What is the best argument for particularism? Does this argument show that particularism is true?

Introduction

In this essay, I describe what it means to be a “moral particularist” by explaining what “particularism” is, and looking at the claims it makes which give it force. I then assess what kind of thing it is, in order to be able to clarify whether it is capable of being “true”. I conclude that while it may be possible that particularism is true, we are not able to verify this one way or the other.

Throughout the essay, I use term “particularism” to mean “moral particularism”.

What is “Particularism”?

Particularism is best (and typically) described by contrasting it with what might be called a “generalist” approach.

A generalist says that it is possible to create a set containing one or more ethical principles which provide moral reasons in particular cases. Such principles may be regarded as self-evident, or may have been arrived at following examination of a number of past cases, using a process of reflection or Aristotelian *nous*.

An ethical principle gives a moral reason for acting (or not acting) in a certain way. For a monist, the set contains only one principle, and the “right” action in a situation is governed by reference to that principle: for example, a principle of “maximise welfare” would always
promote the action which would bring about the greatest increase of welfare.

For a pluralist, the set will contain more than one principle, and so there are likely to be situations where principles conflict: when this happens, some process of reconciliation may be required. For example, if two of my principles are “don't tell lies” and “don't cause pain”, then when my wife asks me if I like her hairstyle, I may have to decide which principle carries the most weight. What is important for the generalist though, is that each principle always carries the same type of “moral charge” (be it positive or negative), whatever the situation. “Pluralists generally assume that if a property tells in favour of an action being a duty, it will tell in favour of any action that bears it” (Dancy 1983:531), although it may be that a process of weighing up might cause one principle to take precedence over another. A significant implication of this is that if only one principle applies, then the “right” action is decided by reference to that one applicable principle.

By contrast, a particularist says that principles cannot be generalised in this way. While not denying that “don't cause pain” is a valid reason for lying to my wife about her haircut in that particular situation, it is wrong to say that “causing pain” must always be counted as a “moral minus”. In fact, says the particularist, “causing pain” need have no inherent moral dimension at all: while it may be that case that in certain particular instances “causing pain” is morally wrong, there may be some situations where it has no moral “charge”. Dancy gives an example of a girl treading on a sea urchin. The subsequent extracting of its spines caused pain, but that pain “is not a reason against the action ... It is not just that it is not
sufficient reason; it is not any reason at all.” (Hooker & Little 2000:147). It is also possible, says the particularist, to conceive of situations where “causing pain” might be morally required. If the only way I can make a maniac drop the gun with which he's about to shoot my daughter is by dropping a brick on his foot, then “causing pain” would be a morally good thing to do.

The particularist denies then, that reasons for actions in one particular case can be generalised into principles which are applicable in other cases. “Moral Particularism, at its most trenchant, is the claim that there are no defensible moral principles”. (Dancy:2005).

How strong is the case for Particularism?

When the batteries for my camera have been recharged, the light on the charger goes out and I can tell by this that they are ready to use. But if I had forgotten to plug it in, then the fact that the light on the charger is off is a reason why I should not consider them ready. If my friend lends me her car, and then asks whether I have her car-keys, I tell her, because the principle “be honest” gives me reason to do so. But if I know that my friend is drunk, then arguably I have a moral duty to be dishonest: “honesty” in this case carrying a negative moral charge. In these cases, what, on the face of it, may have appeared to be a reason for acting in a certain way, turns out to be a reason for not acting in that way.

By using examples such as these that the particularist gives weight to his assertion that
principles cannot be always be generalised as providing invariant reasons for a certain kind of action in all cases. We cannot say, ahead of time, that “the light is off” always means the batteries are charged; we cannot say that “being honest” always makes all courses of action morally better. To undermine the generalist's position, the particularist does not need to deny that some principles may give invariant reasons, only to show that not all of them do.

In response, it might be said that the examples given by a particularist under-describe the principles that are being appealed to. For any example that the particularist can construct that shows a principle does not generalise, it seems likely that the generalist could just refine the principle: “if the light is off and the charger is plugged in, then the batteries are charged”; “be honest when dealing with people who are fully rational”. But the particularist only needs to conjure up another example, and the principle needs yet more refinement. Even if the particularist's ingenuity fails him, the generalist who responds in this way will be left with a rather more complex and qualified set of principles than when he started off. If the generalist takes the position that there is a multitude of general moral principles, then it seems that the claim made by particularists is one which has force.

It is perhaps worth noting that the particularist's argument only works against the generalist who claims that there are more than one principles which serve as a guide to action. Suppose that I am a utilitarian who believes in the single principle “maximise welfare”. Or perhaps I am a Christian, living by the single principle “what would Jesus do?”. In either case, with only one principle, it seems that whatever the particulars of a situation, I can
decide upon the morally correct course of action by referring to that single principle. Here, the particularist claim can gain no traction, because by definition, it is not possible to provide an example where maximising welfare, or behaving unlike Jesus, would not be the “right” thing to do.

Dancy does provide a response to this challenge, albeit a brief one. He says that “there is more than one sort of relevant property, or more than one way in which features can get to be morally relevant. So a position with only one absolute principle is false” (Dancy:2005). Whether or not Dancy is correct in this assertion, what is significant is that particularism *per se* cannot be used to challenge a monist position.

The case for particularism then, seems fairly robust: it has an intuitive appeal (we can agree with many of the examples given of situations where what was once thought of as a “reason for action” applies in a different way), and it certainly forces the (non-monist) generalist on the defensive. But before deciding whether or not it is true, we need to be clear about what *kind of thing* particularism is.

**What Kind of Thing is Particularism?**

Particularism does not set out to describe what kinds of actions are right and wrong, or to explain what we ought to do. It is not, in other words, a normative ethical theory. And while it is concerned with normative ethics, it is not, in the generally accepted sense, a
meta-ethical theory; that is, it is not a theory about the nature of “right” and “wrong”, or whether such a thing as “evil” exists as an objective reality. So particularism is used to criticise aspects of moral theories, and may cause us to reconsider aspects of them. But it does not offer an alternative moral framework itself.

Particularism (whether trenchant or not) is a kind of claim or assertion about how a normative ethical theory may be formulated, claiming that “the rationality of moral thought and judgement in no way depends on a suitable provision of [moral principles]” (Dancy:2005). I think it is reasonable to paraphrase the assertion as saying “moral principles are not necessarily generalisable to particular cases”.

If it is an assertion, then it is plausible to assume that it has a truth value, and to attempt to decide whether it is true or not.

Is Particularism True?

I have said that particularism asserts that moral principles are are not necessarily generalisable to particular cases. It appeals to examples to justify this assertion. In order for it to be true, it only has to be shown that there exist “moral principles” which do not act in the consistent way across different situations. If there is a single case where this can be shown, then the assertion is valid, and particularism is “true”. It has to be admitted that the word “necessarily” weakens the force of the assertion somewhat, but it does seem that there
are plenty of examples that the particularist can give in support of his assertion. As we have seen, the only defence a pluralist generalist can give is to refine his principle in the face of these examples, and any refinement he gives seems likely to be subject to further challenge from the particularist. However, the issue of whether particularism is true can only be resolved when one or other party is forced to give up, and it is not clear that this has to happen. In other words, while I think that particularism is capable of being true, I do not think that it is possible to show definitively that particularism it is either true or false.

Conclusion

Particularism makes certain assertions about the way that a moral philosophy can be formulated, and its strength is that it makes use of persuasive examples which appear to show weaknesses in the assumptions made by a generalist who subscribes to the view that there is a plurality of moral principles that have application in any particular situation. It may not be possible definitively to say whether particularism is true, but at the least, it forces us to re-consider aspects of the framework on which a moral philosophy is based.
REFERENCES


