

## Peter N. Tuck, *Moral Particularism and the Non-Flatness Requirement*

### The Review Report

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Peter Tuck's dissertation is a sophisticated work on a topical issue in the contemporary metaethics. It is well-written; the author writes clearly and straightforwardly, using technical vocabulary sparsely, and the technical terms that he does use, he properly defines. Sure, it is a demanding work for specialists and Tuck spends hardly any time trying to justify his choice of a topic, or the entire project. If you are interested in it, there it is: you can read it and assess the cogency of its intricate arguments; but if you are not into metaethics, he does not try to convince you of its intrinsic importance. His essay is addressed to those, who already have a considerable amount of knowledge about the contemporary metaethics, and at least some knowledge of, and interest in, particularism. However, precisely because Tuck's prose is so clear and unpretentious, his work can be understood even by a relative outsider such as myself, who encountered particularism previously only at a graduate school—in the form of Jonathan Dancy's then rather recently published *Moral Reasons* (1993)—but has not followed this literature since. I am grateful to Tuck that he has given me an opportunity to learn about the new developments in this area of a contemporary metaethical inquiry.

Peter Tuck wishes to provide a novel response to the so-called flattening objection to moral particularism. Though some philosophers (originally including Dancy, as it happens) understand particularism as a position in moral epistemology, Tuck explains that it is a position in ontology, namely a denial of the existence of moral principles. Thus it is a claim about the shape of the moral landscape. Moral generalists share with particularists a belief in the existence of a moral landscape; in other words, both generalists and particularists are moral realists of some sort. However, the generalists believe that the moral landscape out there is diversely shaped, which makes our moral decision-making possible in the first place. As Tuck puts it:

The moral landscape, like an actual landscape, is populated by mountains, trees, landmarks, and roads that represent the textured nature of the

external moral reality, and specifically, act as guides, letting us orient ourselves to know where we are, and where we can go from here. (25)

Particularists, by denying the existence of the general moral principles, are accused of flattening the moral landscape, thus robbing the moral agents of an ability of making moral decisions:

The problem with particularism then, is that its “moral landscape” is apparently just an empty, flat steppe. If any piece of information can matter, or not, on a case by case basis, we can never map the territory, never remember anything, and never agree with others. Looking around us apparently gives us no clue where we went before, where we are, or where we ought to go. (*ibid.*)

Now, it is true that particularists admit that any fact or property can acquire a moral significance, so none of them peak over others as mountains or landmarks. The moral landscape does indeed appear, on the particularist construal, rather flat.

Tuck’s original response to the flattening objection is basically two-fold. First, it involves a distinction between a global vs. local shape of the moral landscape. Some so-called weak particularists consider themselves to be obligated to solve the flattening objection, by meeting the requirements imposed by the generalists. In their various attempts at such a solution, they assume that the moral reality has to have a global shape. However, this assumption can be challenged. Particularists offer a clear picture of our moral decision-making in local contexts, without having to worry about the global shape of the moral landscape. Second, Tuck a suggestion that moral decision-making is conducted by weighing reasons in particular contexts. What’s crucial about his response is that it is not construed as a solution to the flattening objection. Some particularists have have tried to solve this objection, but Tuck explains, in Chapter 2, that this concedes too much to generalism. He argues that the facts that the flattening objections enjoins the particularists to provide are epistemically inaccessible. This is not because facts are unimportant or insignificant, but because they cannot be recognized as important or significant before considering some particular situation.

Reading Tuck's dissertation, I appreciated many of his rejoinders to the generalists' criticisms of particularism. These rejoinders have often pointed out that the generalist reasoning were often question-begging. This pattern is noticeable from the very beginning of the first chapter, in which Tuck reviews some generalist complaints about the allegedly unwieldy practical consequences of particularism (on moral education etc.). I think one can appreciate many of Tuck's critical points about generalism whether or not one wishes to endorse particularism. Of the later arguments, I liked the plaidoyer for quietism (Chapter 3), though I felt that Tuck's quietism was sometimes in a danger of collapsing into skepticism. Also, terminologically speaking, I am not sure whether the choice of the term "quietism" was completely wise, given that it is associated with Wittgenstein's anti-theoretical program, which forces Tuck to distance himself from. I thought that bringing the concept of "weighing reasons" to the discussion of particularism, which is the subject-matter of Chapter 5, was original and fruitful. However, I felt that it could be helpful, if the model of "perception and weights" were utilized to address each of the practical objections introduced in Chapter 1. Overall, a clearer differentiation between the ontological and epistemological issues could be helpful, in particular in Chapter 5.

Having admitted that Tuck is within his rights to focus on a very specific issue within metaethics, I do regret that he chose not to justify his fundamental theoretical commitments within metaethics at a greater length. In addition to particularism, his other major theoretical commitment is moral realism. Both of these theses are controversial, and particularism perhaps more than realism, though it depends on which sort of realism we are talking about. As mentioned before, Tuck explains that both particularism and generalism share a commitment to moral realism, which he describes as follows:

Moral realism is, of course, the view that morality is "real", in the sense of being mind independent. Moral truths exist "in the universe" and are discovered rather than invented, and their truth does not depend on anyone thinking them true. There is an external moral reality and to have moral knowledge is to have knowledge of this reality; to be morally correct is to be correct according to this reality. (73)

As far as I remember the Bourget and Chalmers 2023 report, more than a half of contemporary philosophers subscribe to moral realism, but some brands of realism are more controversial than others. Tuck reveals at one point that he is committed to “nonnatural realism”, though he allows that the “nonnatural fact(s) [...] are *grounded* in some natural fact(s)” (p. 32; italics in the orig.). Only roughly a quarter of philosophers endorse nonnatural moral realism, a position pioneered in the modern metaethics, I gather, by G. E. Moore. What exactly is the nature of the grounding relation? At one point, Tuck speaks of “supervenience, or grounding,” thus suggesting that the two terms are coextensive. This in itself is controversial, but at any rate, I do not know of any successful models of moral supervenience (Tuck only mentions R. M. Hare as an originator of this metaphysical model). I do realize that this is not the focus of Tuck’s dissertation, but I would love to learn more about his brand of nonnatural moral realism, about his view of the grounding relation, and all the rest. Tuck at one point mentions that „all metaethical philosophers agree about“ the grounding of moral facts in natural facts (74). Now, this is a strange claim, because there are plenty of moral antirealists, irrealists etc. who all see various problems with the assumption of a mind-independent moral reality, albeit grounded in the natural reality. I realize that I am in an even smaller minority when I shall say that I happen to be impressed by the worry that moral facts do not fit too well with natural facts, because moral facts are “queer” (I am obviously alluding to Mackie’s argument). But even if only a minority of metaethicists endorse the error theory, it is simply not the case that all philosophers are realists who believe that moral facts are grounded in natural facts.

As for particularism, only roughly a third of contemporary philosophers claim to be particularists. So perhaps some further justification of the choice of particularism would be in order. As far as I have noticed, Tuck speaks of his motivation for particularism mostly in negative ways: moral behavior and decision-making cannot be described in terms of general principles. However, I do respect Tuck’s decision to motivate particularism only by way of responding to some objections to the seemingly unacceptable practical consequences of particularism in Chapter 1 of his dissertation. Perhaps there will be an opportunity to discuss nonnatural realism, grounding and other issues that are more or less assumed in the dissertation during the actual defence.

At any rate, I wholeheartedly declare Peter Tuck's dissertation as fit for defence. Despite its controversial commitments (though I do remember that Tuck tries to distance himself from the charge of "radicalism"), it is excellent.