THE PARTICULARIST METHOD OF ETHICAL REASONING

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ABSTRACT
This essay concerns itself with the methodology of practical ethics. There is a variety of methods employed in ethics. Moral particularism challenges the widely held view that the application of principles is the best approach to practical ethics. Particularists deny an essential link between morality and principles and they hold that ethical decisions should be made case by case and not by applying principles. In this article, I show how ethical reasoning can avoid subsuming cases under principles. To accomplish this, I clarify (in Section 1) the basic features of particularism and outline how ethicists should approach ethical issues, on the particularists' view. Section 2 explains the crucial notion of a practical reason by focussing on simple reasons for action, and I explain the epistemic problems that particularism faces. In the third section, I demonstrate then how we can construct complex reasons from simpler reasons in a logically correct way. This section shows that particularism can be reconstructed as a logically correct method of ethical reasoning. The result of this study is that despite its shortcomings, particularist reasoning is a useful and legitimate method of practical ethics.

This is an essay on the methodology of practical ethics. Over the years, various conflicting views about how best to do practical ethics have been proposed, but no approach has firmly established itself as dominant. One commonly used method to arrive at justified ethical decisions consists in the application of principles. However, in the face of continuing disagreement about which principles are correct, ethical particularism (hereafter 'particularism' for short) has been presented as an alternative to the principle-based method of ethics. Particularists deny an essential link between ethics and principles and they see little role for moral principles. Their negative attitude

towards principles is based on the view that reasons are context-dependent. Since moral reasons can vary according to context, ethical decisions should be made case by case and not by applying general principles.

There has been a considerable recent debate on one or another version of particularism.[1] The issues that have been discussed in the philosophical literature are mainly *metaphysical* (concerning, e.g., the source of moral truths) and *epistemic* (dealing, e.g., with the basis of justified moral decisions). In this paper I have little to add to this debate. In what follows, I shall rather focus on the methodological issue of how particularists can approach an ethical issue and reach a reasoned decision about its resolution. This topic has suffered from comparative neglect despite the fact that it is of crucial importance if particularism is to be a viable method of practical ethics.

To accomplish my aim of showing that morality can get by without subsuming cases under principles, I clarify (in Section 1) the basic features of particularism and outline how, on the particularists' view, ethicists should approach ethical issues. Section 2 explains the crucial notion of a practical reason by focussing on simple reasons for action. In a third section, I demonstrate then how we can construct complex reasons from simpler reasons in a logically correct way. This section shows that particularism can be reconstructed as a logically correct method of ethical reasoning. For simplicity of presentation, I have sought to set out my presentation in a non-technical way. But for the sake of brevity and clarity, some formalization has been unavoidable, most of which has been relegated to the footnotes.

1. GENERAL FEATURES OF PARTICULARISM

Particularism—as the term is used by Jonathan Dancy, its central contemporary figure on whose work I will focus—holds that ethical reasoning does not need ethical principles to determine how to resolve ethical issues (Dancy 2004).[2] The particularists' claim that we should do ethics without

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[1] Particularist thinking in a broad sense, which implies only a critical attitude towards the application of principles in ethical reasoning and an emphasis on a detailed consideration of the facts of a particular case, has won many adherents in recent years. But particularism properly speaking, as it can be found in the works of Jonathan Dancy, is a hotly contested doctrine. It has many supporters (e.g., Little 2000 and Salay 2008), but it has also attracted considerable criticism (e.g., from Hooker 2000; 2008, Raz 2000 and Väyrynen 2006; 2008). Two collections that introduce into the debate about particularism are Hooker and Little (2000) and Lance et al. (2008).

[2] Particularism is not a single doctrine but a family of doctrines. What unites particularists is their claim that ethical reasoning should not be based on general principles. This rejection of principles can, however, vary. Strong (or extreme) particularism is the view that there are no

principles is based on the view that moral reasons are sensitive to contexts. This claim of context-sensitivity ('holism', in the philosophical jargon), is the core of the particularist doctrine and is discussed next.

1.1 Holism

Ethical particularism depends on the doctrine of holism about reasons, which has been defined as the view that "a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another" (Dancy 2004, 7). On the particularists' view, whether a feature of an action (e.g., that it is a lie) is a reason for this action, or a reason against it, or no reason at all, depends on the circumstances. We cannot know in advance in which way a particular factor will contribute in a given case. In some contexts it may favour an action but in another situation it may be a reason against this action. Particularists insist that this variability of reasons is essential to practical reasoning.

Dancy and other proponents of particularism try to make holism plausible by examples that are intended to show that reasons are generally context-dependent (i.e., holistic). If it currently seems to you that you see something red, this is normally a reason for believing that there is something red before you. But if you know that you have taken a drug that makes blue things look red you do not have any longer a reason for believing that there is something red before you (Dancy 2004, 74). This example suggests that *theoretical* reasons function holistically. But *practical* reasons seem also to be context-dependent. That an action is against the law is in many cases a reason not to do it, but if the law is unjust, it may be no reason against it, or even a reason for doing it (Dancy 2013; McNaughton and Rawling 2000). More importantly, ethical reasons seem to be variable, too. That I have borrowed a book from you, would normally give me some reason to return it to you. But if I learn that you have stolen the book from the library, I seem not to have any longer a reason for returning it (Dancy 2004). That an action causes pain to others is in many contexts a moral reason against it, but if this action is a just punishment or part of an experiment where pain is being inflicted with the informed consent of the participants, causing pain is arguably ethically permissible (Shafer-Landau 1997). Examples of this sort can be multiplied at will; and particularists hold that they can support their doctrine of holism.

defensible (substantive) moral principles (Dancy 2004; 2013). Weak (or moderate) particularism, on the other hand, allows some use of principles but holds that ethical reasoning does not require the subsumption of cases under principles. See to this classification also Cullity (2002), Holton (2002) and Sinnott-Armstrong (1999). In this paper, I shall focus on moderate particularism, which is generally regarded as the more plausible view.

There is a lot to be said about the notion of holism, but I shall restrict myself to some points of clarification that are worth mentioning here. Particularists need not hold that *all* moral reasons function holistically. They can admit that there *may* be reasons that are *not* variable (even though they tend to doubt it). It is therefore not possible to refute particularism by producing a counter-example of an (apparently) invariant reason—for example by holding that the infliction of suffering on others for your own enjoyment is always a reason against this action (Cullity 2002, 182). When particularists claim that moral reasons are *capable* of being altered by changes in the context, they mean that their nature as reasons can change in various ways: They can *cease* to be a reason for an action at all. As the examples above illustrate, the particular circumstances of cases may nullify a reason. But the context may also *reverse* the polarity of a reason. Instead of being a reason in favour of some action, it becomes a reason against it. In analogy with the chemical notion of valence, particularists call this a change of a reason's valence. Even if the valence of a reason does not change in different contexts, particularists think that its *strength* as a reason may vary in these contexts. That an action is just may be a strong reason for doing it in some contexts but only a weak reason in other circumstances.

There is one final point I wish to make to avoid a possible confusion. All forms of alterations of reasons must be distinguished from *overridden* reasons. According to a widely held view, a reason (e.g., for keeping a promise) can be overridden by the conflicting and stronger reason to help someone in need. An overridden reason is, however, not changed in its nature. But particularists assert that a change in the circumstances can alter the nature of a reason. (I shall return to this in the succeeding subsection.)

1.2 Ethics without principles?

What we need to understand now is why particularists hold that the variability of *reasons* supports their view that we should do ethics without *principles*. This requires first to make a brief comment on the relationship between reasons and principles.

On the particularists' view, reasons and principles are linked because moral principles identify reasons. Let us consider the simple principle 'Lying is wrong' to make this clearer. On the particularists' use of 'reason', the fact that an act is a lie is often (but not necessarily always) a reason for holding that it is wrong. That is, the principle identifies a reason (that an act is a lie) and we can therefore say, 'What you did was wrong *because* it was a lie'.

It is worth mentioning that particularists do not reject principles in general. They accept *formal* principles (e.g., the principle of formal justice that equals are to be treated equally), but oppose the use of *substantive* principles such as

'Promises are to be kept' (Dancy 1999). To understand this correctly, it is important to notice that there are different interpretations of substantive principles.

On the *absolutist* conception, moral principles are conclusively binding whatever circumstances arise. Absolute principles are universal claims to the effect that all actions of a certain kind have a certain normative status (i.e., are obligatory, permitted or forbidden). That is to say, holding that the principle 'Don't break your promises' is an absolute principle, implies asserting "that each and every action of breaking a promise is a wrong action, whatever else there may be said for it" (Dancy 2013, 2). However, if holism is correct, there are no invariable features. Breaking a promise is sometimes a reason against doing it, but there can be contexts in which it is a reason for doing it. On the particularists' view, absolutist principles do therefore not exist.

Some authors admit that a principle like 'Don't break your promises' is much too crude for being universally valid. They hold that such principles must be *specified*. Specification attempts to make principles more concrete by adding content. Promises must be kept, except they are given under duress or one has been tricked into making them, and so forth. But according to holism, even the complex feature of being a promise that has neither been given under duress nor under fraudulent conditions, etc. is still variable (i.e., can be a reason for keeping it or against keeping it). Particularists do therefore not accept specified principles either.

Many principles are meant to be *prima facie* principles only. The classic example of such an account is W.D. Ross's (1930) theory of *prima facie* duties. On this view, 'Don't break a promise' does not determine the normative status of breaking a promise. Such principles are therefore weaker than absolute principles because they can be overridden. Sometimes one can keep one's promise only by telling a lie. In such a situation, the right thing to do, may, in the circumstances, be to keep the promise (in other circumstances, the account may tell us to tell the truth). However, no matter whether a *prima facie* principle is overridden or not, the fact that an act is the keeping of a promise invariably counts for this act. Particularists must reject such principles because holism does not allow that certain features *invariably* count for or against an act (Dancy 1983; 2004; 2013).

There is a conception of ethical principles, according to which they create only a presumption for or against performing a certain act. Let us therefore call them *presumptive principles*.[3] Since presumptive principles do not determine the moral rightness or wrongness of an act, they are different from absolute

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[3] There is a terminological confusion in the literature. Some use the term 'presumptive principle' but others call them (or something very similar) *default principles* (Stangl 2006). I have dubbed them presumptive principles because this term seems to me more appropriate.

principles. On the presumptive view, there is no guarantee that, say, breaking a promise is always wrong. Defenders of this view can admit that it is usually (or normally) wrong. But they insist that whether it is wrong depends on the specific conditions of the situation; and they hold that in some circumstances, the fact that an act is an instance of breaking a promise can make this act right. That is, the fact that a promise has been broken is only presumptive to its moral status (Stangl 2006). Presumptive principles are also different from *prima facie* principles because on this view, a feature of an action need not *invariably* favour or disfavour it. For instance, that a promise has been broken by not returning a book may be a reason against this act in some contexts but not in others.

Presumptive principles can play an important role in ethical reasoning. They can function "as heuristic devices which direct us towards features of a situation that may be morally relevant" (Stangl 2006, 202). In considering an ethical issue, we have to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant features. Ethicists often overlook important factors (e.g., the long term effects of an option), and the heuristic function of principles is to remind us to these factors. Particularists can accept this heuristic use of principles because on the presumptive conception, no claim is made that certain features are invariably relevant.

Let us take stock. Despite holding that we should do ethics without principles, particularists allow a weak use of principles as heuristics. What they reject is the principle-based method of resolving ethical issues—no matter whether the principles are interpreted as absolute, specified or *prima facie*. According to this method, saying 'that is stealing and therefore you should not do it', is understood as giving an incomplete argument, which fully specified reads: 'stealing is wrong, that is stealing and therefore it is wrong'. By combining the principle (stealing is wrong) with the factual premise (that is stealing), the conclusion is drawn that stealing is wrong. We can call such a way of thinking *subsumptive reasoning* because we draw the conclusion by subsuming the act of stealing under a principle that proscribes it.

1.3 The particularist method outlined

On the particularists' view, ethical decisions must be made case by case. That is, they do not want to find out whether, say, euthanasia in general is morally permissible but whether a particular case of euthanasia is morally appropriate. They attempt to do this by establishing the reasons for and against the available options and evaluating their relative merits with the aim of finding that option which we have most reason to choose (Dancy, 2004).

This method requires, firstly, a detailed description of the case under consideration. Particularists insist that knowledge of the facts is crucial because it provides the basis for the reasons for and against the options available.

Secondly, considering the various reasons involved in a case requires that one can recognize them. As already said, for particularists, reasons are context-sensitive, which implies that a factor that was a reason in another case need not be a reason in the present case. This makes it understandable why *moral discernment* plays a crucial role in this method. Particularists need to rely on the "experienced moral judge" (Dancy 2013, 5) who is able to discern which features favour or disfavour an option in the circumstances. The experienced moral judge needs, however, not only rely on his moral intuition. He can also use other sources of moral knowledge. As I have already mentioned, ethical principles can be used heuristically to avoid overlooking relevant factors. In addition, particularists allow the use of analogous cases. According to Dancy (2013), a particularist "can perfectly well point to how things are in another perhaps simpler case, and suggest that this reveals something about how things are in the present more difficult case" (p. 5). This shows that analogous cases, too, need to be used heuristically and not, as in traditional casuistic reasoning, as paradigm cases which serve as final object of reference to new and unsettled issues. (I will return to this epistemic problem in the next section.)

Thirdly, since the resolution of ethical issues requires considering reasons for and against the options available, an ethicist needs to combine simple reasons to see where the overall balance lies. This combination can, however, not be done by merely adding them up because reasons can interact. That is to say, the "presence of one feature can affect the weight of another" (Dancy 2004, 105). The skill of discernment is therefore also required when ethicists combine the various simple reasons to a more complex reason.

Finally, after collecting the reasons that favour or disfavour the alternatives, the ethicist has to find that option he has most reason to choose because the morally best decision is the one we have most reason to make in the circumstances (Dancy 2004).

The particularist method has been criticized as all too vague and unhelpful (Hooker 2000; 2008). This criticism is partly due to the fact that particularists have never worked out in detail how their method should work in the resolution of real-life ethical issues (their examples are overly simplistic). In the remainder of this essay, I will present a detailed account of ethical reasoning that is compatible with particularism and that is applicable to problems we face in practical ethics.[4]

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[4] It should be noticed that the account I present in this paper can also be employed by the increasing number of ethicists that are not particularists but are sceptical about the subsumptive mode of ethical reasoning (see e.g., Harris 2003; Toulmin 1981).

2. SIMPLE REASONS FOR ACTION

According to particularism, we ought to do what we have most reason to do. We, therefore, need an account of practical reasons that starts with an explanation of simple reasons (also called unidimensional reasons), and we need to understand how these reasons can be combined into complex (multidimensional) reasons. To keep things as simple as possible, I shall here be concerned with reasoning *under certainty* only. Reasoning is said to be under certainty if the reasoner knows, at least for practical purposes, of each of his options what the outcomes of his taking it would be. Certainty is the simplest case of practical reasoning because no probabilities enter.

2.1 Justifying reasons for action

Since the nature of reasons for acting is controversial and the term 'reason' is used in a variety of contexts meaning different things, some conceptual clarifications will be in order. Particularism in not a theory about *explanatory* reasons (i.e., reasons that explain why we do something) but of *normative* reasons (i.e., reasons about what we should do). It takes, however, little familiarity with philosophical discussions of the concept of reasons to know that there are competing theories of normative reasons. There is no need to rehearse this discussion here. But it should be noticed that if particularism is to be a useful method of practical ethics, it must be suitable for (prospectively) justifying what we are going to do and for (retrospectively) warranting what we have done. Reasons that can be used for these purposes are commonly called *justifying reasons*, and it is this type of normative reasons that we are concerned with in this paper. Since we give such reasons in pieces of practical reasoning, I will clarify the notion of justifying reasons with the help of a simple example: You argue that you should water the garden because if you don't, it will not grow.

This reasoning is certainly *incomplete*. Like most informal reasoning, ethical reasoning is commonly elliptical. In everyday ethical conversations, but also when we try to resolve a serious ethical issue, we almost never make a full and complete statement of our argument. We usually state only a part of it, and our choice of which part we state is determined by pragmatic considerations. But when we analyse the notion of a practical reason we need to make explicit the components of complete reasons that can be left implicit in everyday reasoning. The reasoning is incomplete because it states only a *necessary* condition for the garden's growth (i.e., it will *not* grow if it is *not* watered). But a necessary

condition does not provide a reason for acting.[5] In our example, it is compatible with the fact that the garden will not grow even though it *is* watered—in which case you have no reason to water it. We must therefore add that the garden *will* grow if it is watered. By adding this *sufficient* condition, we get now two premises: 'The garden will not grow if it is not watered' and 'The garden will grow if it is watered'.

One effect of this improvement is that the reasoning has become *comparative*. We compare now two options with regard to their outcomes. This is important because practical reasoning requires a choice. If we have no choice—when we slip off the ladder or when our body is held immobile—then we do not reason what to do. This may appear so obviously true as to be hardly worth saying, but many authors, including particularists, have overlooked this fact, and they refer therefore to (monadic) facts (e.g., that a promise has been given) when they discuss practical reasons. It can, however, easily be seen that *monadic* valuations are irrelevant for establishing justifying reasons. If the outcomes of an action are good this is not *ipso facto* a reason *for* doing it because one of its alternatives may be better, in which case you have a reason *against* doing that action. And if an action is assigned a negative value this is not always a reason *against* doing it because all its alternatives may be worse, in which case you have a reason *for* doing that action. To construct a practical reason for an action, we need at least two options; and if we have only two options we have to find that action which is better than its alternative. I take the dyadic (or comparative) term '*a* is better than *b*' to mean that the agent assigns more value to *a* than to *b*, which can, in appropriate contexts, also be expressed by saying that the agent *prefers a* to *b*.

As said, particularists claim that it is *facts* that are reasons for acting. To see that facts do *not* provide justifying reasons, let us consider another example. Searle (2001) holds that "for a long time people had a good reason not to smoke cigarettes ... without knowing that they had such a reason" (p. 99). The reason for not smoking was the *fact* that it causes cancer. I do not deny that there is a use of 'reason' that allows saying that they had a reason for not smoking, but I wish to emphasize that those people had no *justification* for not smoking. They did not know the dangers of smoking and they had no reason for believing that it is a health hazard. If a person quitted smoking, he could not (retrospectively) justify his action, and a person who did not take up smoking in the first place could not (prospectively) justify his refusal by referring to its health hazards. Justificatory reasons, however, are meant to provide a justification for the

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[5] An example will be helpful to illustrate this. Assume that I want to become the next heavyweight-boxing champion. But this goal does not imply that I have a reason to start training. Because even though training is a necessary condition for achieving my goal, given my physical constitution and age, I will not become the next boxing champion anyway.

actions they are reasons for.[6] In short, what is needed for justifying reasons is that the reasoner has a justification for the factual premises (in our example, that the garden grows if, and only if, it is watered), and since he needs to compare the options available, he also needs a warrant for his preferences.

Let us summarize the result of this discussion by stating the reasoning in our example in its explicit form:

(a) If I water the garden it will grow.
(b) If I do not water the garden it will not grow.
(c) I prefer the garden to grow.
(d) Therefore, I should water the garden.

This is a piece of logically correct reasoning. If you have a justification for the premises (a) – (c) then you have a reason for holding that you should water the garden—and derivatively you have a reason for watering it. The valid reasoning transmits the justification from the premises to the conclusion and it is this fact that renders the premises a *reason* for the conclusion. This reason is a so-called *pro tanto* reason. That is, (a) – (c) are a reason for watering the garden only as far as its growth is concerned. There may be other reasons against watering it. *Pro tanto* reasons therefore need not be decisive reasons for a given course of action.

2.2 The particularist approach to ethical issues

A fresh scenario will help to clarify how particularists approach an ethical issue. A sex worker requests from Jones, a health-care professional, antiretrovirals to prevent her from contracting HIV, on the basis that she has clients who often refuse to use condoms. She complains of constant anxiety at the prospect of getting AIDS and asks for PrEP to reduce the risk of contracting HIV.[7]

As will be clear by now, the particularist's approach is *piecemeal*. He starts with collecting *pro tanto* reasons for and against the options available. To find such reasons, he can heuristically use principles (e.g., that he should act in the best interest of his clients), compare the case under consideration to analogous cases, and he can rely on his personal experience. One consideration in favour of prescribing ARVs may be that it significantly decreases his client's risk of

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[6] The particularists' conception of reasons, in particular J. Dancy's notion of a practical reason, has also been criticized by Berker (2007), Lance and Little (2008), Moad (2007) and Raz (2000), although partly on different grounds.

[7] Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is the use of anti-retroviral (ARV) medication *prior* to exposure to HIV to prevent infection. The example has been adapted from Venter et al. (2014), p. 271.

HIV acquisition. Jones' fully spelled-out first simple reasoning can schematically be put as follows:

If I prescribe ARVs the client has a decreased risk of HIV infection.

If I do not prescribe ARVs the client does not have a decreased risk of HIV infection.

It is better that the client's risk of infection is decreased.

Therefore, I should prescribe ARVs.[8]

As I have already indicated in the previous subsection, this piece of reasoning is logically valid. But the premises of valid reasoning provide only a reason for its conclusion if they are justified. We must therefore have a closer look at the *epistemic* question how Jones can justify his premises.

For justifying the factual premises (1) and (2), Jones is free to refer to scientific research about PrEP prescription, but he needs to contextualize it. His concern is with the unique case under consideration. He is dealing with a particular sex worker in a particular social context and he needs to assess whether PrEP is likely to decrease the likelihood of his client's HIV infection *hic et nunc*. While research results about the biological effects of antiretrovirals will also apply to this case, the social conditions may be so different that prescription of ARVs may actually increase the risk of infection (e.g., through behavioural changes).

Jones must also justify the third premise of his reasoning that it is better that his client has a decreased risk of HIV infection. Since this seems rather straightforward, he can rely on his moral intuition, but he can also use ethical principles—for instance, from codes of ethics (e.g., that physicians should act in their patients' best interest). Interpreted as heuristic devices, they may help him to argue that prescription is the better choice. Furthermore, he may compare the issue under consideration to similar cases—for instance, to vaccination of prostitutes against the human papillomavirus (HPV) or against hepatitis C infection and even by analogizing it to the case of malaria prophylaxis (see Venter et al. 2014).

No matter what source of justification Jones uses, he must show that a decreased risk of infection is better *in the given context*. On the particularists' view, this requires that he makes use of moral discernment, which lies at the

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[8] Stating the argument in this way may seem pedantic, but it is helpful for understanding the logic of the account I am presenting in this paper. For the sake of clarity, I will also present the reasoning in a formal way, which may facilitate a better understanding of how simple reasons can be combined into complex reasons. Let 'p' mean 'I prescribe ARVs', let us use 'd' for 'The client has a decreased risk of HIV infection' and let '>' stand for the relation '*a* is better than *b*'.

If we symbolize the reasoning as suggested we obtain (1) $p \rightarrow d$, (2) $\neg p \rightarrow \neg d$, (3) $d > \neg d \vDash$ (4) $p > \neg p$. On the left side of '$\vDash$' (the "double turnstile") are the premises of the reasoning and on its right side is the conclusion, which can be *expressed* by saying 'I should prescribe ARVs'.

heart of particularist moral epistemology. This somewhat mysterious skill to discern what matters in a given situation has been the focus of much debate. Critics concede that it is plausible that we sometimes 'just see' that an option is morally wrong, particularly when we are dealing with simple issues. But they hold that the 'perceptual model' is open to serious judgmental distortions, such as special pleading (the agent may make exceptions in his own favour) and arbitrary resolutions of interpersonal disagreements. The literature on rational choice can add a considerable number of further biases that can undermine even the most carefully considered decisions of the particularist ethicist.[9]

The critics are certainly right in pointing out these epistemic challenges. But their objections do not show that the particularist method is fatally flawed. I think it is fair to say that any method that takes the complexity of ethical problems seriously must rely on what the philosophical tradition has called *phronēsis* (practical wisdom). It allows an ethicist, after careful consideration of the details of an ethical problem, to judge what is ethically relevant in the circumstances. And although its judgement is not infallible, which particularists readily admit (Dancy 2013), it plays an important role in the justification of ethical decisions.

3. COMPOSING COMPLEX REASONS FOR ACTION

In most real-life situations, a simple reason will not suffice for resolving an ethical issue. If, for example, someone argues for or against genetically modified crops he will put forward a potentially large number of reasons. This raises the question how these different reasons can be combined. In this section, I shall propose an answer to this question. It should be mentioned at the outset that any method of combining reasons that is compatible with particularism must allow that their combination is not simply additive. On the particularist view, reasons can combine in peculiar and irregular ways. They can interact and the addition of further reasons can therefore change the contribution a reason makes in a situation. It can become stronger or weaker, it can be annulled and its valence can be changed. In short, "how reasons present in a given circumstance combine to determine the overall moral status of the actions available in that circumstance varies from context to context" (Berker 2007, 125). As will become obvious below, the account presented in this section is compatible with these particularist constraints.

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[9] Compare to this debate, for instance, Hammond et al. (1999), McKeever and Ridge (2006) and Sinnott-Armstrong (1999).

3.1 Combining simple reasons

Whether the provision of ARVs decreases the risk of HIV infection is only one of the factors relevant in this case. Another consideration is that the patient may acquire HIV resistance (because current PrEP does not have enough suppressive power to prevent the development of HIV resistance). We can state this reason as follows:

(1') If I prescribe ARVs the client has a higher risk of developing HIV resistance.

(2') If I do not prescribe ARVs the client does not have a higher risk of developing

  HIV resistance.

(3') It is better that the client does not have a higher risk of developing HIV
  resistance.

(4') Therefore, I should not prescribe ARVs.[10]

It will be clear by now that this reasoning is valid and that the premises (1') – (3'), if justified, provide a *pro tanto* reason against ARV prescription.

Jones has now *two* simple reasons and we are seeking a robust and logically sound method for determining whether he has now a complex (i.e., two-dimensional) reason *for* ARV prescription or rather one *against* it. Authors commonly hold that if we have reasons for and against an action we need to determine which one of these reasons outweighs the other. However, the idea that some reasons can outweigh others is not only unclear, the conditions for weighing reasons are also not quite grasped, I think, by many authors who use the metaphor of weighing reasons.[11] In this section I shall therefore argue for *combining* simple reasons to multidimensional reasons rather than trying to weigh them.

To understand how this can be done, we first need to consider their factual premises (1) and (1') as well as (2) and (2'). To combine them, we can make use of the following general *composition rule*: $[(p \rightarrow q_1) \wedge (p \rightarrow q_2) \wedge ... \wedge (p \rightarrow q_n)]$

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[10] If 'p' means again 'I prescribe ARVs', and 'r' stands for 'The client has a higher risk of developing HIV resistance' we obtain this formalized argument: (1') $p \rightarrow r$, (2') $\neg p \rightarrow \neg r$, (3') $\neg r > r \vDash$ (4') $\neg p > p$. The conclusion can be *expressed* by saying 'I should not prescribe ARVs'.

[11] Among the conditions that must be satisfied for specifying the weight of a given reason that is in conflict with its competitors are (i) a method of quantifying the degrees of justification involved in those reasons (justification admits of degrees, which make a reason stronger or weaker), (ii) a way of weighting each of the value dimensions (in our example, we need to determine whether the difference between having a decreased risk of HIV infection and not having a decreased risk of HIV infection is more important than the difference between having a higher risk of developing HIV resistance and not having a higher risk of developing HIV resistance), and (iii) preferential independence (roughly, the preferences on one dimension must be independent of the preferences on other dimensions). These conditions are, however, rarely met.

$\Leftrightarrow [p \rightarrow (q_1 \wedge q_2 \wedge ... \wedge q_n)]$. This rule states that the conditional on the right side of the equivalence symbol '$\Leftrightarrow$' with the consequent made up of a conjunction of the propositions q_1, q_2, ..., q_n is logically equivalent with the n conditionals $p \rightarrow q_i$, $i = 1, 2, ..., n$, individually on the left side. This rule allows combining the descriptive premises of any number of unidimensional reasons into the descriptive premises of an n-dimensional reason (and it allows also decomposing the premises of multidimensional reasons into any number of one-dimensional reasons). In our example, (1) is the conditional statement 'If I prescribe ARVs the client has a decreased risk of HIV infection'—in its formalized version: $p \rightarrow d$ (see footnote 8), and (1') is the statement 'If I prescribe ARVs the client has a higher risk of developing HIV resistance'—formally: $p \rightarrow r$ (footnote 10). According to the composition rule, the two statements are logically equivalent to (1") 'If I prescribe ARVs the client has a decreased risk of HIV infection *and* has a higher risk of developing HIV resistance'—formalized: $p \rightarrow (d \wedge r)$. By the same reasoning, the combination of (2) and (2') is logically equivalent to (2") 'If I do not prescribe ARVs the client does not have a decreased risk of HIV infection *and* does not have a higher risk of developing HIV resistance'—formalized: $\neg p \rightarrow (\neg d \wedge \neg r)$.

As a result of this combination, Jones does not yet have a two-dimensional reason. He has only obtained its factual premises. On the account presented here, multidimensional reasoning requires that a reasoner constructs a *compound valuation* and infers the conclusion with its help. Suppose now that Jones regards it as better that the client has a decreased risk of HIV infection *and* has a higher risk of developing HIV resistance. His two-dimensional reasoning can then be stated as follows:

(1") If I prescribe ARVs the client has a decreased risk of HIV infection *and* has a
higher risk of developing HIV resistance.

(2") If I do not prescribe ARVs the client does not have a decreased risk of HIV
infection *and* does not have a higher risk of developing HIV resistance.

(3") It is better that the client has a decreased risk of HIV infection *and* has a higher
risk of developing HIV resistance.

(4") Therefore, I should prescribe ARVs.[12]

This argument is again logically correct. That is to say, if Jones has a justification for the premises he has a complex (i.e., two-dimensional) reason *for* prescribing ARVs. It should be noted that this reason is still a *pro tanto* reason.

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[12] By choosing the familiar letters for the symbolized sentences, the formalized arguments is: $p \rightarrow (d \wedge r)$, $\neg p \rightarrow (\neg d \wedge \neg r)$, $(d \wedge r) > (\neg d \wedge \neg r) \vDash p > \neg p$.

That is, the addition of further reasons can have the result that there is an overall reason *against* prescribing the drugs.

For lack of space, I can only very briefly discuss the epistemic issues of multidimensional reasoning. The justification of the *factual premises* is quite straightforward. Since they are logically entailed by the factual premises of the simpler reasons (as we have seen in this section), the latter provide the justification for the former.[13] The main problem is how to justify the *valuational premise* that the outcome of one option is better than the consequences of another. There exist methods, partly developed by decision theorists,[14] which are certainly more art than science, but will nonetheless by of some help. According to particularism, the final judgement lies again with the competent moral judge and his skill of discernment (Dancy 2004, 143). Research suggests, however, that experts are quite unreliable at correctly integrating complex information (Zamzow 2015); and I therefore think it is fair to say that the distortions, mentioned in (2.2), are generally harder to avoid the more complex the reasons become.[15]

3.2 Some further clarifications

(i) Adding further reasons: Jones has now a two-dimensional reason *for* providing ARVs to his client. But this does not settle his ethical decision problem. There are more factors that need to be taken into consideration. For example, other people may be dying of untreated AIDS for want of those same drugs if he provides them to prostitutes for PrEP. This new simple reason *against* prescribing ARVs[16] can be added to the two-dimensional reason *for* prescribing them to generate a three-dimensional reason.[17] This process is iterative and can go on as long as new reasons emerge.

It is worth observing that the account presented here does not require adding only further one-dimensional reasons to a reason we already have. The method can be generalized. It is possible to combine a k-dimensional reason with an n-dimensional reason to obtain an $(n + k)$-dimensional reason. Let a formalized example serve to illustrate this. Suppose the premises of your k-dimensional

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[13] Strictly speaking, this requires that justification is closed under deduction, which is widely accepted in the epistemological literature.

[14] Among these techniques is the so-called *even swap method* which aims at reducing the number of dimensions to make a decision easier (see Hammond et al. 1999).

[15] It should, however, be noticed that higher dimensional reasoning is not necessarily more difficult to handle. Sometimes it becomes valuationally easier because the simple reasons *for* (or *against*) one option become dominant.

[16] If we use 'o' for 'other people are dying of untreated AIDS', the formalized reason is: $p \rightarrow o$, $\neg p \rightarrow \neg o$, $\neg o > o \models \neg p > p$.

[17] In a formal presentation, this reason can be stated as follows: $p \rightarrow (d \wedge r \wedge o)$, $\neg p \rightarrow (\neg d \wedge \neg r \wedge \neg o)$, $(\neg d \wedge \neg r \wedge \neg o) > (d \wedge r \wedge o) \models \neg p > p$.

reason are $a \rightarrow (w \wedge x)$, $b \rightarrow (y \wedge z)$, and $(w \wedge x) > (y \wedge z)$; and the premises of your n-dimensional reason are $a \rightarrow (q \wedge r \wedge s)$, $b \rightarrow (t \wedge u \wedge v)$, and $(q \wedge r \wedge s) > (t \wedge u \wedge v)$. Our composition rule allows combining them to $a \rightarrow (q \wedge r \wedge s \wedge w \wedge x)$ and $b \rightarrow (t \wedge u \wedge v \wedge y \wedge z)$ and if you prefer the former consequent to the latter it follows the conclusion $a > b$. If your premises are justified you have now an $(n + k)$-dimensional reason for a-ing.

(ii) Decomposing reasons: Suppose that Jones has now a three-dimensional reason *against* prescribing ARVs. But upon further research, it turns out that the premise of his third reason (that other people are dying for want of ARVs) is unjustified because a sufficient amount of drugs is now available. My account allows decomposing this three-dimensional reason in a logically correct way into a two-dimensional reason by removing the faulty reason.[18] Since the process of decomposing reasons is also iterative (a multidimensional reason can always be broken down into one-dimensional reasons), the method is both flexible and robust. At any time in the process of reasoning, we can add new reasons if they become available and we can remove them if they turn out to be indefensible.

Be it noted that no matter how many dimensions and options we consider, a practical reason can virtually always be defeated by adding new dimensions or by adding new options. It is particularly important to note that practical reasoning is defeasible. Many ethical discussions are confused because debaters tend to propound one or a few reasons for their view and seem to think that settles the matter. Apparently, it does not occur to them that their reasoning can be defeated by new options or consequences not yet considered. Awareness that practical reasoning is defeasible is important for another reason, too. It partly explains why discussions about ethical problems (e.g., abortion) can drag on for many years without being ever resolved in a definite way. But if we understand this characteristic feature of practical reasoning we cannot expect that such intricate problems can be settled conclusively. Put differently, if we make a practical decision of some complexity it will always be a decision "in fear and trembling" (to borrow a phrase from S. Kierkegaard). We just do not know what to do "all things considered" because there may always be crucial factors, which we have overlooked.

4. CONCLUSION

Although the application of principles is still a commonly employed strategy to arrive at justified ethical decisions, there is no doubt that the particularist

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[18] This can easily be seen if we consider the formalized reasons. From $p \rightarrow (d \wedge r \wedge o)$ and $\neg(p \rightarrow o)$ it follows $p \rightarrow (d \wedge r)$ and from $\neg p \rightarrow (\neg d \wedge \neg r \wedge \neg o)$ and $\neg(\neg p \rightarrow \neg o)$ it follows $\neg p \rightarrow (\neg d \wedge \neg r)$, which are the factual premises of Jones' two-dimensional reason.

method can, in the circumstances, be superior to the subsumptive model of ethical reasoning. By considering cases individually, it avoids a simplistic approach to ethical issues to which the principle-based method is prone. Many moral theorists working today agree that principles are not the whole of the story and that context matters when we consider ethical issues. It is this emphasis on the context-dependency of moral thinking that won particularism adherents. Particularists are convinced that taking all contextual features of a situation into account makes ethical reasoning more complex, but it also renders it more relevant.

As a method of *justifying* ethical decisions, particularism faces, however, problems. In particular, the reliance on the ethical insight of the experienced moral judge is epistemically questionable and may lead to downright prejudicial decisions. There is therefore need for further work on how bias in particularist reasoning can be avoided. But since particularism can be reconstructed as a logically valid mode of ethical reasoning, this article has shown that it can play an important role in ethical reasoning. The point I wish to close with is therefore that when the strengths and limits of particularism are properly understood, particularist reasoning is a useful and legitimate method of practical ethics.

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