Principles and Reasons in
Moral Knowledge and Moral Guidance

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1 Introduction

Moral principles like the Ten Commandments are often regarded as the basis for ethics. Generalism is the philosophical position that claims that moral principles are fundamental to moral thinking. I will shortly mention three problems with such a conception of morality that woke my interest in alternative conceptions (especially particularism). Later on, I will elaborate some more substantial critiques.

The first problem is that any proposed set of moral principles has counter-examples. This shows that the principles are not true for all cases. Much of the search for moral principles is the search for exceptionless moral general truths, and counter-examples show that this search has failed. Particularism emphasizes the uniqueness of each case and does not simplify the matter too much.

The second criticism is that the search for fundamental moral principles in modern times is an application of the methods of natural sciences in the moral domain. That the methods have been successful in natural science does not mean that they will be successful when applied to moral problems. The natural and the moral are different, and it is easy to criticise those that do not respect that difference.

Thirdly, I want to stress that generalism is often accompanied with the belief that moral concepts have necessary and sufficient conditions for their application (a theory from the philosophy of language). If that were true, and these conditions were easily explicable, then some form of generalism seems to follow. However, to search for necessary and sufficient conditions for a concept is not a promising way to engage in philosophy. These three points are among the considerations that made me become interested in particularism.

The most famous particularist today is Jonathan Dancy. In his book Ethics without Principles (and in many articles and other books as well) he tries to develop a sustainable particularistic position as well as an attack on generalism. Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge have written a book called Principled Ethics that contains a defence of generalism against the particularistic threat. In this essay, I will investigate the debate and determine whether McKeever and Ridge's criticism is convincing. I will examine and criticize a couple of problems concerning moral guidance more carefully. This will shed some light on the difference between the positions, and give at least an idea of how particularism can rebut McKeever and Ridge's criticism. My general position is that I am critical of generalism and broadly sympathetic to particularism, but I think that particularism has a few unsolved problems as well.

In section two and three I characterize particularism and generalism. I will discuss their different formulations and introduce some important distinctions. I will also rather briefly look at some arguments for and against each position.

Section four contains a discussion of moral competence and moral knowledge. McKeever and Ridge
claim that a good account of practical wisdom goes better with generalism. I think that it does not.

In section five I will discuss social intuitionism and McKeever and Ridge claim that this threatens
generalism. It seems to be a threat to particularism as well, but the defence given by McKeever and
Ridge is applicable for particularists as well. Their solution is that moral reasoning (and thereby moral
principles) plays an important role in shaping the person and the persons concepts, and not as guiding
action in a present case. I think this is a step towards particularism, since there are aspects of concept
competence that seems hard to capture with principles.

In section six and seven I will look at two arguments from moral guidance directed against
particularism, put forward by McKeever and Ridge. The first is the framing effect problem and the
second is the problem with special pleading. Since I argue in section five that action guiding mainly
involves shaping a person's concept, it will come as no surprise that I do not think that there are any
overwhelming problems special for particularists here. If the critical point is how a person's concept
could change, I do not see any advantages for generalism over particularism. On the contrary,
particularism seems to me to be more attractive when it comes to questions about concept change. One
reason for this is that I am not attracted by theories of language that postulates sufficient and necessary
conditions for concepts.

I think that this fits very well with a particularistic picture. However, there are important differences
between language in general and moral reasoning, which I do not think is sufficiently taken into
consideration.

My conclusion will be that there is some important practical work for moral principles. However, this is
on a higher, action-guiding or motivational level, not on the grounding, metaphysical level.

1.1 Shared Assumptions

Particularists and generalists start from some shared assumptions that are disputed in philosophical
contexts, but not in this essay. Both sides assume that we can have knowledge in moral matters, and that
moral statements can be true or false. The truth-value is not (wholly) dependent on the person's
opinion: some kind of realism is the starting point. It is also assumed that moral statements can
motivate in themselves, i.e. that moral internalism is true. Both sides also agree that every moral feature
is so in virtue of moral reasons\(^1\) (a relation called resultance, see next section). The major
disagreements are metaphysical or ontological, but the battlefield is mainly epistemological. The
division between particularists and generalists is related to the nature of the reasons that constitutes a
moral property. These reasons are supposed to be knowable, i.e. it should be possible to have
knowledge about why an act is good or evil. The two camps differ in their views about the nature of this
knowledge (as well as about the nature of the reasons themselves). It is also assumed that moral
properties supervene on non-moral properties. Supervenience says that if two objects are exactly like in

\(^{1}\) To say that the right action has no reason can mean that it is arbitrary, but it may also mean other things, i.e. that I can
not specify or express the reasons, or perhaps that I do not have to give any reasons to the person asking for them.
all non-moral properties, then they have the same moral property; conversely, if two objects have different moral value, there must be some non-moral difference between them as well.

### 1.1.1 Resultance

Moral properties depend on other features of the object. This relation is called "resultance" and Dancy characterizes it as follows:

"Resultance is a relation between a property of an object and the features that 'give' it that property. [...] A resultant property is one that 'depends' on other properties in a certain way. As we might say, nothing is just wrong; a wrong action is wrong because of other features that it has. The obscure 'because of' in this claim is sometimes expressed using the equally obscure phrase 'in virtue of'; a wrong action is wrong in virtue of other features than its wrongness."\(^2\)

The moral properties result from the reasons of the act. The rightness of an act is thus grounded in the reasons or the *favourers* (which are the features that counts in favour of doing the act). The natural (non-moral) features that give the moral property are called the *grounding* or the *resultance base*.

The difference between *resultance* and *supervenience* is that the resultance base consists only of those features in virtue of which the action is right or wrong, while the supervenience base consists of all features.

### 1.1.2 Grounding, Motivating and Justifying Reasons

*The moral reasons* or the *grounding reasons* of a moral property are the features that *constitute* the goodness or badness of the action, for instance a drowning person’s need could be a reason for me to help that person. This is a relation on the ontological level. Kihlbom makes a distinction between two other kinds of reasons, which will be important later. The *motivating reason* is the mental state that explains the agent’s action: it could be my awareness of a person's need that makes me try to save her or it could be a belief that I would be famous if I save a drowning person. As we shall see in the discussion of social intuitionism, social psychology shows that these motives are more often relatedness and coherence motives than the motives we give when we are trying to justify our actions. The *justifying reasons* are mental states that justify the action. My belief that the drowning person is in need justifies my rescue attempts. However, I could be mistaken about the situation; perhaps the person is just playing in the water and not drowning at all. In that case, there would of course not be any grounding reasons that I should help the person. Nevertheless, my belief that the person is drowning is still a justifying reason, because if the person really were drowning as I thought, then it would constitute a reason for a rescue attempt. The relation between the different kinds of reasons is important. Kihlbom says that in

\(^2\) (Dancy 2004, p. 85)
“ideal cases, grounding reasons constitute the content of both motivating and justifying reasons.”\(^3\) In the example, the grounding reason for the rescue attempt is the need of the drowning person. The same fact, the need of the person, should be the content of both the motivating and the justifying reasons. Crisp says, “[b]ehind the notion of justifying reasons and beliefs lies the way things are.”\(^4\) The reasons on a psychological level should conform to the grounding reasons. McKeever and Ridge make a similar assumption: “In a standard case, knowledge that a given action is wrong is based on a recognition of the moral reasons against it.”\(^5\) My own philosophical intuitions adhere to this; I am convinced that sometimes some person has given a correct reason when explaining why an action is right. There are generalists that do not believe this; I fear that many utilitarians do not believe this. They strictly separate between principles as action guiding and principles as standards (see the section "Principles are Action-Guiding Standards").

### 1.1.3 A Reservation Concerning the Assumptions

I think that these assumptions cover many moral cases, but not necessary all cases. As Winch writes:

> “what we call ’moral judgements' constitute a heterogeneous bunch and we have absolutely no business to assume that we can give an account that will fit all of them.”\(^6\)

I hope that these common assumptions are valid for a large part of the moral field, and this essay deals with that part without trying to specify more than what is explicitly assumed. This essay leaves out many important aspects of morality since it only deals with the study of truth-conditions, application and reasons for moral statements. These restrictions also make it hard to determine what is a correct counter-example, and what simply belongs to another part, or to another aspect, of morality. There can be other fruitful approaches to the moral field, e.g. a phenomenological approach (which may be complementary). Even though this essay starts from strict assumptions, I think it still can throw some light on this matter from the perspective it takes.

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\(^3\) (Kihlbom 2002, p. 15)  
\(^4\) (Crisp 2003, p. 33)  
\(^5\) (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 115)  
\(^6\) (Winch, 1987b, p. 185)
2 Particularism Outlined

There are many different possible forms of particularism. McKeever and Ridge (2006) distinguish five. Dancy (2005) is the leading particularist and he accepts a form of particularism that McKeever and Ridge call anti-transcendental particularism. They formulate it as follows: “The possibility of moral thought and judgement do not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles.”

According to Kihlbom, McDowell puts forward a particularism that claims “that there are no moral principles” (or perhaps that there are no true moral principles), which is more radical than Dancy's position. It is even too radical because a moral anti-realista can be seen to adhere to it (as Kihlbom notes), regardless of her view on generalism. Both anti-transcendental and McDowell's particularism have the drawback that they make particularism dependent on what we mean by “moral principle.” The anti-transcendental formulation captures something very central in particularism. Dancy tries to offer an even more useful formulation in terms of holism about reasons.

2.1 Holism about Reasons

Dancy (2005) makes a “positive” characterization of particularism when he says that a feature that in one situation constitute a moral reason for an action may in another constitute a moral reason against such an action. This is what he calls holism about reasons. The opposite view is called atomism, and asserts that “a feature that is a reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity, in any other.”

Holism is supported by simple examples. For example, if I have promised to proofread a thesis this constitutes a reason for me to do it. However, if I was forced or fooled into making the promise then I could argue that I do not have a reason to do the proofreading even though I actually promised. Kihlbom also underline this variability of moral reasons in his characterization of particularism:

“Any non-moral property that constitutes a moral reason in one case may lack or have contrary moral valence in another.”

In a context it is also important to separate out enabling conditions, “features the absence or presence of

7 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 19)
8 (Kihlbom 2002, p. 23)
9 I mean that he defines particularism in a way that is not dependent on moral principles and generalism.
10 (Dancy 2004, p. 73-4)
11 (Kihlbom 2002, p. 27) Kihlbom uses the more explanatory term contextualism for this view, but Dancy's use of the term holism has been accepted in the generalism-particularism debate
which enable certain features to constitute moral reasons.”12 These are not reasons, but are still not morally irrelevant features. Dancy gives the example that I am able to do what I promised, which enables the action to be what I should do, but that I am able to do it is still not a reason to perform the action. Another enabler could be that I do not have any other reason that is stronger than this reason (that there is a drowning person). These are not reasons that speak in favour of the action, but without the enablers, the favourers would not speak for the action (i.e. those features would not be favourers without the enablers).

2.1.1 Contributory Reasons

A contributory reason is a case for an action, but is not in itself decisive. Let us take an example. That I promised to go to a party is a contributory reason for me to go there. This does not necessarily mean that I should do it, because I could have even greater reasons to break the promise. It might, for instance, happen that I see a drowning man, which gives me a very strong reason to help him. In this case, it could be that overall I should save the drowning man instead of going to the party. Even if I have a stronger contradictory reason, the first reason (that I promised) does not disappear. That it does not disappear is the reason why I feel regret when I did not fulfil the promise. Dancy thinks that there are two basic kinds of reasons: contributory reasons and the overall reason. The overall reason tells us what we should do. If I have an overall reason to go to the party, I should go. On the other hand, if I only have a contributory reason to go to the party there could be something else I should do (i.e. save a drowning man). When Dancy says that the contributory and the overall are two basic notions, he means that they cannot be reduced or explained in terms of each other.

2.1.2 Holism about Reasons Supports Particularism

Dancy's main argument for particularism is that reasons in all other domains outside the moral are holistic, and reasons in the moral domain are not that different from other practical domains. In other areas, holism is not questioned. That something seems brown is a reason to believe (i.e. a theoretical reason) that it really is brown. However, I could wear sunglasses that makes white things seems brown, and brown things seems black. In that case, the fact that something seems brown provides me with no reason at all that I have a brown thing in front of me. It depends on the context. In practical domains (outside the moral), Dancy finds plenty of examples:

"For instance, that there will be nobody much else around is sometimes a good reason for going there, and sometimes a very good reason for staying away. That one of the candidates wants the job very much indeed is sometimes a reason for giving it to her and sometimes a reason for doing the opposite.”13

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12 (Kihlbom 2002, p. 51)
13 (Dancy 2004, p. 74)
Since we do not have any good reasons to believe that moral reasons are radically different from other reasons, we should assume that they behave in the same way as other reasons. The fact that a feature is a reason for an action does not imply the same reasons must favour the same kind of action in other cases. That there are features (like maximizing happiness) that cannot vary in moral valence seems to be one of the main intuitions underlying generalism, and that intuition is plainly denied by holism. Holism about reasons is, as we have seen, supported by many examples even in the moral realm, and it seems like an even more convincing position outside the moral.

As we shall see, the relation between holism about reasons and particularism is not clear. McKeever and Ridge (2006) argue for a kind of holistic generalism, and they accept the important distinctions between reasons and enabling conditions. Dancy and Kihlbom, on the other hand, treats holism and particularism as very closely connected, or even identical, theories. They do not seem to take the possibility of a holistic generalism seriously.

### 2.2 Moral Vision and Moral Competence

Particularists are fond of using observation of secondary qualities or aesthetic appreciation as an analogy to moral observation. According to particularists, moral observation is the main justification method for our moral judgement. Moral competence is closely linked to moral observation. McNaughton contrasts a newcomer to jazz to the jazz connoisseur (“jazz competent”). He especially wants to underline two points. The first is that “the result of successful training in the aesthetic case is a change in perception,”\(^\text{14}\) a change brought about by giving the newcomer hints to what should be the salient features and encouraging her to pay careful attention to different aspects. The second point (which I will not discuss further in this essay) is “that failure to appreciate a piece of music or a painting is not in any way a failure of reason;”\(^\text{15}\) she is simply insensitive to certain facts in the situation.

### 2.3 Response Conformity and Objectivity

Kihlbom characterises moral reasons in terms of (some) persons' responses under special conditions. This does not make morality subjective or dependent on a single agent's outlook. Morally competent persons in ideal circumstances are assumed to respond morally in the same way to the non-moral features: this is what accounts for the objectivity of moral facts. Such objectivity is in many ways similar to the objectivity of colours and other secondary properties. People often talk about perceiving moral properties and particularists take this analogy seriously. Kihlbom writes:

“Moral facts are [...] objective in virtue of being such as they would elicit certain responses from morally competent persons in ideal circumstances. [...] [A] non-moral feature

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\(^{14}\) (McNaughton 1988, p. 58)

\(^{15}\) (McNaughton 1988, p. 59)
constitutes a moral reason only if it is such as it would elicit a certain response among morally competent persons in ideal situations.”

The base for Kihlbom's realist stance is thus the hypothesis that morally competent persons would be disposed to make the same moral judgement about a situation. I am sceptical about the use of the ideal and fully competent, and will come back to that problem later on. Many particularists think that colour-properties, and their objectivity, bear an interesting resemblance to moral properties. I hope (and think) that objectivity can be accounted for without the use of an ideally morally competent person, but I will not try to do that in this essay.

2.4 Moral Generalism within Particularism

Kihlbom proposes that the best version of “particularism will concern how moral features result from non-moral features.” According to Dancy, all reasons for a thin moral feature can vary in polarity in different context, but it is not necessary that all reasons actually have different polarities in different contexts. There may be reasons that have the same polarity across all contexts. If there are, the invariance does not depend on the fact that they are reasons, or reasons of a special kind that must always have the same valence. It is rather a fact that happens to be true, like the fact that our sun is always yellow. Dancy calls these kinds of reasons default reasons and they do not fit easily in the particularistic picture. (The next section will discuss default reasons more.)

Kihlbom is against the idea that thick moral features can have variable moral polarity; he says that this is counter-intuitive. I think many would agree that the cruelty of an action could sometimes be said to count in favour of it, for instance in a deterrent example. However, Kihlbom points to the difficulty of coordinating the variable polarity of thick moral concepts with a moral internalism:

“it is hard to see how one can coherently stick to the idea that if one apprehends a moral feature, then one is necessarily motivated to act in a certain way, and at the same time holding the view that a moral feature may not elicit certain responses.”

One possible solution could be to abandon the strict version of moral internalism and say that internalism only concerns thin moral concepts, accepting that moral beliefs usually (de facto) motivate another. Even though it seems possible to solve the problem in this way, this might be a problem for Dancy's theory. Kihlbom thus accepts thick moral principles, which say that some (thick) moral properties have a specific moral valence. An example could be that cruelty always makes an action morally worse.

Kihlbom wants to allow for some kind of generalisations in ethics, which will be of some import below.

16 (Kihlbom 2002, p. 67)
17 (Kihlbom 2002, p. 24)
18 (Kihlbom 2002, p. 25)

10(39)
He calls this the moral canon and he gives as an example that “It is cruel to intentionally cause suffering to innocent beings for one's own pleasure.”\textsuperscript{19} This says that, typically, actions of this kind are cruel. Moral canons say something about when a thick moral concept is applicable.

### 2.4.1 Default Reasons

As I mentioned, default reasons may be problematic for particularists. Dancy does not use the notion much, and he is not sure if it is the right way to explain moral invariance. He explains default reasons in this way:

“if a default reason-giving feature does give us a reason in this context, there is nothing to explain; we only have something to explain when such a feature doesn't provide a reason. With other features it is the other way around; if they do provide reasons there is something to explain, and if they don't there isn't.”\textsuperscript{20}

According to Dancy's account, default reasons are reasons that do not require any enablers. However, McKeever and Ridge\textsuperscript{21} remark that there is not substantial difference between the presence of an enabler and the absence of a defeater. Then Dancy's account seems to say that default reasons are not context-dependent, and the whole point of default reasons is to account for invariance within a holistic frame. Thus, that project fails. According to McKeever and Ridge,\textsuperscript{22} Dancy later tried to explicate default reasons with help of the terms positive and negative dependence. I will not go into that attempt here, but notice that particularists have difficulty giving a satisfactory account of default reasons. It intuitively feels right to say that killing someone is more morally relevant than the colour of one's shoelaces, and not only a contingent empirical generalisation. This is a crucial point, and a serious obstacle to the particularistic enterprise. Without a good account of default reasons, particularism leaves many of the most important questions in the moral field unanswered.

### 2.5 The Right Place for Moral Principles

There seems to be a very aggressive attitude against moral principles from particularists. Dancy and McNaughton provide two examples of this: "Moral principles are at best crutches that a morally sensitive person would not require, and indeed the use of such crutches might even lead us into moral error;"\textsuperscript{23} "Moral particularism takes the view that moral principles are at best useless, and at worst a hindrance."\textsuperscript{24} I will investigate some areas where generalists claim that we must use moral principles. In

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[19] (Kihlbom 2002, p. 37)
\item[20] (Dancy 2004, p. 113)
\item[21] (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 51)
\item[22] (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 55-60)
\item[23] (Dancy, 2005)
\item[24] (McNaughton 1988, p. 190)
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
this discussion, I propose that it is possible to use some moral principles as a useful and practical tool, without claiming that the moral principles are necessarily true or truth making. As we shall see, this is what McKeever and Ridge call principles as guides.
3 GeneralismOutlined

"Moral principles" can mean different things for different authors, but Kihlbom gives the following characterization: "moral principles are understood as universally and necessary true statements that specify the explanatory relation between non-moral and moral properties."25 Moral principles as discussed here are also assumed to be action guiding. In other words, they should be important both as grounding reasons and as motivating reasons. There are many different opinions about what moral principles there are (assuming that there are any), for instance Rawls' and utilitarianism's kind of principles, or more everyday moral principles like “you should not lie”. McKeever and Ridge try to make their defence of generalism without assuming any specific generalistic theory, but at times it seems clear that they have some kind of Russian view in mind. This is shown in their argumentation that a Russian approach is "intuitive,"26 and when they discuss practical wisdom claiming that we sometimes recognize the moral reasons for or against an action.27 Kihlbom and Dancy distinguish between two types of moral principles (strict and contributory) which I will explain in the next section along with a discussion of some common objections against each type. After that, I will introduce a distinction that McKeever and Ridge stress between principles as standards and as action-guides. I will also mention some initial objections against their project.

3.1.1 Strict and Contributory Moral Principles

According to a strict (Kihlbom's term) or absolute (Dancy's term) conception a moral principle is a "universal claim to the effect that all actions of a certain type are overall wrong (or right)."28 Strict moral principles say that certain non-moral properties imply a certain moral property. According to this conception, if we have a non-violence principle, every action that involves violence is wrong.

This position raises the question of what happens when the principles conflict. Conflicts between principles seem to be common if we assume, for example, that non-violence is a principle. This problem does not occur if we have a monistic view of morality and just one moral principle like hedonistic utilitarianism. However, monistic forms of generalism are less plausible, as they tend to have counterintuitive implications.

Another type of moral principles is more interesting. Dancy calls these “contributory moral principles” and Kihlbom “Ceteris Paribus principles.” These principles say that some non-moral properties give a propensity to a moral property. For instance, if we have a non-violence principle then if an action is violent, that will count against it. However, several moral principles may apply in a situation and there

25 (Kihlbom 2002, p. 29)
26 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p.172-6); I think this is a weak argument and do not discuss it.
27 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 115)
28 (Dancy 2005)
might be no straightforward way to say which principle will “win.” Since generalism with contributory principles avoids the counterintuitive implications that affect strict moral principles, I will use such a version of generalism in this thesis when it is important to distinguish between the two. (In the examples given here, I have assumed atomism about reasons, but McKeever and Ridge assume holism.)

### 3.1.2 Default and Specified Moral Principles

McKeever and Ridge start their case for generalism with *default principles*. These are principles states that there are no disablers present and that there is not any stronger counteracting reasons, without specifying what these disablers or counteracting reasons might be. *Specified principles*\(^{29}\) are principles that are fully specified. This means that in the principle the possible disablers for the reason in question are explicitly specified. Unfortunately, I am not quite sure how a fully specified moral principle would look.\(^{30}\)

One initial objection to this is that default principles cannot give any guidance because they just say (for instance) that killing is wrong when there is nothing that disables its wrongness and when there are no counter-reasons why it is not wrong in this case. Without recourse to such knowledge, default principles only say trivial things, like that killing is often wrong unless it isn't. If that indispensable knowledge is particularistic, then particularistic considerations have the last word in moral matters. It would not be true generalism with "just" default moral principles. McKeever and Ridge are aware of this objection against default principles;\(^{31}\) this is partly why they are not satisfied with default principles, and instead argue for specified moral principles. When I talk about moral principles later on I mean this kind unless I specify something else.

### 3.1.3 Principles are Action-Guiding Standards

McKeever and Ridge make an interesting distinction between moral principles as standards and as guides, and both of these functions are assumed to be valid for moral principles as discussed here. A principle is a *standard* if it consists of sufficient conditions for making a thing or action right. These conditions are exceptionless necessary truths that are finitely long and “can help explain why that concept applies.”\(^{32}\) Principles might also function as *guides* for our actions. This implies that the principles must be of a manageable length since we must be able to know, express and endorse them. What is a manageable length? It must be much fewer than all the facts that are given by supervenience functions (which state all the facts in the world). This also implies that the principles are practically and

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29 McKeever and Ridge's term for what I call specified principles seems to be unhedged principles (see for instance 2006, p. 140).
30 Would specified principles really explicitly mention all reasons that might override this one? That sounds unmanageably long, but I will leave his question open.
31 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 138)
32 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 8)
not only principally codifiable. (I think I have never seen a proposed principle that mentions more than a few (not over seven) relevant features.)

Many of the standards that have been proposed are very complex, utilitarianism for instance. In fact, they might be so complex that it is not practically possible to use them in every case where we need guidance. Nevertheless, the two levels should not be completely separated, and McKeever and Ridge say that an action-guiding standard is "a standard that necessarily figures in the moral psychology of any virtuous agent moral agent at some level."³³

### 3.1.4 Coherentism and Justification

While particularism rests heavily on a perceptual model to justify moral judgement, the generalist uses coherentism as the justification method. Coherentism is the view that "we gain justified moral opinions by testing our considered judgements about particular cases against moral principles,"³⁴ and "we go back and forth, revising sometimes our considered judgements about particular cases, sometimes the principles."³⁵

### 3.1.5 Star's Objection: Generalism is Not a Genuinely Holistic Theory

Daniel Star (2007) objects that McKeever and Ridge's moral principles are indeed holistic according to Dancy's definition, but only because Dancy's definition is not precise enough. He argues that the example that McKeever and Ridge give in support of the view that moral principles can be holistic are easy to reformulate to an atomistic version of practically the same principle. To see how this is done, we can use the example that McKeever and Ridge gives:

"(U) The fact that an action would promote pleasure is a reason to perform the action if and only if the pleasure is nonsadistic. 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."³⁶

Star objects that this is not a genuine holistic theory, since theories of this kind can easily be transformed to an atomistic theory of the following kind:

"(Ua) The fact that an action would promote nonsadistic pleasure is a reason to perform the action. 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."

³³ (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 10)
³⁴ (Tännö 1995, p. 574)
³⁵ (Tännö 1995, p. 574)
³⁶ (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 29) This is just given as an example on a theory based on principles, and not a theory the authors actually endorse.
pleasures over pain as any of the available alternatives; otherwise it is wrong.”

Since (U) and (Ua) are extensionally equivalent and there is no good way of finding out whether (U) or (Ua) are correct, then (U) cannot be holistic in any interesting way, according to Star. McKeever and Ridge might be aware of this. They say that there are two ways of interpreting holism. The first way is the thesis of context sensitivity, and this gives us the problem Star points out. Another interpretation that they briefly discuss claims in addition to context sensitivity that the way the reasons depend on the context transcends codification. McKeever and Ridge note that this is a particularistic thesis and thus not something that particularists can depend upon in their defence. On the other hand, if it were found to be plausible, that would be an argument for particularism.

37 (Star 2007)
4 From Moral Knowledge to Moral Principles

Here I wish to establish that the morally competent person is best characterized as a person who is competent with the moral concepts in a wide sense. I will argue that to be morally competent it is fundamental to be able to apply moral concepts correctly. I will also suggest that this competence is something that we can understand without postulating moral principles, or even moral reasons.

The last sections discuss McKeever and Ridge's attempt to strengthen the case for generalism by appealing to the difference between types and tokens of reason. They argue that such a division is necessary for moral knowledge to be possible, especially in radically different circumstances. I argue that it is not clear that such a difference is an important difference. It is not clear how the distinction between reasons and types of reasons should be drawn. They continue by arguing that only generalism can account for how we can learn from radically different situations. I do not find that claim plausible.

4.1 Moral Knowledge Gives Default Moral Principles

McKeever and Ridge\(^38\) argue that the possibility of moral knowledge makes it possible to extract moral principles, at least of a limited kind. Knowledge that an action is wrong is based on moral reasons, which are features. They assume that we can describe moral situations in a way that can mediate moral knowledge. Since all descriptions are of a limited length, a full account demands that all relevant features (including disablers/enablers and not only the reasons) are expressed. This is a rational commitment in the claim to moral knowledge.

We can take one particular instance of moral knowledge, for instance a case where the killing of a rational agent is wrong. From this, we can “extract” a “default principle” of the following kind:

“(K) For all actions (x): If

(a) x is an instance of killing 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 reason to 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 an instance of killing a rational agent.”\(^39\)

\(^38\) (2006, chapter 6)
\(^39\) (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 118) I have somewhat changed the formatting of this text to make it easier to read.
A very interesting feature with this kind of principle is that it is compatible with holism about reason. It says that there are no disablers (in b) and that no counter reasons weigh more (in c). In that way, it shows respect to the context, a kind of respect that particularists (and most explicit Dancy) accuse generalism to overlook.

In their argument for specified principles, they use the same kind of starting point. They argue that there are only a limited number of possible reasons and enablers/defeatrs, which makes it possible to specify the moral principle more than as just a default principle. That would mean spelling out all possible disablers and enablers, instead of quantifying over them as in default principles. This gives a moral principle with a fully specified antecedent, what I call specified moral principles.

Since we can have moral knowledge through (finite) descriptions, everything relevant could be assumed to be in the description. However, this is not the case, because we rely a lot on the describer who maybe not gives a full description (if that at all is possible). Our actual descriptions are dependent on many things that are presupposed without saying.

### 4.1.1 The Connection between Moral Knowledge and Principles

What is the nature of this step from a specific piece of moral knowledge to a principle, according to McKeever and Ridge? Unfortunately, they use different words in different places for that relation. They ask, “whether our moral knowledge in a given case can be captured in a principle,” they want to build implicit rational commitments into a moral principle and they say that they “can extract a default principle.” Build, capture, extract could be quite different things. To build a moral principle implies that there is not any moral principle preceding the case, it is built afterwards. To capture the moral knowledge in a moral principle sounds more like there is a principle that we ensnare with a philosophical net. To extract a moral principle implies that the moral principle is there all time and does important job behind the specific piece of knowledge, but that it is hard to see. McKeever and Ridge seem to favour the word presupposes, like in there own summary of their reasoning when they say that moral knowledge in a given case “suffice to ensure the availability of a suitably moral principle [...] So moral judgement, insofar as it constitutes knowledge, does presuppose the availability of a suitable stock of moral principles.” Thus, I will assume that moral knowledge presupposes moral principles, which can be extracted from that knowledge.

### 4.2 Objections against that Moral Knowledge Gives Moral Principles

I will here give some short objections against the idea that we can come to moral principles from moral knowledge. The first objection is that there is no reason to assume that there are moral principles just

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40 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 118) my italics
41 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 119) my italics
42 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 121)
because we can reformulate moral descriptions to the form of a satisfied moral principle. The second objection is that we do not get enough guidance from our moral principles. The next two objections claim that moral vision is more basic epistemologically than moral principles and the last objection is that generalism is not a genuine holistic theory.

4.2.1 Objection: Against Underlying Principles and Assumptions

McKeever and Ridge want to go from a case where we have moral knowledge to a principle that underlies this specific piece of knowledge. When we have knowledge about a case, we know the reasons for the moral valence and we know how different enablers/disablers work in this case. This makes it possible to extract (or construct) a default moral principle. But that we can rewrite one kind of a statement to another does not imply that the other kind is more basic or real than the first. We need not assume that every true moral statement is an instantiation of a moral principle.

4.2.2 Objection: Principles Give Precedence to Moral Vision

The proposed way that extracts moral principles assumes that there is some other way to come to know the truth than through moral principles. The starting point is a piece of moral knowledge. If moral principles were the only way to get moral knowledge, then we could not have any examples (or descriptions) from which we could start extracting the moral principles.

At least this would be the case if they argue that all moral agents must explicitly know their moral principles. The generalists must instead assume that the moral principles only are known implicitly by the agents. We have implicit knowledge in many areas, but I do not really know what this means. Do we for instance have implicit knowledge about natural laws that we express through our behaviour? Why should we formulate the principles? There are possibilities, and questions, here for generalists.

4.2.3 Objection: We Cannot Trust Moral Principles

It is always possible that the moral principles do not state all the facts or that a principle must be revised for some reason that was not under consideration when the principle was formulated. Two main errors can be done. First, that there might be other reasons why the action is not wrong, reasons that perhaps are not in our system of principles. Second, there might be enablers or disablers that were overlooked when the principle was constructed (this does not apply to default principles).

In any case, it is easy to meet both of these objections, the first by arguing that this new (contradicting) reason also must have a moral principle behind itself or that constitutes the reason. The new reason is governed by a principle, but the principle has not been formulated yet. The second objection is even easier to deal with; it is just to expand the moral principle so the newly discovered enabler is mentioned in the principle.
Nevertheless, even though it is simple, it means that in complex and hard cases we must be open for the possibility that our moral principles do not guide us correctly. According to McKeever and Ridge, as Daniel Star (2007) remarks, “agents should be open to revising principles in the light of new considerations”. In their own words: “Our sense of what principles are correct must be shaped by our judgements in particular cases, and new experience may prompt revision of received principles.”

Perhaps we could trust moral principles in simple cases. However, in simple cases, we most often do not need moral guidance, often it is obvious what we should do without any reasoning. If we need them anytime it would be in complex and hard cases, but then we have to be open to the possibility that they may lead us wrong.

One possible proposal that makes moral principles useful in practice is that we could use our principles without any doubt in complex cases, when we do not have reason to believe that our principles lead us wrong. On what ground could we conclude that our moral principles misguide us?

One solution is that we apprehend that the verdict our current principles give is wrong. It could not be any other moral principles that say that it is the wrong answer, because then we would just have a conflict between principles and between different existing reasons. The particularistic answer is that even if we accept moral principles, we still have to use our moral vision when we should revise and apply some of our moral principles.

Star (2007) seems to assume that the possible revision of moral principles is itself guided by (higher-level) principles. I do not know how such higher-level principles would look like, but it feels like the problem remains, it has just transcended to a higher level. To create another principle that says when we could trust the first principle is not a final solution to the problem.

### 4.3 Moral Competence

Moral competence is an important phenomenon in the debate because its link to moral knowledge. By appeal to the idea of the fully (or ideal) morally competent person Kihlbom defends the objectivity of moral facts: “Moral facts are [...] objective in virtue of being such as they would elicit certain responses from morally competent persons in ideal circumstances.”

He also uses the phenomenology of the fully competent to distinguish between moral reasons and other features of the situation (which may be morally relevant (as enablers or intensifiers) or not). His suggestion is that: “a non-moral feature constitutes a moral reason only if it is such as it would elicit a certain response among morally competent persons in ideal situations. Enabling conditions lacks this phenomenological quality.”

I will argue that the idea of a fully competent person is vague and that we should not trust that concept delivering the goods. I will not try to elaborate an alternative suggestion how this important separation could be drawn.

43 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 158)
44 (Kihlbom 2002, p. 67)
45 (Kihlbom 2002, p. 67)
McKeever and Ridge give an account of how a person can assess the strength over a possible vast number of reasons by separating between types and tokens of reasons. They assume that a practically wise knows all the types of reasons. I will argue that moral competence does not rest on a distinction between tokens and types. As support for this I will mention that there are approaches to linguistic competence that do not presuppose this kind of competence is essentially rule-governed. Finally in this section I will look at McKeever and Ridge's "argument from scope". We can learn from strange new cases, and that we can have knowledge about these unfamiliar situations. McKeever and Ridge says that this is best explained by generalism, but the real question is how this new knowledge is to be explained. Here generalism and particularism give different answers, but these differences are the same as in ordinary cases. Ordinary cases are better understood and we should discuss these first.

### 4.3.1 The Fully Competent and the Competent

What is a (morally) competent person (McKeever and Ridge uses the phrase practically wise)? Webster of the year 1913 has the following to say:

“1. Answering to all requirements; adequate; sufficient; suitable; capable; legally qualified; fit.”

A morally competent person answers to all the requirements in the moral field, she is capable of making the right choices and make moral judgements that others should meet with respect. It is useful to distinguish between the competent and incompetent in many circumstances, and between persons that are more and less competent in an area. Kihlbom wants to put an ideal for our moral convictions, a person that is infallible in ideal situations: the fully morally competent person. To say that someone is ideally competent could be a way to say that no one can be more competent than this person is, or perhaps that he cannot become more competent. I will argue that the idea that there could be a fully competent person is too vague to be useful in moral philosophy, and it seems to depend on moral objectivity and can thus not support it. That it is vague can be seen from a parallel with philosophical competence. Some people think that Socrates is the greatest philosophical genius through all times. This does not mean that they think that he knew the true answer to every philosophical question. Perhaps he did not even have the language to formulate all philosophical questions. He could also have been mistaken on some points in his philosophy. We know what it means to be competent in philosophy (i.e. you have a masters degree) or very competent (a Ph.D.-degree). However, we do not know what it would be like to be more philosophically competent than the greatest genius there has been (or if Socrates really was ideally philosophically competent). Another example could be taken from martial arts; we could imagine three fighters with different strengths and weaknesses. The first fighter is tall, which give her a reach advantage but it can expose her body in some situations. The other two have different strength and weaknesses to the effect that fighter number one beats fighter number two, who beats the third fighter. However, assume that "because the first fighter is tall, the third fighter succeeds

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46 (1913 Webster)

21(39)
with her special moves and always wins when she meets the first fighter. This seems to me a definitely possible scenario (perhaps it is a real example).

To assume that there can be an ideally competent person (without saying much more about his abilities) in one area is not sufficient to guarantee objective truth. If we just postulate the existence of a fully competent ideal, that then that seems ad hoc and can not in itself support objectivity. It is better and more honest to discuss objectivity directly, which is the interesting question. The idea of a fully morally competent person is far from reality. We do not know what such an ideal would look like, or what judgements she would give in particular situations. We should not place much importance on such an uncertain idea as the morally ideally competent in our reasoning and I will not use it from here on. This means that we cannot accept Kihlbom's suggested way of separating between moral reasons and other factors, or establish moral objectivity. Nevertheless, it is still possible to assume that there is a difference between moral reasons and other factors and that the moral is objective, even if we cannot account for it in detail.

Our intuitions seem to be more useful in more ordinary and realistic circumstances, like the question what it means to be practical wise. An investigation of that idea could perhaps give some support to either particularism or generalism.

### 4.3.2 The Practically Wise

McKeever and Ridge talk about the practically wise person who is morally competent (but not infallible as the fully competent). Their understanding of what such a person must know is fundamental for their argument for generalism. Given holism, the practically wise person must have at least three abilities.

First, she must be able to identify which features that can be reasons in the situation. Then she must be able to identify the relevant enablers and defeaters for every reason and see if they are present. Finally, she must be able to recognize what she has the most reason to do. According to McKeever and Ridge, this presupposes that the practically wise person must already know in advance which features that can function as reasons or as enablers/disablers for present reasons:

“The best explanation of how a person of practical wisdom can reliably know what there is most reason to do will invoke the idea that she already knows all of the kinds of considerations which can function as reasons, defeaters, enablers, intensifiers, and diminishers and indeed understand how they interact. Such knowledge is essential if the person of practical wisdom is to know what to look for.”

This threatens particularism because it implies that all of morality is codifiable in a manageable (finite) set of considerations that can be reasons. Any practical wise could enumerate all possible reasons for all possible situations. This would be a very big step towards generalism, and codification of morality. However, there are so many features that might be reasons, how could generalism provide a model that

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47 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 142)
explains that? McKeever and Ridge argue that the key lies in that a practical wise knows all the \textit{types} of reasons, and that this is necessary to be able to account for moral knowledge at all.

\subsection*{4.3.3 Types and Tokens of Reasons}

McKeever and Ridge draw a distinction between \textit{types} and \textit{tokens of reasons}. Their argument is that there must be a manageable number of types of reasons; otherwise, it would be impossible to reach practical knowledge. This is because that “the person of practical wisdom already knows and indeed can articulate all of the potential reasons, defeaters, etc. which might be in play.”\textsuperscript{48} She must know these \textit{types of reasons} because she has to know that no stronger tokens of other, counteracting types of reason is present in a situation. This is only possible if it is a limited and manageable number of types of reasons, according to McKeever and Ridge. As an example they take that “[a] pilot can know that he has good reasons not to crack jokes about engine failure over the intercom because this is likely to cause distress to passengers.”\textsuperscript{49} The tokens are every one of the passengers that becomes distressed by the joke; the type is something like “distresses passengers”. Even though there is (or could be) a vast number of tokens of one type, McKeever and Ridge claim that it is possible to assess the strength of a type of reason. It is not possible to quantify over types of reasons in the same way. If there is a manageable set of types of reasons then it seems relatively easy to construct moral principles from these types of reasons.

\subsection*{4.3.4 The Difference and Similarity between Tokens and Types}

The distinction between types and tokens plays a very important role for McKeever and Ridge's epistemology:

“With a huge number of tokens of the same type we can at least quantify over those tokens and have some rough sense how strong those reasons are. On the other hand, if there were a huge number of radically different types of reasons it is much harder to see how we could get a sense of the overall balance of reasons.”\textsuperscript{50}

One striking thing here is that they talk about radically different types but not of radically different tokens. However, different types of reasons can have as much (or as little) in common as different tokens of one type. It might seem strange to claim that two reasons (tokens) of the same type can be radically different. It would be plain self-contradictory if "radically different" means something like “not of the same type”, but it is more reasonable to see the tokens of a type as being connected by family resemblances. Then it could be possible that two tokens (of the same type) are radically different regarding all features, but that there is a network of family resemblances that tie these tokens together.

\textsuperscript{48} (McKeever and Ridge 2006, 142)
\textsuperscript{49} (McKeever and Ridge 2006, 143)
\textsuperscript{50} (McKeever and Ridge 2006, 143)
They may be connected through a number of intermediate tokens where each token in these intermediate steps bears some important resemblance with its closest's neighbours (in some feature), but it is not guaranteed that there is one single feature that is relevantly similar in all tokens of a type. The similarity may be different kinds between different tokens. That two tokens belong to the same type still leaves the possibility that these two tokens are radically different on all features. Moreover, they may be more similar to tokens belonging to other types, at least in many respects. We must thus be able to make overall assessment about radically different elements.

Could McKeever and Ridge's argument be that we cannot make an assessment if there are a vast (or infinite) number of elements? No, because they accept that we can assess the strength of infinite number of reasons, that all are of the same type. If there is something problematic in the practical wise's abilities then it is in this step. To divide the infinite many reasons into a few smaller (and more manageable) categories would not help us with the alleged impossibility to assess a potentially infinite number of reasons. That is because if we split an infinite number into a finite number of groups, each group has an infinite number of elements. We always have the problem of quantifying over, or being able to assess the elements of an infinite large group.\(^{51}\) I have not given a solution how we should explain that the practical wise can recognize infinite many reasons, but I have just assumed that it is possible (without the help of moral principles). This task belongs to philosophy of language, and I will mention some more on this problem later on.

We have investigated two facts about reasons, that they can be radically different from each other and that there could be a vast number of them. These facts do not show that we must assess their strength by referring to types of reasons. Could it instead be something in the nature of tokens and types that makes it possible to assess the overall strength of types of reasons and not of reasons (and I will not repeat my objection in the last section, which I think is strong enough to silence this critique)?

Reasons and types of reasons are similar in nature, which can be seen when we reflect on the possibility to make a higher “type of types”, and regard the ordinary types as tokens. Then the same problem appears at the level of types (now seen as tokens of the higher order types). An example can perhaps illustrate this point, which can be presented as this:

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\(^{51}\) Appealing to mathematics in morality (as I just did) is often just a cheap trick. In all realistic examples I can think of it seems to be more manageable to split all the reasons in types of reasons. Still I want to use the appeal to mathematics to point at a problem area (for those who think that this kind of arguments is sound).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Token (instantiation of a type)</th>
<th>Type of reason</th>
<th>Type of type of reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>individual D1’s distress</td>
<td>An individual's distress</td>
<td>Related to an individual's mood or Type of reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individual D2’s distress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individual D3’s distress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual E1’s enjoyment</td>
<td>An individual's enjoyment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since it seems possible to make further divisions, so that the types (of reasons) becomes tokens of a super ordinate type, it seems less plausible to say that there is some difference between assessing tokens and type just because they are tokens and types. There is not a fundamental difference in nature between tokens and types, because types can be seen as token as well. It will not happen anything fundamentally new if we introduce types of reasons, it does not matter much if there are one, two or three levels. We still have the same number of reasons to gain knowledge about. It might be very practical to divide the reasons into different types, for instance in pro and contra reasons, or family related and impersonal reasons. Nevertheless, this does not show that types of reasons are more basic to morality than the reasons themselves.

Another possible threat is that the division I give above seems arbitrary. This is a point the generalist might expand on later; here we may simply assume that there is a true division. One threat is that such a division could be ad hoc, and not an argument in favour of generalism.

### 4.3.5 Moral Competence Presupposes Nothing

Particularism needs an account of how we can be able to be sensitive to a vast number of reason, and I will examine this a bit further. Kihlbom says “To be morally competent is to master moral concepts, to be able to correctly apply moral concepts”\(^52\) and Dancy that “what one knows when one knows the practical purport of a concept; one becomes familiar with its practical grammar”\(^53\). A morally competent person is a person that correctly (but not necessarily flawless) can apply moral concepts (like right and wrong). Mastery of a moral concept is probably similar to mastery of other concepts\(^54\). Is it possible to explain concept-mastery without referring to principles? Kihlbom says that: “[t]he

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52  (Kihlbom 2002, p. 116)  
53  (Dancy, 2005)  
54  I accept this characterisation in this essay, but there is something very different between practical concepts and other concepts. When we have moral doubt, and examine moral reasons for and against an action we seem to be doing something that is different than when we are applying other concepts. I am not going to investigate this difference here.
mastering of a concept manifests itself in our actions rather than preceding them.”\textsuperscript{55} This explanation sounds influenced by Wittgenstein who says that, for a large group of words, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language."\textsuperscript{56} With such an explanation of meaning and understanding there is no need to suppose that there are any reasons, principles or any understanding that necessarily precedes the application. (Nevertheless, according to this view it would be wrong to say that it just happens to be right.) It is an objection of the whole attempt to analyse meaning into conditions for application. When asking, “What does it mean to know what the right action is?” it can be informative to see what Wittgenstein says about knowing what a game is:

“\textbf{75.} What does it mean to know what a game is? What does it mean, to know it and not be able to say it? Is this knowledge somehow equivalent to an unformulated definition? So that if it were formulated I should be able to recognize it as the expression of my knowledge? Isn't my knowledge, my concept of a game, completely expressed in the explanations that I could give? That is, in my describing examples of various kinds of game; shewing how all sorts of other games can be constructed on the analogy of these; saying that I should scarcely include this or this among games; and so on.”\textsuperscript{57}

In the previous section I quoted McKeever and Ridge that said that the morally competent (or practical wise person) that postulated that the morally competent must already know all kind of considerations that can be reasons, enablers and defeaters. As we have seen, particularists should be inclined to deny that. An art critic (or a jazz connoisseur, or a person who can use the word "game") could be a good comparison to a practically wise. To say that an art critic already knows (in an expressible way) all the kinds of considerations, which can function as reasons for a painting to be a good painting, is false. In addition, even if the practical wise in some sense already knows which considerations that be reasons, this does not imply that it is an possible task to enumerate them. There are many skills, like the ability to appreciate music and poetry, that are not codifiable by principles; at least not by principles that are so simple that we easily could understand (and be guided by) them, but it is correct to talk about competence anyway. If we would deny this, and say that everything that exists is guided by principles, then of course there would be some kind of moral principles. However, even if this is were the case, it does not imply the kind of principles we are discussing here. Consider, for example, an artificial neural network that is trained to recognize faces. It has not learned this by being exposed to rules, just to examples. Its competence is not straightforward codifiable in rules, but it is always possible to rewrite its competence with statistical analysis. However, this yields principles that do not resemble human principles.

The view that moral principles have very little to do with moral competence in a judgement situation also receives support from cognitive science and the prototype theory. The prototype theory asserts that

\textsuperscript{55} (Kihlbom 2002, p. 91)
\textsuperscript{56} (Wittgenstein, § 43)
\textsuperscript{57} (Wittgenstein, § 75)
our concept-application is done on basis of stored prototypes, which somehow resemble the stimuli. The resemblance can be based on many different features, like Wittgenstein's famous family resemblance. A philosophical theory of language needs more that just the concept of family resemblance, but I think that it is a essential part of such a theory. I will examine another argument from modern psychology that supports this conclusion, a theory that is called social intuitionism.

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58 If we should have a theory of language in a straight-forward way, Wittgenstein opposed that idea. Wittgenstein also carefully avoided the moral field.
5 Social Intuitionism as a Threat against Moral Theory

Social intuitionism is a theory about how moral judgements are formed. According to it, moral reasoning plays only an indirect role in moral guidance. McKeever and Ridge see a threat against generalism from social intuitionism and they try to defend it by arguing that moral principles play an indirect role in the process, by shaping the agents moral concepts and moral competence. I argue that the threat that McKeever and Ridge see from social intuitionism against generalism is an argument against particularism as well. Even if it could not be met, it would not settle the debate in favour of particularism (or at least be a very thin and double-edged support). However, McKeever and Ridge give a solution that is available for particularists as well.

5.1 Social Intuitionism

Haidt\(^59\) develops a social intuitionist approach and defends it with empirical evidence against more rationalistic theories. In short, the model says, "moral judgement is caused by quick moral intuitions, and is followed (when needed) by slow, ex-post facto moral reasoning."\(^60\) This is the reverse of the "traditional" picture, where we first have moral reasoning that results in a judgement. These "quick moral intuitions" are not very rational, instead Haidt gives two major types of motives that govern them. The first is relatedness motives, which "includes concerns about impression management and smooth interaction with other people."\(^62\) The second is coherence motives, which "includes a variety of defensive mechanisms triggered by cognitive dissonance and threats to the validity of one's cultural worldview."\(^63\)

This social intuitionism model gives no role for moral reasoning (and moral principles) to intervene in real time when we make decisions or act. In actual moral reasoning moral principles are not explicitly used. We do not come to moral judgements from a deductive process with moral principles and facts (which is a common way to think about moral knowledge, a way that separates "a posteriori knowledge of the morally relevant contingent facts and our presumably a priori knowledge of a suitable and necessarily true moral principle,"\(^64\) and which is a way that McKeever and Ridge suppose support the generalist position.) Haidt writes that "we should instead look for the roots of human intelligence, rationality, and virtue in what the mind does best: perception, intuition, and other mental operations that are quick, effortless, and generally quite accurate."\(^65\) This sounds like a particularist insistence that

\(^{59}\) (Haidt 2000)
\(^{60}\) (Haidt 2000, p. 5)
\(^{61}\) Hume, the emotivists and many others have not accepted this "traditional" view, but I think that it has been (and still is) dominating the scene. It seems to be a natural position for moral realists. Therefor I will accept the label traditional.
\(^{62}\) (Haidt 2000, p. 11)
\(^{63}\) (Haidt 2000, p. 11)
\(^{64}\) (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 159)
\(^{65}\) (Haidt 2000, p. 11-12)
moral vision does not have much to do with deduced moral judgements. If this is correct, then McKeever and Ridge's claim that “the best explanation of practical wisdom invokes principles”\(^\text{66}\) does not seem likely (which is one of their three arguments in favour of generalism). I will discuss this threat against generalism a bit more, before looking at McKeever and Ridge's proposed solution.

### 5.1.1 Social Intuitionism and the Threat against Moral Theory

Haidt's social intuitionism gives empirical evidence that can threaten a traditional view on action guidance. The new view is that moral reasoning has very little to do with the rational reasoning in an actual situation; other (irrational) reasons are much more influential on action. Moral principles (and moral reasons) do not have an important direct role in action guiding. However, McKeever and Ridge want to allow for a different role for moral principles in human action. In their words:

> “we often articulate moral rules only when pressed by others to defend our actions. However, this is compatible with those principles then having a life of their own. For if the agent is being sincere then she really does endorse the principle she has articulated, and she may well internalize that principle. That principle, in turn, may color the agent's perception of other novel cases in unanticipated ways.”\(^\text{67}\)

The new role for principles is thus not to explicitly (“articulated”) guide in the situation the agent stands before, since that moral response is already done when the search for justification starts (and moral principles are applied). Instead the role McKeever and Ridge propose for moral principles is in the shaping her concepts, in a way that can alter her future responses.

As we saw above, the social intuitionist theory seems to go well in line with particularism, especially in that it stresses the primacy of the spontaneous response over moral reasoning, which is done afterwards. However, social intuitionism threatens particularism as much as it threatens moral principles. The particularist relies very much on the notion of reason. The reasons the particularist underlines, the reasons why an action is wrong, seem to have little to do with the reasons from which people actually acts. Moral reasons simply do not have much to do with actual moral actions and decisions, moral reasons appear afterwards. The same answer that the generalist gave above, is available to particularists as well. The reasons are not interesting when investigating action and moral vision, but only in a later step. Reasons can change the agents concepts and thereby her future action. In addition, I might add, they change her moral vision.

\(^{66}\) (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 158)

\(^{67}\) (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 221)
5.1.2 Action-guiding and Changing the Person

I accept the response to the social intuitionist's threat given by McKeever and Ridge in the previous section. Social intuitionism does not show that rational moral action guidance is impossible, but that the moral reasoning influence our moral responses indirectly, through forming our dispositions. This sounds like the view Winch (who attributes it to Sartre) expresses: “when I come to deliberate – to consider reasons for and against doing something – 'les jeux sont faits' ('the chips are down').”\textsuperscript{68} To understand a man's moral one must know what actions she chooses from reasons, and "what he considers the alternatives to be and [---] what are the reasons he considers it relevant to deploy in deciding between them."\textsuperscript{69}

Moral reasoning and moral guidance through principles changes the person so she sees similar situations in a new, and hopefully better, way. However, there may be many ways to make such a change in the person's moral concepts, and which way is the best probably depends on the person and the situation. To use moral principles could perhaps be especially useful to come to terms with special problems like special pleading (which I discuss in a later chapter). However, conceptual changes can be done with other tools as well; to use moral principle is just one of many tools. Other tools involve the use of metaphors, narratives, literature, group processes and more. These tools are available to both generalists and particularists, but it seems like particularists stress them more (on behalf of moral principles).

5.1.1 Moral Competence Supports Particularism

In the preceding section, I have tried to establish a view according to which moral competence is best characterized without reference to full (or ideal) moral competence. I accepted the view that moral competence is the mastery of moral concepts and that it is not necessary to postulate that the morally competent knows about any reasons, or that the competence presumes the appreciation of moral grounding reasons (of a certain articulated kind). Most reasonable accounts of concept-competence do not involve rules or principles, and this view of moral competence thus fits better with particularism.

\textsuperscript{68} (Winch 1972b, p. 178)
\textsuperscript{69} (Winch 1972b, p. 178)
6 A Moral Guidance Argument against Particularism: the Framing Effect

The framing problem is that our moral responses seem to vary depending on how the situation is described, and which words are used. It is often assumed that this must be some kind of error in our moral intuitions. McKeever and Ridge propose that generalism can solve these kinds of problems with moral framing. I will argue that their kind of solution is in effect available to the particularists as well. However, I will also argue that the framing problem is not that serious (perhaps it would be better to call it the framing effect instead).

6.1 Framing and Principled Guidance

In a psychological experiment, the subjects were presented with two scenarios how to combat an epidemic that is expected to kill six hundred people:

“If program A is adopted, two hundred people will be saved. If program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that six hundred people will be saved, and a two-thirds probability that no people will be saved. [...]"

If program C is adopted, four hundred people will die. If program D is adopted, there is a one-third probability that nobody will die and a two-thirds probability that six hundred will die.”

In the experiment, people were asked to make two choices, one between A and B and a second between C and D. Most people choose A and D, even though the number of expected survivals are the same in A and C, and in B and D. When the situation is described in terms of lives saved (A and B) people play safe. When the situation is described in terms of lives lost (like in C and D), people tend to be more willing to take a chance (or risk). There are similar effects regarding other ways of framing situation, for instance the difference between killing and letting die. This can seem inconsistent, and McKeever and Ridge propose that principles can help us judge cases consistent:

“A number of philosophical arguments and thought experiments support the conclusion that the distinction between killing and letting die either has no weight in itself or at best has far less moral weight than is often assumed [...] Suppose we ultimately decide that most people tend not to care nearly enough about letting people die as opposed to killing. Perhaps we could offset this tendency with principles couched in terms that prospect theory predicts

70 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 212)
would lead people to attach greater weight to lives lost due to decisions to let people die”71

McKeever and Ridge thus say that in moral reasoning we can come to terms with erroneous framing with better-framed moral principles. This might be a problem for those particularists who are unwilling to use moral principles in their thinking.

6.2 The Framing and Particularistic Responses

The problem is that people tend to do systematic mistakes in the same way because of the terms that are used to describe the problem. McKeever and Ridge argues that we have to use moral principles to help people to get closer to the truth in such a case, and that particularists have a problem here. There is a problem, but there are several different possibilities to deal with it.

First, a particularist could accept the framing effect and still claim that our intuitive judgements are correct. It is possible to deny that we do (or even can do) mistakes in a systematic way that seems to be presupposed in the framing effect. Particularists could argue that there is an important distinction between killing and letting die, or that the way we see the situation is right, even though philosophers (and psychologists) points to the framing effect regarding lives saved/lost. Something in the philosophical reasoning is erroneous, and with the particularist standpoint in mind, it seems quite likely that particularists would reject appeals to consistency as too strict.

Another way could be to use thick moral principles, which Kihlombo's version of particularism allows. One thick moral principle could be that it is murder to deliberately take someone's life. Using this approach, and accepting that the distinction between killing and letting die is ordinary given too much weight, one could argue for a principle that says that allowing someone to die is murder. The particularist could not say that murdering someone is always wrong, that is something that is to be perceived in the single case. This is one way to reframe the problem.

A third way to deal with the conclusion is that by pointing to an eventual problem in cases of this kind, one might do better judgements. If the person realizes that there is a danger in framing a situation in certain terms, she might come to use others. For instance, the person might come too see that it is often useful to reformulate moral problems by using “killing” instead of “letting die”. To realize that is not to accept a moral principle.

These two last suggestions, is to accept that there may be a better description of the situation. However, it sounds very possible to distinguish good from bad descriptions without using moral principles (if particularism is true). Perhaps there is often a mistake to use “letting die” and we should use “killing” instead, but this is not anything that we need to refer to a moral principle to say. We need to develop a competence and sensitivity as to when it is correct to use one term rather than the other.

The framing effect thus does not constitute a much harder problem for the particularist than for the

71 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 213)
generalist. Nevertheless, it could be a very important problem for both of them!
7 Another Moral Guidance Argument against Particularism: Special Pleading

Special pleading is when an agent lets self-interest influence the judgements or decisions in a way that should not be done. I will use the term to refer to something that is unconscious to the agent. To act in self-interest is given a wide meaning here; it may be in the interest of the agent's family or friends. McKeever and Ridge claim that adopting moral principles is a good way to come to terms with this problem. I will show that it is not because moral principles are often hard to apply and often gives reason to both sides of the argument. Then the threat from special pleading is once again a pressing issue, even with moral principles. Actually, if moral principles would counteract special pleading in the way that McKeever and Ridge claim, then this leads to serious problems for generalism. I shortly mention how particularism could meet the threat; one way would be to use moral principles as a practical tool. We have to accept that special pleading is a problem in morals, and we do not have a foolproof method of dealing with it.

7.1 Moral Principles and Special Pleading

McKeever and Ridge think that moral principles provide a very good way to deal with special pleading, because when someone has adopted a principle she will become less likely to use rationalization in that way. Adopting a principle raises the cost for changing the course of action (in a way that contradicts the principle) for any reason, including special pleading reasons. McKeever and Ridge express this rising of the ante as this:

“Adopting a principle does produce new symbolic values and thereby makes it less likely that the agent will shift her principle in light of the specific features of the case.”

For this to work, it must be easy to see what the principles require. McKeever and Ridge claim that it is “often [...] extremely clear what one's initial principles require in the case at hand.” This is wrong for all reasonably complicated principled moral systems. If we had one monistic principle that was easy to apply, then special pleading would be a lesser problem for adherents of that moral system. The major monistic theory is utilitarianism, but it is very hard to determine which action utilitarianism demands. It

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72 The same (or a similar) sort of problem might arise where ever the agent is inclined to do something, that is not the right thing to do. But this would not count as special pleading, and if there is an important difference here I would like to discuss only special pleading here.
73 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 206)
74 I think the spirit of McKeever and Ridge's solution is naïve constructivism, but I am not going to elaborate that criticism here.
75 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 209)
is almost certain that all alternatives have utility in their favour, which necessitates a deliberation process that once again opens up for special pleading. If on the other hand we are considering a pluralistic theory then each alternative will probably have something in its favour (at least in some, hard cases). Both with monism and pluralism the moral principle(s) give some weight to both sides. That means that the extra, symbolic weight is added to all alternatives, and the extra weight from the moral principle does not help very much. The extra weight on each side is probably about equal in hard cases, since many hard cases are characterised by a “close run” with about equal weight on both sides. Let us take an example with pluralism. Assume that it is wrong of me to lie in a particular situation. And assume that I am a victim of special pleading, so I lie anyway and say and think that the reason I should lie is that it would hurt the other person’s feelings to do otherwise (which is a reason, but not sufficiently strong). If I have explicitly adopted a moral principle that lying is wrong this could make me tell the truth anyway. However, if I also have adopted a principle that I should not hurt others’ feeling my principles does not clearly tell me what to do, and I have to weigh the principles against each other. In this weighing process, special pleading is once again a threat.

It seems plausible that there is a principle in the (pluralistic) moral system that I should look after my self-interest (or family, which can be object of special pleading as well). Then there is always a principle that pulls in the same direction as special pleading. This means that it is always some extra weight on that side, and the problem with special pleading is back.

I said, “in most interesting moral problems“we are not helped very much by moral principles when it comes to dealing with special pleading. However, perhaps there are some everyday cases where there is a risk of special pleading that moral principles might correct. McKeever and Ridge take the example with smoking (a non-moral case, I suppose): it can be rational for a smoker to adopt a principle not to smoke. They say, “someone who has adopted a moral principle forbidding a certain sort of action is less likely to rationalize such an action when faced with temptation than someone who is unprincipled.”76 In ordinary circumstances, I often adopt a principle like “I should not play computer games” or “I should only eat candy on Saturdays”. I find such principles useful, as I do not have to stop and reflect in those situations. They help me raise the ante and I think I live a better life because otherwise, I would use special pleading (or some other form of bias as biased toward the present, sometimes I start to eat candy on a Wednesday and soon I eat candy all week long). Principles help me with easy everyday cases.

Last, I want to mention a potential problem with moral principles. Assume that we have a moral principle that counteracts self-interest in situations when a person considers lying. The principle then produces "new symbolic value" in favour of truth telling. However, imagine that we have a person that is not a victim of self-pleading (or at least to a much smaller degree than ordinary people are). She is hiding refugees from the military. Assume that the military come to her house, and she judges that she should lie. This judgement includes a correct consideration for her self-interest. Then she comes to think about this truth-telling principle (which is spread in society and adopted because ordinary people

76 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 203)
need to counteract their inclination to take to much consideration to their own interest). With this "new symbolic value", the principle adds it could be that the result will be that she should tell the truth, even though that her first judgement was the correct one. The problem is that moral principles should be valid for all, and not just persons that have a problem in some circumstances. (I think this problem is because McKeever and Ridge talk about "new symbolic value" on a psychological level, which is hard to reconcile with their truth-making function.)

### 7.2 Particularism and Special Pleading

McKeever and Ridge first describe principles as a remedy to special pleading in different terms:

> “By adopting [...] a principle which forbids lying I come to see my lying in a new light. For in that case, in addition to the particular wrong of lying to someone my lying will now constitute my abandonment of an ideal of honesty which I presumably value (why else did I adopt the principle?).”77

A particularist could use this, at least if she accepts thick moral principles. The facts in this case are “I am lying” and “I become dishonest by not telling the truth” (which is a kind of thick moral principle). There are two facts in this situation that are morally relevant, or so could a particularist argue.

In fact, what McKeever and Ridge describe is very close to some kind of virtue ethics, which (here) emphasizes the virtue of honesty. Kihlbom advocates a particularistic virtue theory, which seems to be a common position. (I will not defend some kind of virtue ethic here, but it is a common particularistic position and not in opposition to particularism.)

If one accepts the use of the fully competent ideal (or a kind of ideal observer), then it could be easier to come to terms with the special pleading. The question then becomes “what should the fully competent do in this situation”, not “what should I do in this situation”. The first question could lead to framing the question in terms like “it is not my, but the agent's interest that are tempting”, which perhaps could lead to less special pleading. However, as I argued above, I do not think that it is good to put to much weight on the uncertain concept of full moral competence.

Dancy stresses that we should look at the situation one more time:

> “... the remedy for poor moral judgement is not a different style of moral judgement, principle-based judgement, but just better moral judgement. There is only one real way to stop oneself distorting things in one’s own favour, and that is to look again, as hard as one can, at the reasons present in the case, and see if really one is so different from others that what would be required of them is not required of oneself. This method is not infallible. I know; but then neither was the appeal to principle.”78

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77 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 205)
78 (Dancy 2005)
To “look again, as hard as one can” is Dancy’s (fallible) method against special pleading. McKeever and Ridge are sceptical about this: “For someone with flawed sensibility, looking harder at the reasons will often be of little help.” Looking harder can mean different things. If it means that the person repeats the same process but more careful, looking for what reasons there are and how strong they are, then it can help sometimes (actually quite often for me). However, there are other tools if one suspects special pleading, tools that a particularist could accept. When I am standing before a choice, I seldom respond with creating and adopting a principle. Instead, I discuss the issue with some close and honest friends, I try to imagine what the other involved feels and thinks, I reflect on any laws that may be against it, I try to compare it to other cases or I could ask what a saint would have done. One problem with this is that we should not be using these tools in every case; we should only use them when there is time and when there is a certain risk for special pleading. To use them all the time would probably be a waste of time and resources. Then we have the problem that special pleading is so hard to detect. Perhaps moral principles give us a better chance to counter special pleading without us having to discover it?

In the same way that it may not help a person with flawed sensibility to look harder, it will not help a person with flawed moral principles to apply them harder or more carefully. Neither method is infallible, but it seems clear that both camps must accept many of the same tools.

Maybe the whole problem is not about flawed vision. It could be that the person has sound moral vision, but that it is somewhat distorted by her self-interest. Somehow, it seems that just becoming aware of the problem is a big step towards the problems dissolution. Otherwise, I hope that there are other possibilities for this person.

My conclusion is that there are some uses for principles in practical problems, especially of the type that one should not smoke. If I have a special problem, perhaps I often lie, then it could be good to express that principle and think that through a few time. That way I change myself as a person and can respond better when faced with moral problems. These kinds of principles are practical tools that allow exceptions, they do not constitute truth and they may be different for different persons. However, they do not have anything directly to do with the nature of morality.

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79 (McKeever and Ridge 2006, p. 211)

37(39)
8 Conclusion

It is possible to construct default moral principles as McKeever and Ridge proposes. The question is why we should; constructed moral principles seem to be ad hoc to the moral judgement. There is a practical use for moral principles, to solve problems with special pleading (not so much in framing problems). It seems reasonable to say that guiding principles have an important role to play in our thinking. However, there is also use for empathy, imagination, sensitivity, conference with friends. Not to mention that there can be use for food, sleep and time (it is often a bad idea to make moral decisions hungry, tired and stressed). That moral principles are helpful (or sometimes even necessary for us to come to the right decision in a specific situation) does not mean that they are essential for moral truth.

In McKeever and Ridge's terms, we could accept moral principles as action guides, but deny them the status as standards. This is a generalistic position, but only in a limited way. If we accept moral principles, i.e. "you shall not lie", this often points to the truth in actual cases. It is often wrong to lie, and it is often wrong because it is lying. However, this does not warrant the claim that lying is wrong, universally. On the other hand, there seems to be something morally important about lying in general, for which the particularists should give a good explanation.

My conclusion is that we should not exhaust our resources in a search for moral principles.
9 Bibliography


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