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**Moral Particularism and the
Non-Flatness Requirement**

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Summary of Doctoral Thesis

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Introduction

This thesis intervenes in a recent debate in the metaethical literature between moral generalists, who endorse the traditional view that morality should be understood in terms of general principles, and moral particularists, who reject such a conception, instead preferring to understand morality in terms of the unique features of particular cases and decisions.

The philosophies and debates examined in this thesis often rely on what the philosophers at hand find to be obvious, or intuitive, or commonsensical, and, as we will find, what is obvious or intuitive in fact differs widely between otherwise similarly theoretically situated metaethical philosophers.

Moral generalists think moral particularists, in the end, are unable to explain how anybody has any moral knowledge, and they think this is because particularists have no understanding of the difference between what is generally central or marginal in morality. My task here, in the end,

will be to explain how we can have moral knowledge without generalities.

1. What Responses to Particularism Have in Common, and What We Should Take from Them

In the first chapter of the thesis, I begin by explaining some relevant points about the metaethical view called moral particularism, which holds that there are no general moral principles, which are construed as moral rules that hold for all people in all places and times, for example, “nobody should ever tell a lie”, or “nobody should ever steal”. I also explain the view that particularism necessarily defines itself against, which is moral generalism. Generalism is the traditional view that there *are* such general moral rules.

I then turn to consider a range of selected criticisms generalist philosophers have made about particularism, based around the specific concepts of moral education, social order, moral justification, and the making of excuses. These philosophers complain that, if we reject general moral principles, we have no way of explaining

how moral education works, how we can have social order, how we can justify our behaviour to others, or how we can decide whether or not somebody's behaviour can be excused.

I point out what all of these apparently different criticisms have in common: they all rely firstly on the idea that morality needs some limited set of central facts, and secondly, on the idea that we can only have moral knowledge at all if there is such a set. With these commonalities in hand, I turn to discuss a range of philosophers who have made this criticism against particularism directly, as the flattening objection to particularism. Rather than pointing to any specific part of morality and wondering how particularism might explain it, they instead conclude that particularism simply cannot explain morality. The flattening objection is summed up by its main proponent, Vojko Strahovnik, as follows:

The moral non-flatness requirement says that any moral theory must somehow account for the fact that some

considerations or features of acts are more central to morality than others...radical particularism cannot properly account for the thought that some considerations are more central than others. (Strahovnik, 2016, 67-68)

As Strahovnik declares, the idea here is that *any* moral theory must account for this fact, and particularism, apparently, does not.

2. Responses to the Flattening Objection

In the second chapter of the thesis, I turn to examine how particularist philosophers have attempted to respond to the flattening objection. And the way they do this is by developing various forms of what have come to be called “weak” particularism. In the literature, the original view, which confidently holds that there are no general principles of morality, has been called “strong” particularism. Weak particularism, on the other hand, allows for some kinds of general moral truths, as long as they do not amount to truly general principles. And there are eight forms of weak particularism.

The first kind is based around the concept of a “default reason”, which is a moral reason that has a default status, unless unusual circumstances cause it to have some other status. On this view, that an action will involve lying will usually count against performing that action, unless the specific circumstances make it acceptable on this particular occasion. The fact that it is raining, for example, will instead have no particular moral status.

The second kind is based around the concept of a “semantic generic”, which is a statement generally considered to be true, however much it actually turns out to be true in practice. On this view, statements like “Americans like coffee” or “birds can fly” are accepted as generally true, even though some Americans do not like coffee, and some birds cannot fly. Supporters of the semantic generics view think the central moral truths ought to be construed in this way. “lying is wrong” will be accepted as true, whether or not it is always true.

The third kind is based around the concept of a defeasible generalisation. There are two ways of understanding this. The first way is that there are certain central ethical truths which all other truths have a sort of family resemblance to, and will be understood in comparison with. For example, “lying is wrong” will be the defeasible generality that all acts that involved lying are understood with reference to, whether they are right or wrong. The second way is to understand defeasibility in terms of privileged *conditions*. There are certain stable background conditions that cause lying to usually be wrong, and if it

turns out to be right, it is because something unusual has happened in the background.

The fourth kind is evaluative generalism. On this view, while our reasons for action, which are deontic in nature, are particular, it is our values which are general. And since our reasons for action are informed by our values, it is the values that indirectly shape and structure our moral reality.

The fifth kind is based around thick moral concepts, whether evaluative or deontic. On this view, it is the thick concepts that are on the limited list of general ethical truths.

The sixth kind, similar to the fifth but in some ways distinct, is a form of virtue ethics. On this view, if we accept virtue ethics at the level of ethical theory, we can understand how there can be generality at the metaethical level, where moral particularism and moral generalism reside. We will have certain stable character traits and dispositions that form the limited core our morality is based around.

The seventh kind is based around the notion of a subjective context. On this view, there will be general truths, or even principles, for specific forms of life. While there will not be any that hold for all people in all places and times, there will individually be such truths for everybody, in all places and times.

The eighth and final kind of weak particularism I discuss is utopianism. This is the idea that our general moral truths are derived from our abstract understanding of what a morally perfect, ideal world would be like.

I reject all of these eight forms of weak particularism, both for independent reasons, and some reasons that tell against more than one of the eight kinds, but in all cases, because they fail to defend any kind of general moral truth that would suffice to meet Strahovnik's non-flatness requirement.

3. Quietism

In the third chapter of the thesis, I turn from critiquing individual forms of weak particularism, and explaining why they fail to solve the flattening objection, to explaining why *no* form of weak particularism can solve the objection, and that instead, therefore, we need to find a way of *dissolving* the objection. And my argument for this is that, to declare any truly general ethical truth, a human philosopher would need to know all the possible situations a person could ever find themselves in. And since it is impossible for anybody to have this knowledge, it is impossible for anybody to defend any general ethical truth.

I call this position a form of quietism, in that it requires us to be *quiet* about moral metaphysics, and for reasons of epistemic inaccessibility. I next point out the other forms of quietism extant in the literature, which are Wittgensteinian views, relaxed realist views, antirealist views, and sceptical views. I point out that while my own view has important differences that set it apart from these

other forms of quietism, there is an important commonality. And that is that all forms of quietism try to direct our attention to questions we can answer, about topics that are meaningfully available to philosophise about.

My claim that the flattening objection cannot be solved apparently leaves us at something of a dead end. If it cannot be solved, how do we comprehensively deal with the critics concerns about moral education, about society, about justification, about excuses? I argue that by considering again what grounds these worries, we can see another way forward. And what all these complaints have in common is that they connect the possibility of moral knowledge to the need for a general metaphysical structure in ethics. So if we can provide a clear picture about how we have moral knowledge *without* referring to such a general metaphysical structure, we can practically resolve the debate while dissolving the debate as one about general metaphysical truths.

4. Moral Knowledge as Case-Based Reasoning

In the fourth chapter of the thesis, I turn to consider one way particularist philosophers like to try and explain our having of moral knowledge, which is by using the model of case-based- reasoning.

On this view, the way we get moral knowledge *here* is by comparing our current case to other cases we experienced previously, that somebody else experienced previously, or ones that we imagine. This way of understanding moral knowledge is meant to be relevantly similar to how we understand practical knowledge in other domains. Comparisons are made by particularist philosophers to domains like bicycle riding, chess, football, and music composition. The point is meant to be that, whatever activity we are engaged in, we understand what to do *here* by comparison to what ended up being correct somewhere else.

I argue that while this is surely *part* of a complete picture of moral knowledge, it fails to explain why anybody has any moral knowledge in the first place, or how we evaluate situations that are completely different to anything we have experienced or heard about before. These are special problems for morality and are the reason why the strategy of comparison between different domains does not really work. In chess, for example, there are only a limited number of pieces, squares on the board, possible moves, and so on. It is possible to “solve” chess, and indeed, humans have produced computer programmes that have done so. Morality, however, is not closed in this way. There is no limited range of possible situations or choices. A complete answer about morality, then, will be one that explains how we get knowledge in the first place, and concomitantly, how we get it in a truly novel situation.

5. Basic Moral Knowledge as Perceptions and Weights

In the fifth and final chapter of the thesis, I turn to consider what particularists ought to think basic knowledge is. I point out that particularists, in common with many other metaethical philosophers, use a “three-layer” model of morality. We have facts about the world, we have reasons for action “grounded” in those facts, and we have the moral conclusions those reasons recommend. This model allows us to phrase our question more precisely, in two parts?. Firstly, how do we have reasons at all, and secondly, how do we know which moral conclusion the reasons recommend most strongly? The first of these will be most directly about why anybody has any moral knowledge at all, and the second one will be more relevant to understanding how we evaluate new and surprising situations.

On the first point, philosophers in the literature have preferred to focus on the idea of our having “moral perception”. Moral perception is meant to be alike to, and

continuous with, ordinary sense perception. Further, many critics say that particularists *must* use the concept of moral perception; that it is in fact the only way particularists can explain basic knowledge.

My solution is to point out that the problem of basic moral knowledge is not actually specifically one for particularists, but is one for particularists and generalists alike. I recast the question of basic moral knowledge, and whether it requires moral perception, as being one grounded in scepticism. And particularism and generalism are both forms of *anti-sceptical* philosophy. Therefore, I simply state that particularists do not need to provide any specially concrete answer about basic knowledge, or if they do, then their opponents do, too. Instead, I conclude that it will be sufficient for our purposes to assume that we do have reasons, and to ask how we evaluate the reasons that we surely do have.

And on this topic, both particularist and generalist philosophers understand the answer to revolve around reason “weights”. Reasons are held to have weights, which means they count more or less strongly for or

against certain courses of action. And the only thing particularists and generalists disagree on is whether the reasons are “additive”, which means that they have individual weights that can be somehow added up or computed. Here we again find that particularists are meant to have a special problem with explaining reason weights, structurally alike to the flattening objection. If particularists deny that reasons have identifiably individual weights, how can they say which reasons are the most important, or central?

My answer to this question is that we know reason weights by comparison to the other reasons within the same situation. Unlike the case-based reasoning view, this does not require the comparison of the present case to any other case. It only requires a careful understanding of the case at hand, and the identification of what is most important *here*. Since I think we are capable of doing this, I conclude that this is the correct response to the flattening objection, which satisfies all the practical concerns that engender the objection.

Conclusion

This thesis was for anyone, like myself, who is sympathetic to the particularist starting point, which is the view that ethics ought not to be constructed out of general principles, and is interested in seeing where this leads us. And the most important question I identified about this progression, by far, which was shared by many other contributors to the debate about moral particularism, was the one about how we have reliable moral knowledge without general principles.

I found that while case-based reasoning was surely part of a complete picture of moral knowledge, it was not a basic answer to our question, and in the end, what was most basic was the reasons we have *here*, and which of those reasons we found to be the weightiest; the most important. The case-based reasoning answer is one that relies on relevant *similarities* between the case at hand, and others. Whereas the answer about reason weights relies on the *difference* between reasons; between what is heavy, or important, and what is light, or marginal.

I think my anti-sceptical answer about reason weights satisfies the critics concerns on all particular moral topics, including their worries about moral education, about social order, about intrapersonal justification, and about the making of excuses.