practice in particularist terms. If a model of that practice in terms of laws is, co-incidentally, *also* true then we have, as Dancy has pointed out, a 'cosmic accident' (Dancy, 2004, p. 82). We have a set of true necessary principles, and a non-principled wholly particularist account, jostling in the same explanatory space as equally good explanations of our ordinary moral practice. If we are driven to conclude that this is the case, then this is good news for particularism, not generalism. If we found ourselves in this situation we would need to ask which of these two explanations is prior to the other. That returns us to the original inference to the best explanation which Ridge and McKeever put forward. We would have two equally good explanations of our ordinary practice and no means of choosing between them. If particularism and generalism both win in this debate, then particularism wins, and I think particularists should be satisfied with that result.¹²

References

- Austin, J. L. (1961a) *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)
- Austin, J. L. (1961b) 'Other Minds', in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 76–116.
[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)
- Austin, J. L. (1961c) 'A Plea for Excuses', in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 175–204.
[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)
- Baker, Gordon and Hacker, Peter (1984) *Language, Sense and Nonsense* (Oxford: Blackwell).
[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)
- Brandom, Robert B. (1994) *Making It Explicit*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)
- Brandom, Robert (1998) 'Action, Norms, and Practical Reasoning', *Noûs*, vol. 32, *Supplement: Philosophical Perspectives*, 12, *Language Mind and Ontology*, pp. 127–39.
[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)
- Copp, David (ed.) (2006) *Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)
- Dancy, Jonathan (1993) *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell).
[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)
- Dancy, Jonathan (2004) *Ethics Without Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)
- Dancy, Jonathan (n.d.) 'Practical Reasoning and Inference', unpublished MS.
- Davidson, Donald (1992) 'Thinking Causes' in Heil, J. and Mele, A. (eds.) *Mental Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 3–17.
[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)
- Dreier, James (ed.) (2006) *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)
- Elstein, Daniel Y., and Hurka, Thomas (2009) 'From Thick to Thin: Two Moral Reduction Plans', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 39 (4): 515–35.
[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)
- Finlay, Stephen (2009) 'The Obscurity of Internal Reasons', *Philosophers Imprint*, 9 (7): 1–22.
[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)
- Foot, Phillipa (1978) 'Are Moral Considerations Overriding?' in *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell).
[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)
- Garfield, Jay (2000) 'Particularity and Principle: the Structure of Moral Knowledge', in Hooker, Brad, and Little, Margaret (eds.) *Moral Particularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 178–204.
[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)
- Harcourt, Edward and Thomas, Alan (2013) 'Thick Concepts, Analysis and Reductionism', in Kirchin, Simon (ed.) *Thick Concepts*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp 20–43.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Harman, Gilbert (1986) *Change in View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Heil, John and Mele, Alfred R. (1992) *Mental Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Holton, Richard (2002) 'Principles and Particularisms', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 76 (1): 191–209.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Hooker, Brad, and Little, Margaret (2000) *Moral Particularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Hornsby, Jennifer (2008) 'A Disjunctive Conception of Reasons for Action' in Adrian Haddock, Adrian, and MacPherson, Fiona (eds.) *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp.244–61.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Horty, John F. (2001) 'Nonmonotonic Logic' in Goble, Lou (ed.) *Handbook of Philosophical Logic* (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 336–61.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

p. 74 Horty, John F. (2007) 'Reasons as Defaults', *Philosophers' Imprint*, 7 (3): 1–28.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Lance, Mark and Little, Margaret (2004) 'Defeasibility and the Normative Grasp of Context', *Erkenntnis*, 61: 435–55.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Lance, Mark and Little, Margaret (2006a) 'Particularism and Anti-theory' in Copp, David (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 567–93.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Lance, Mark and Little, Margaret (2006b) 'Defending Moral Particularism' in Dreier, James (ed.) *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 304–321.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Lance, Mark and Little, Margaret (2007) 'Where the Laws Are' in Shafer-Landau, Russ (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Meta-Ethics*, ii (Oxford: Oxford University Press), chapter 7.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Lance, Mark and Little, Margaret (2008) 'From Particularism to Defeasibility in Ethics', in Lance, Mark, Potrcz, Matjaz, and Strahovnik, Vojko (eds.) *Challenging Moral Particularism* (London: Routledge), pp. 53–74.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Lance, Mark, Potrcz, Matjaz, and Strahovnik, Vojko (eds.) (2008) *Challenging Moral Particularism* (London: Routledge).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Morton, Adam (2004) 'Epistemic Virtues, Metavirtues, and Computational Complexity', *Noûs*, 38 (4): 481–502.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Nozick, Robert (1974) *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Ridge, Michael and McKeever, Sean (2006) *Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Robinson, Luke (2006) 'Moral Holism, Moral Generalism, and Moral Dispositionalism', *Mind*, 115 (458): 331–60.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Robinson, Luke (2008) 'Moral Principles Are Not Moral Laws', *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*, 2: 1–22.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Schroeder, Mark (2009) 'A Matter of Principle', joint critical notice of Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, and Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge, *Principled Ethics, Noûs*, 43 (3): 568–80.

Shafer-Landau, Russ (2007) *Oxford Studies in Meta-Ethics*, ii (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Sjoerd, D. Zwart and Franssen, Maarten (2007) 'An Impossibility Theorem for Verisimilitude', *Synthese*, 158 (1): 75–92.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Star, Daniel (2007) 'Review of Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge, *Generalism as a Regulative Ideal*', *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. Available at <<http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=9203>> accessed 5 August 2014.

Thomas, Alan (2006) *Value and Context: the Nature of Moral and Political Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Thomas, Alan (2007) 'Practical Reasoning and Normative Relevance', *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 4 (1) April: 77–8.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Thomas, Alan (2010b) 'Moral Particularism', in Chadwick, Ruth (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* (Amsterdam: Reed-Elsevier), pp. 152–9.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Thomas, Alan (2011) 'Another Particularism: Reason, Status and Defaults', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 14 (2): 151–67.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

p. 75 Thomas, Alan (Forthcoming) 'Is Practical Reasoning Essentially First Personal?' in Feltham, B, Cottingham, J., and Stratton-Lake, P. (eds.) *Partiality and Impartiality in Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Väyrynen, Pekka (2004) 'Particularism and Default Reasons', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 7 (1): 53–79.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Väyrynen, Pekka (2006a) 'Moral Generalism: Enjoy in Moderation', *Ethics*, 116 (July): 707–41.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Väyrynen, Pekka (2006b) 'Ethical Theories and Moral Guidance', *Utilitas*, 18: 291–309.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Väyrynen, Pekka (2008) 'Usable Moral Principles' in Lance, Mark, Potrcz, Matjaz, and Strahovnik, Vojko (eds.) *Challenging Moral Particularism* (London: Routledge) pp. 75–106.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Väyrynen, Pekka (2009) 'A Theory of Hedged Moral Principles', in Shafer-Landau, R. (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, iv (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 91–132.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Williams, Michael (1996) *Unnatural Doubts* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Williams, Michael (2001) *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Williams, Michael (2008) 'Responsibility and Reliability', *Philosophical Papers*, 37(1): 1–26.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Notes

- 1 A point pressed upon me, in different contexts, by Krister Bykvist, Brad Hooker, and Larry May.
- 2 That is distinct from their claims about the epistemic status of the principles themselves: they state unequivocally that they are a true a priori (Ridge and McKeever, 2006, p. 139).
- 3 However, strictly speaking the only grounds that they offer for ruling out reasons holism as candidate explanation to be considered alongside its competitors is the problem of 'flattening the normative landscape': I have argued that, properly understood, that is no problem at all and in any case has an alternative explanation in Thomas (2007).
- 4 For the record, I find this 'unrestricted scope' argument very odd: it is not a sensible requirement in general epistemology that you should be reliable in detecting barns in fake barn country nor reliable in detecting barns in hologram-barn-world on Alpha Centauri. There are contingent background conditions to reliable knowledge acquisition, but ignoring this part of our ordinary practices brings out McKeever and Ridge's commitment to rationalism alongside their reductionism.
- 5 For a similar view, equally indebted to the views of R. M. Hare, see Elstein and Hurka (2009). For a critique of this reductionism about thick concepts see Harcourt and Thomas (2013). For a further critique of the rationalist assumption that abstraction brings greater scope and a greater potential for rational convergence see the critique of epistemological realism in ethics in Thomas (2006) chapter 7.
- 6 I think the best response is this: an inductive survey of our moral commitments does not offer any evidence for the truth of generalism. Dancy, Garfield, and I believe in such an inductive survey, but differ over how best to characterize its results. The thought that moral reflection has shown that there is a short and manageable list does not mark off the generalist from the particularist: it is, rather, the possibility of supersession that separates the two views. My brand of particularism then goes on to explain how we can make judgements, in spite of the possibility of supersession, by appealing to an open-ended ability plus the indefinite character of the list.
- 7 See, for example, Ridge and McKeever (2006), p.118.
- 8 This claim awaits a proof that it does not generalize inappropriately to every non-monotonic domain making every special science impossible because its hedged laws would all come out vacuous. The point hinges on the independence condition on Pietroski and Rey's model of *ceteris paribus* generalizations on which see McKeever and Ridge, pp. 123–4, fn. 6.
- 9 There is, of course, an interesting parallel with Donald Davidson's claim that the anomalism of the mental implies that psychology is not a science. This is precisely because Davidson stipulates a sense for the word 'science' that makes it definitional that such sciences appeal only to strict and exceptionless laws. His response to the observation that psychology must be a science because it involves true hedged laws closely parallels Ridge and McKeever's position. See, for example, Davidson (1992).
- 10 Compare the claim that generalism must be true because there is an enterprise of theorizing that is not 'on a hopeless mission' so must be on its way to the right principles (Ridge and McKeever, p. 140). But by their own lights all that this tradition of theorizing has done is deliver a collection of falsehoods. See also pp. 172–4.
- 11 That latter claim seems to rest on a more generally conjunctive view of reasons statements that, as Jennifer Hornsby has argued, we have reason to reject and to replace with a non-conjunctive view (Hornsby, 2008). However, specifying that objection requires another occasion.
- 12 I am very grateful for the helpful comments and suggestions on this chapter of Kathryn Brown, Tim Chappell, Edward Harcourt, Jonathan Dancy, Brad Hooker, Mike Ridge, and Sean McKeever.