

Moral Particularism, virtue and moral reasoning

Moralsk partikularisme, dyd og moralsk resonnering

Vår, 2019

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Masteroppgave i FILO350

Sammendrag:

Moralske prinsipp har vært sentrale i såvel moralsk teori som praksis. Moralsk partikularisme er en kritikk av denne sentrale rollen til prinsipper, og innebærer at moral ikke er avhengig av moralske prinsipp. I denne teksten søker jeg å løse et tilsynelatende problem for partikularister, nemlig at det synes som om man ikke kan forstå (normativ) moralsk resonnering gitt partikularisme.

Det foreligger flere tidligere forsøk på å møte denne utfordringen. Jonathan Dancy har både foreslått å forstå begrunnelse i etikk som narrativ begrunnelse og gjennom hvilke (moralske) grunner som holder i normale omstendigheter. Mark Lance og Margaret Little har foreslått generaliteter som ikke er prinsipper, men som likevel kan gi begrunnelse for handling. Jeg argumenterer for at disse forsøkene ikke lykkes, og at partikularisten derfor må anta en mer omfattende etisk teori for å redegjøre for moralsk resonnering.

Det nærliggende alternativet er å utvikle en partikularistisk dydsetikk. For å gjøre dette viser jeg at det er en konsepsjon av dyder som er konsistent med partikularisme, og at vi ut i fra denne konsepsjonen kan skille mellom god og dårlig moralsk resonnering. Partikularister kan derfor benytte et dydsetisk rammeverk for å gjøre partikularisme til en plausibel teori.

Acknowledgements:

I am very grateful to my supervisors Hallvard Fossheim and Jesse Tomalty for all the many comments they have given me and questions they have posed to me. My natural state is both confusing and confused, and they have been of great help on both counts.

I would also like to thank the many fellow students whom I have had the pleasure of agreeing and disagreeing with during my time at the department of philosophy in Bergen. Without them writing this thesis would not have been nearly so enjoyable.

I would also like to thank my parents and my brother for all their support in this and other endeavours. Finally, I would like to thank Emma Helland-Hansen for suffering me throughout the entire writing process.

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0. Introduction

0.1 Moral Particularism and moral reasoning

It is a common assumption that principles are central to moral theory and moral practice. Both consequentialist and deontological ethical theories appeal to principles. Relatedly, one common criticism of virtue ethics has been that it fails to codify ethics sufficiently¹. The view that principles are central to moral theory and moral practice is called generalism. Moral particularism, the subject of this thesis, is very roughly opposition to the idea that principles should play such a central role in morality².

Particularism has primarily been developed by Jonathan Dancy, who states particularism as follows: “the possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles”³. Particularism is however an umbrella term and there are many different particularist views, unified by varying degrees of scepticism towards moral principles⁴. At the most extreme the moral particularist is devoted to the claim that there are no moral principles. I will not try to defend a claim as ambitious as that in this thesis. What I will do is argue that within a particularist framework we can still make sense of moral reasoning, and therefore that as far as moral reasoning is concerned there is no need for specifically moral principles. Giving an account of moral reasoning that requires no principles is the main goal of this thesis.

This however is not straightforward. The particularist claim seems to stand in opposition to much of our practice in which we use principles in justifying our actions, in debating what one should do, in trying to become better morally and so on and so forth. There have been raised several objections that seek to show that particularism cannot provide moral guidance nor account for moral reasoning⁵. If particularist theories cannot answer these doubts they seem to fail as moral theories⁶. Particularism therefore requires an account of

¹ See Hursthouse, 2010, pp.39-42 for a discussion of such criticisms.

² I will often write “particularism” for “moral particularism” throughout the thesis

³ Dancy, 2004, p.7.

⁴ Hooker and Little (2000), and Lance, Potrč and Strahovnik (2008) are important collections of papers on particularism. Dancy’s position is given its fullest statements in his (1993) and (2004). McKeever and Ridge (2006) give the most prominent generalist reply.

⁵ See Hooker (2000), McKeever and Ridge (2006), and Lance and Little (2008)

⁶ Note that while particularism is intended to be free from other major meta-ethical commitments the debate about particularism is conducted in realist terms. I will also use realist language in this thesis. As some anti-realists can account for realist language this way of conducting the debate does not necessarily commit one to moral realism. See Dancy, 2004, pp. 140-141.

moral reasoning and moral guidance that does without principles to be a plausible view in ethics.

Particularists have responded to these objections in a variety of ways. One important reply is Dancy's notion of a default reason⁷. A default reason is a reason which comes with a presumption towards rightness or wrongness (e.g. lying is wrong by default). Default reasons are not intended to be principles, but still give a starting point for moral reasoning and some structure to the moral realm. Another suggestion, also made by Dancy, is that justification in ethics is best understood as a successful narrative rather than as the application of a rule⁸.

Another option open to particularists is to move towards a sort of compromise with generalism. Margaret Little and Mark Lance are in this regard a good example. Little has moved from describing herself as a "card-carrying particularist" towards what she and Lance have termed a "contextualist" view⁹. In this they have developed an interesting account of moral generalities as defeasible generalisations. Adopting these "defeasible generalisations" would allow one to adopt a standard model of moral reasoning and thus avoid the objections to particularism (as far as reasoning and guidance is concerned). An important question, for the particularist, is whether this can be done while avoiding being fully principled.

In this introduction I will first (0.2) state my approach to the particularism/generalism debate, and what I hope to achieve in this thesis. My way of construing the debate will (0.3) require clarity on what we take principles to be, and (0.4) an understanding of what principles do in moral reasoning. I then briefly state (0.5) why a virtue ethical approach to reasoning seems promising, and give in outline my answer to the objections from moral reasoning and guidance. Finally, (0.6) I provide a chapter overview.

0.2 My approach

My goal in this thesis is to develop an account that avoids granting moral principles a decisive role in reasoning. The thesis can be read in the following way: If one holds

⁷ See Dancy (2004 and 2007)

⁸ Dancy, 1993, p. 113.

⁹ See Little (2000) and Lance and Little (2008).

particularism to be true apparent problems with regard to moral reasoning and moral guidance appear. I then show that introducing default reasons or defeasible generalisations cannot solve these problems for particularists. Instead, I propose to account for moral reasoning and moral guidance by adopting a virtue ethical approach. In other words, problems raised against the meta-ethical theory of particularism are to be resolved by adopting a normative ethical theory¹⁰.

This means that I understand the debate about particularism as a debate about the structure of moral reasoning¹¹. That might seem to follow quite naturally from the formulation of particularism as about “the possibility of moral thought and judgement”. However, what the debate surrounding moral particularism is about is a surprisingly fraught issue. Particularism has been characterised as a metaphysical, epistemological and semantic thesis¹², and the debate as a whole has been said to enjoy a well-deserved reputation for obscurity¹³. It will therefore be important to clarify what exactly particularism involves on my view. As Dancy is the most important exponent of particularism, I will structure my presentation around his contribution to the debate¹⁴.

As the debate, in whatever guise, is about principles one should first get clear on what kind of principles are at stake. Both consequentialist and deontological ethics are taken to be principled in the relevant ways. As I will return to it is not as clear that virtue ethical approaches are principled, it seems that there is at least a possibility for a non-principled virtue ethic.

It would be a far too extensive task to survey and consider the principles that have been present in the many different generalist ethics. One option could be to pick only a single such principle (say the principle of utility) and then argue against that principle. That would however have a rather limited application as it would at the very best give us reason to abandon that principle. My approach, which is typical, is to give some criteria for a generalist

¹⁰ Christine Swanton (2015) suggests that the problems particularism faces cannot be solved without a normative theory. Leibowitz (2009, p.196) similarly claims that a particularist interpretation of Aristotle’s *Ethic* could provide an account of moral explanation for particularism.

¹¹ Following Kirchin (2007). These different characterisations are of course not all mutually exclusive, but the question is which issues are central.

¹² Smith, 2011, pp. 1-2.

¹³ Schroeder, 2009, p. 568.

¹⁴ In addition to Dancy (1993) and (2004) see Dancy 1983, 1999 2000, and 2007a.

ethic, and for what counts as a principle, before arguing that principles that meet those criteria are not necessary for moral reasoning.

0.3 Criteria for a generalist ethic

We can distinguish between criteria for a generalist ethic as a whole and criteria for the principles within a generalist ethic. For a generalist ethic as a whole I will give the criteria of *epistemic plausibility*, and *coverage*¹⁵. By coverage I simply intend that a generalist ethic must resolve the vast majority or all cases by reference to moral principles. An ethic that has only one principle (of limited range) is not a principled ethic in any interesting sense. Epistemic plausibility simply demands that one must also be able to know the relevant principles in some way.

Moral principles are general statements that use moral terms (example: “it is wrong to lie”, or “you should not lie”). I will give criteria drawn from two conceptions of principles. These conceptions are principles as standards of correctness, and principles as guides for decisions¹⁶. The criteria for principles will be the following: *substantiality*, *guidance* and, *justification*.

Substantiality: A principle is substantial if it links non-moral content to moral judgement¹⁷. The non-moral content should further not be an accidental grouping. Another way of putting this is to say that a principle needs to have a descriptive shape¹⁸.

Guidance: A principle needs to guide agents to right action; this limits the complexity of moral principles. A principle that could never be recalled because of its complexity would not be a principle in the sense intended here¹⁹. Providing guidance also explains how a moral theory could be useful for agents who are not already perfectly moral.

Justification: Finally, principles must be able to justify moral judgements. Merely descriptive statements about moral acts miss the mark for being a principle, as they do not provide

¹⁵ Both these criteria are from Dancy, 2004, pp. 116-117.

¹⁶ I discuss these two conceptions of principles in 1.2.

¹⁷ This criteria from McNaughton (1988, pp.191 -192). See also, McKeever and Ridge (2006, p.140)

¹⁸ The shape of a concept can be understood as that which unifies it (see Roberts, 2011, p.505). Principles must be unified by non-moral(descriptive) not moral(evaluative) content.

¹⁹ See McKeever and Ridge, 2008.

justification of the right sort (that most lies are wrong might be true, but that fact does not tell me that this lie is wrong or why any given lie is wrong)²⁰. In the literature this criterion is often put in terms of explanation²¹.

These criteria can be jointly instantiated in a single principle, but one should allow that accounts in which the guidance and the justification come apart can count as generalist. That is to say that, it need not be the same principle which guides that provides justification²².

There needs to be some connection between the guidance and the justification, however, for the guidance to count as principled guidance.

0.4 Principles in moral reasoning

This thesis is a discussion of moral reasoning and particularism. A necessary clarificatory task then is to outline how principles have been thought to be central to moral reasoning. Before doing that however I need to make three clarificatory points.

First, as the guidance criterion given above implies, the objection to particularism is also in part a question of how imperfect moral agents can know what they should do given particularism. Can our moral theory, at least in theory, provide an agent with a way of thinking about moral matters which allows them to more reliably do the right thing?²³. I will therefore need to argue that a particularist can provide some moral guidance. If that cannot be provided any particularist moral theory would have limited interest.

Second, conscious moral reasoning is not necessarily the be-all and end-all of moral thought and judgement. Many moral decisions are made immediately, without thought, and are no worse for that. Sometimes indeed our deliberate reasoning may lead us wrong and our

²⁰ This corresponds to the distinction between normative reasons and explanatory reasons. Normative reasons are what we are after in the case of ethics.

²¹ See section 1.2.1 for more on this. Dancy (2004, p. 117), McKeever and Ridge (2008, p.1180), Lance and Little (2008, p. 54), and Väyrynen (2018, p.842) all give a version of this explanatory role to principles.

²² This is of course a well-known from some consequentialist theories which predict that people should make their decisions on non-consequentialist ground, even if which actions are right is to be determined by consequences.

²³ That ethical theories should provide guidance is often assumed, though perhaps too seldom argued for. Väyrynen (2006) provides an argument for a “guidance constraint” on ethical theories. Ethical theories are better if they can provide moral guidance on his view. Regardless of the particular details of his argument the constraint seems very reasonable.

failure to act on that reasoning may be rational²⁴. The account of moral reasoning I provide then is not a series of steps a reasoner must go through to reason well, but rather a way of judging whether some piece of moral reasoning is good, be that reasoning conscious or unconscious. Another way of putting this is simply that my goal is normative not descriptive.

Three, Moral particularism is supported by a more general claim in the theory of reasons, namely that reasons function holistically. Holism is the claim that “...a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another”²⁵. Given this, being a lie, for example, might be a reason for or a reason against depending on the circumstances.

The simplest and most direct model of moral reasoning imagines good moral reasoning as subsumption of a situation under a rule²⁶. For example: Lying is wrong, A is a lie, therefore A is wrong. Principles here justify the conclusion by being one of the premises in an inference. Such a simple model is however problematic as it cannot account for principles which are hedged. A hedged principle is any principle with a clause which limits its scope²⁷. Reasoning with such principles is defeasible. Even in a case where it might seem that a hedged principle applies it might still be subject to defeat. I will present such a model of reasoning in 1.2.2.

Expounding that model will show that there are three steps to any process of moral reasoning: identifying possible reasons, deciding that the possible reasons are reasons, and concluding on what to do (from the reasons present in the situation)²⁸. If a particularist account of reasoning is to be successful it must account for these three parts of moral reasoning in a satisfactory manner.

Compared to the simple model of reasoning above it can be confusing to try to understand how reasoning can proceed given particularism. It cannot look like this, for example: In this situation lying is wrong, this is this situation, so it is wrong to lie. The problem here is of course that the judgement that lying here and now is wrong must come after not before the

²⁴ Arpaly (2003, pp. 33-65) argues for this at length.

²⁵ Dancy, 2004, p.7.

²⁶ Harman, Kelby, and Sinnott-Armstrong, 2010, p.213.

²⁷ For example, the principle “lying is wrong *all else being equal*” is hedged. Hedging clauses can also be specific (for example: “lying is wrong, except when playing a game”). I will primarily be concerned with general hedging clauses in this thesis.

²⁸ That conclusion can be either in the form of a belief, an intention, or an action depending on one’s theory of practical reasoning.

reasoning is concluded. It is not immediately clear, however, how particularists can say anything about what is the case outside of specific situations.

Dancy responds to the objections from reasoning and guidance with the notion of a default reason and a narrative account of justification. Another seemingly natural option would be to develop a virtue ethical account. Dancy interestingly has resisted this saying at one point that the virtuous person was the person who got things right case by case, adding further that not much else could be said²⁹. If, as I will argue, neither default reasons nor defeasible generalisations can resolve this apparent problem for particularism, it seems that developing a virtue ethical particularism is precisely what is required.

0.5 Virtue ethical particularism

The debate about whether virtue ethics codifies morality strongly enough seems parallel to the debate between particularists and generalists. An uncoded virtue ethics therefore might be an attractive development of particularism³⁰. Virtue ethics can be developed to give an account of just those sensibilities that would be required for getting things right case by case and as such begin to provide an account of a moral agent. I will do this through the eudaimonistic virtue ethic developed by Rosalind Hursthouse³¹.

Given an eudaimonistic virtue ethic, I will argue that one can derive virtue concepts from the virtues. Hursthouse has, similarly, argued that one can derive so-called virtue-rules from the virtues (for example: “do what is just”). Such virtue-rules I will argue are not substantial however, as they already have moral content. Virtue concepts, as I take them, are best understood as overall concepts on par with right or good, and are therefore not reasons for action. To illustrate, no action is simply just, there are some features (of that action) that make it just. The features that make an action just are reasons, while the just action is what

²⁹ Dancy, 1993, p.64.

³⁰ For an overview of particularist virtue ethics see Van Zyl (2019, pp. 145 – 165). See also McDowell (2002), Swanton (2001, 2010, and 2015), Stangl (2008 and 2010), Svensson (2011), Jordan (2013) and Frykholm (2014). There is also debate about whether to classify Aristotle as a particularist. For that debate see Irwin (2000), Price (2005) and Leibowitz (2013).

³¹ See Hursthouse (2010).

there is reason to do. As no moral principle (per the substantiality criterion) can be established from the virtues, virtue ethics is consistent with particularism.

I will then argue for the positive part of my project by establishing that one can identify possible reasons through the emotional responses of the virtuous. As well as arguing that the one can determine whether a possible reason is a reason by its relation to eudaimonia.

My account of moral reasoning and moral guidance has two main components: virtue concepts and moral heuristics. To begin with the latter, moral heuristics are moral generalities that have only a pragmatic justification, they are good heuristics if they make us act better than one otherwise would have. Such moral heuristics can then explain how a virtue ethical particularism can provide guidance to less than ideal agents. Such heuristics do not provide justification for action however and are therefore not principles.

Good moral reasoning, I will suggest, can be understood as reasoning that has a virtue concept as its conclusion. If one wishes to know if some piece of reasoning is good moral reasoning, the question to ask is whether acting on its conclusion can be described virtuous. This does not amount to a decision procedure, but provides justification on par with that offered by hedged principles. By adopting a virtue ethic, we can say more about what being the right sort of person requires and involves, and thus supply particularism with an account of moral reasoning.

In summary the thesis will argue that objections to particularism from considerations of moral reasoning and moral guidance are successful when raised against particularists who respond by introducing various notions of defaults. I will then offer a particularist virtue ethical account of moral reasoning that is not vulnerable to those charges. The upshot of the thesis then is a defence of particularism from the charge that it cannot account for moral reasoning and guidance.

0.6 Chapter Overview

In **chapter one** I will first present moral particularism, and some of the arguments that have been offered for it. This presentation will centre on Jonathan Dancy's arguments for particularism. Then I will offer criteria for a generalist ethic and moral principles, before

outlining what an account of moral reasoning must provide to be successful. In the third, and final, part of chapter one I present the flattening objection, objections from guidance and objections from reasoning. All these objections threaten to undermine particularism by questioning whether it can make sense of moral reasoning and moral practice.

In **chapter two** I discuss some responses to the objections to particularism raised in chapter one. I first consider Dancy's suggestion that justification in ethics is more akin to narrative than subsumption. That is as I will argue not a good option for particularists as it makes particularism plausible only if justification in ethics is weaker than most suppose.

I will argue that some of the problems particularism faces regarding reasoning stem from lack of an explanation of why certain features (of a situation) are reasons. I then consider the related notions of default reasons and defeasible generalisations which in part could ameliorate this. I argue that neither of these proposed solutions can provide particularism with a starting point for moral reasoning. Default reasons fail as they sit uneasily within the framework of particularism and lack a satisfactory formulation. Similarly, I conclude that defeasible generalisations are either not attractive for the particularist (as they become principles), or that they rely on a problematic conception of normality (as privileged conditions).

In **chapter three** I turn to virtue ethics which is the normative ethical theory that both seems most amenable to particularism and farthest removed from the standard models of moral reasoning that presuppose principles. I will argue that an eudaimonistic conception of virtue ethics can be compatible with particularism. Importantly, moral reasons are capable of being defined in terms of their relation to eudaimonia. Then I will turn to how to understand virtues given particularism. I will argue that we should preserve the notion that having a virtue is always for the better and adopt the corresponding understanding of virtue concepts. These virtue concepts I then show to be incapable of principled expression. I will then lay the groundwork for an account of moral reasoning by considering the positive role of both emotion and description in reasoning.

In **chapter four** I will draw together the resources that have been put forth so far in giving my account of moral reasoning under particularism. By showing how use of virtue concepts and moral heuristics can respond to the challenges raised in the first chapter with regards to

reasoning and guidance the force of those objections to particularism is lessened. I conclude by offering a way of representing such moral reasoning. In sum I argue this account of moral reasoning both remains particularist and manages to account for moral reasoning satisfactorily.

Chapter 1: Particularism, principles and moral reasoning

As I stated in the introduction this thesis will assume that particularism is a broadly attractive view. In the first section of this chapter (1.1) I will present moral particularism. That will involve some arguments proffered in favour of particularism, as well as some of the motivation for the view. The goal is simply to give a statement of particularism and introduce some terminology. In the second section of the chapter (1.2) I will give criteria for moral principles and give an account of moral reasoning with principles. I also state there what an account of moral reasoning must account for to be successful. In the third section (1.3) I raise some objections to particularism. Namely the, so-called flattening objection, objections from moral guidance, and objections from moral reasoning. These objections question particularists ability to account for moral reasoning and guidance. It is these objections the thesis ultimately seeks to answer.

1.1 Moral particularism

1.1.1 What is moral particularism?

Jonathan Dancy, in *Ethics without principles*, defines the particularist position as follows: “the possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles”³². My exposition of particularism will take Jonathan Dancy as its starting point as his work makes up the core of the current debate on particularism. First, we should note that Dancy’s view has changed. He has moved from the stronger claim that there are no moral principles, to the weaker claim that morality does not depend on moral principles³³. I will mainly be drawing on the formulation of particularism found in *Ethics Without Principles* in this exposition. Throughout the thesis I will however have reason to draw on Dancy’s earlier work as well.

Even though Dancy’s arguments are central, particularism is not a unified doctrine and there are many different particularist views. Particularists can differ from each other in at least two regards: namely in what they take a principle to be, and in the way they reject

³² Dancy, 2004, p. 7.

³³ Flynn, 2010, pp. 140-141. See Dancy (1993 and 2004)

principles³⁴. Dancy rejects principles as necessary for moral thought and judgement, but is not as clear on what kind of principle he rejects. Dancy does give some criteria for principles (coverage, reasons, applicability and epistemology³⁵) but he does not hold those criteria to be exhaustive³⁶. As such there is an interpretative question here. Mark Schroeder reads Dancy as being primarily motivated to deny (1) that for something to be right or wrong it must be so intrinsically, and (2) that it is ultimately principles that make something right or wrong³⁷. This I take it is part of what Dancy wishes to deny, but not all of it. McKeever and Ridge for example do not discuss that conception of principles in great detail in their argument for generalism, and Dancy does not seem to believe they have fundamentally misunderstood his aim³⁸. McKeever and Ridge make a claim for the necessity of principles for moral theory, when principles are understood as standards and guides³⁹. I understand Dancy as having intended his criticism to hold for principles as standards and guides, as well as for principles as truth-makers. In this thesis I will be focused on principles as standards and guides. I will therefore go into greater detail on both standards and guides below (in section 1.2.1). For now, a standard may be understood as a generality which is explanatory of the rightness or wrongness of an action. A moral guide may be understood as a moral generality which is useful for making the right decision⁴⁰.

So, the question then, on this interpretation of Dancy, is whether standards and guides are necessary for moral thought and judgement. We should, however, allow that generalists can accept that some moral agents do not apply principles in their reasoning⁴¹. Pekka Väyrynen accounts for this by defining particularism as follows: “Morality *in no way depends* on the

³⁴ For some different views that can be classified as particularist see e.g. McDowell (2002), McNaughton (1988) Little (2000), Lance and Little (2006a) and Gleeson (2007).

³⁵ I give criteria for principles and a generalist ethic at 1.2.1.

³⁶ Dancy, 2004, pp. 116 – 117.

³⁷ Schroeder, 2009, p. 572.

³⁸ See McKeever and Ridge, 2006, pp. 12 -14. I find Schroeder’s (2009) argument that they set this conception of principles aside to quickly convincing, but will not spend any time on that conception myself as principles as truth-makers is both more demanding (for the generalist) than principles as standards and as the relevance between standards and moral reasoning is far more direct. For support for the claim that Dancy does not see McKeever and Ridge as misguided in this, see Dancy (2007b).

³⁹ McKeever and Ridge, 2008, p.1182.

⁴⁰ McKeever and Ridge (2006, pp. 7-14) distinguish between six kind of principles. These are principles as standards, as guides, as action-guiding standards, as moral truth-makers, as preconditions of conceptual competence and as algorithmic decision procedures.

⁴¹ Väyrynen, 2018, p. 846. The generalist must simply hold that this agent is either worse off for not having principles, or that a rational reconstruction of his reasoning would involve a principle (at least in so far as it is good reasoning).

existence of true or valid moral principles"⁴². So, the particularism I present here can be formulated as the following claim: morality in no way depends on the existence of true or valid moral principles, when principles are understood as standards and guides⁴³.

From the variety in the kind of principle rejected and the way in which those principles are rejected by different particularist there has been many different characterisations of the debate. The debate has, as mentioned, been characterised alternatively as metaphysical, epistemological and semantic. I will follow Simon Kirchin in seeing particularism/generalism as "... a debate about the structure of moral reasoning"⁴⁴. This follows quite naturally from the formulation of particularism Dancy gave in *Ethics without Principles*, as well as some of the criticism particularism has faced. The question then is whether good moral reasoning requires moral principles. Particularism is then the view that good or correct moral reasoning in no way depends on the existence of true or valid moral principles, when principles are understood as standards and guides.

To frame the debate in this way makes at least one important assumption. Namely that our moral reasoning does not come apart from the moral metaphysics, or more precisely that two different normative relations favouring and right-making do not come apart⁴⁵. One can of course imagine that what makes something the right thing to do is unavailable to agents. Whether such a sceptical picture is coherent or not, I will assume that this is not the case⁴⁶. Note that even if favouring and right-making do not come apart, one should not hold these relations to be reducible to one another. For example, something can favour without being right-making. Being told that it is raining favours bringing an umbrella, but it is that it is raining that makes bringing an umbrella appropriate (in the moral case "right" rather than "appropriate" (that it is raining also favours bringing an umbrella of course(i.e. the same

⁴² Väyrynen, 2018, p. 846. Emphasis in original. Compare with Dancy's statement of particularism above for contrast.

⁴³ McKeever and Ridge (2006, pp.14-20) distinguish between four possible ways of rejecting principles (in addition to the one stated in the text which they call anti-transcendental particularism): (1) there are no true moral principles (Dancy's view in *Moral Reasons*), (2) there is no good reason to think there are any true moral principles, (3) any finite set of moral principles will be insufficient to capture all moral truths, (4) we ought not rely upon moral principles.

⁴⁴ Kirchin, 2007, p. 1.

⁴⁵ These are relations between reasons and rightness, and reasons and action. Dancy(2004, pp. 22-24, 79-80) introduces these two normative relations. For the most part I will speak of reasons without distinguishing between reasons that make-right and reasons that favour.

⁴⁶ Price (2013) doubts whether there is such a thing as the metaphysics of reasons at all so perhaps this worry is in any case overstated.

feature can both favour and make-right))). The important assumption is that those features (of a situation) which make an action right or wrong are features that we can come to know.

So, to sum up I will understand particularism as the claim that morality does not depend on true or valid moral principles. Those principles are understood as standards and guides. The debate as such I see as a debate about the structure of moral reasoning. There are many possible particularist views that are not part of this characterisation of particularism⁴⁷. I take it that many of the challenges to particularism that I raise below (section 1.3) are also a challenge to other particularisms. The virtue ethical solution I give in chapter 3 and 4 are as far as I can see also available for other particularist views, but the view given here is the one my proposed solutions must be compatible with.

I will now (1.1.2) state some of the motivation for particularist view as well as some key terminology. I do not try to defend particularism from any criticism here. My approach in the thesis will as stated be to assume that particularism is attractive, and then respond to some objections levelled against it. I present these objections in section 1.3.

1.1.2 Motivation for particularism

Much motivation for particularism is generated by examples. Many proposed moral principles seem vulnerable to circumstances in which what seems right to do is not that which is commanded by the principle. The literature in ethics is of course ripe with examples and counter-examples aiming to show that some initially plausible principle cannot in fact be right. The examples given in support of particularism rarely seek to show that a specific principle is wrong, but rather seek to establish the holism of reasons. Holism may roughly be given as the view that whatever is a reason in one case, may be a reason for a different course of action, or no reason at all, in another case⁴⁸. To give a trivial example sometimes being a lie is a reason against, other times it seems to be morally irrelevant, or a reason in favour (say when playing a game in which lying is part of the point). The intuitive support for holism depends on accepting a certain way of understanding such examples.

⁴⁷ See the following for general overviews of the particularism debate: Kirchin (2007), McKeever and Ridge (2008), Schroeder (2009) and, Flynn (2010).

⁴⁸ Dancy, 2004, p.7.

Dancy develops his particularist view in contrast to the view of W.D. Ross in which prima facie duties pick out features that are always good-making or always bad-making⁴⁹. The holism of reasons will, if accepted, lead one to abandon the notion that there are prima facie duties of that sort. If a good deal of the examples particularists have offered are plausible this poses a problem for any pluralist atomistic ethic⁵⁰. However, a consequentialist ethic need not deny that many features indeed function holistically (only those features that count as relevant consequences, for the classical utilitarian only pain and pleasure, need count in an atomistic way), similarly it is open to those adopting a deontological ethic to question the scope of the generalities under question. Further, all sorts of principles may be hedged. Hedged principles are compatible with exceptions (example: lying is wrong *ceteris paribus*). Holism therefore does not establish particularism as many forms of principled ethics can handle holism. Holism does however seem a necessary precondition for particularism⁵¹. Accepting holism then makes particularism an option in moral theory.

In addition to holding the holism of reasons moral particularists are also committed to morality being rational. So, when what is a reason in favour in one case is not a reason in favour in another case there must be some explanation for that fact. That explanation must, for the particularist, be found in a further feature of the situation. We can illustrate such features with a useful example: Suppose I have borrowed a book from a friend⁵². Having borrowed the book is plausibly a reason to return it to my friend. However, if I come to learn that my friend has stolen the book from the library, simply having borrowed it does not seem to be a reason for returning it to my friend. The same feature (having borrowed a book) here gets different moral valences⁵³, in the first case it is a reason to return the book, in the second it is no reason at all. My friend having stolen the book from the library therefore *disables* the reason of me having borrowed the book. Corresponding to disablers

⁴⁹ *Prima facie* is here best understood as *pro tanto*. For Dancy's comments on Ross see Dancy, 2004, pp. 15 – 34.

⁵⁰ Atomism is the opposite number to holism. An atomistic reason in favour is always a reason in favour and never against (or irrelevant).

⁵¹ Albrecht (2014, p. 23) holds that particularism is consistent with atomism and therefore that holism/atomism has no bearing on the debate between particularists and generalists. This I take it is strictly correct, but would require a view of reasons that itself is unattractive. See n.56 below for a comment on how reasons are understood here.

⁵² Example from Dancy, 1993, pp.60 -61.

⁵³ Valence-shifting is by now the terminology for the shift in moral direction of a reason.

are *enablers*, which are those features that make something be a reason in favour⁵⁴. Other features of situations can make reasons stronger or weaker⁵⁵. So, if some reason shifts valence from one case to another there must be features of that situation which enable or disable that reason. If no such feature can be found, then presumably the valence of the reason must be the same given that morality is a rational enterprise.

The starting point for holism is how we find it natural or intuitive to understand certain examples or instances of moral judgements. These examples can then be broken down by considering which features play which roles. In a sense this is how one must proceed, our morality and our moral beliefs as they happen to be is part of what any moral theory must explain and contend with. A theory that diverges very much from how we react to actual cases becomes implausible. It is of course possible to bite the bullet in any single case (at a negligible cost in plausibility). Does for example the pain and discomfort experienced during athletic competition make the activity less morally desirable? The utilitarian does of course have the option of saying that it does, and there is no test that could tell us that this is wrong. Examples are therefore most useful for accepting the holism of reasons. Once holism is accepted one could of course argue that pain and pleasure are in fact morally invariant. But holism combined with some assumptions about reasons makes that hard to maintain⁵⁶. The holism of reasons Dancy argues, therefore gives some indirect support for particularism⁵⁷. As I have noted above however many kinds of principle can accept holism⁵⁸.

⁵⁴ Dancy, 2004, pp. 38-41.

⁵⁵ Dancy names this role of features intensifiers and attenuators (2004, pp. 41-42), but this role of features will be of little importance in this thesis.

⁵⁶ Crisp (2000) and (2007) distinguishes between ultimate and non-ultimate reasons holding ultimate reasons to be atomistic. Similarly, Raz (2000) and (2006) includes disables and enablers as part of the reason, making a distinction between the complex that is the reason for action and the kind of reasons people cite. There are at least two considerations that such approaches this implausible. Firstly, we would then have to accept that most of the reasons that people do give are simply mistaken. The reason the killing was wrong was not that it was a killing, but that it was a killing not done in wartime, not in self-defence, not for desperate need, and so on and so forth. We might be worried that no reason we could give would be the actual reason. Secondly as is noted by Dancy (2004, p.76) there seems to be no corresponding idea that reasons must function atomistically to be reasons in aesthetics for instance. Barring a convincing argument for why moral reasons must be fundamentally different from other reasons as reasons it seems unsatisfying to have such different conceptions of reasons for different domains. These two considerations are at most preliminary, but I will leave this issue here and operate with the view of reasons preferred by particularists.

⁵⁷ Dancy, 2004, p.82.

⁵⁸ Most generalist responses to particularism grant holism in the theory of reasons. This I take it is done for partly dialectical reasons as well as some inherent plausibility to the claim. See McKeever and Ridge (2006) and Väyrynen (2009) for two examples of generalists who accept holism while arguing against particularism.

To sum up, particularists are united by a negative attitude towards principles. They differ both in the kinds of principles they oppose, and the way in which they oppose them. Particularism may be given as the claim that “morality in no way depends on moral principles”. The main argument for particularism is the argument from the holism of reasons⁵⁹. Reasons are understood as features of a situation which either favour an action or make an action right. Holism of reasons is the thesis that reasons shift moral valence from situation to situation, i.e. that reasons are radically context dependent. Shifts in valence are explained by differences between the situations. The features of situations that explain shifting valences are called disablers and enablers.

I will now (1.2.1) give criteria for moral principles and a generalist ethic and (1.2.2) an account of moral reasoning. Against the background of these criteria and that account, it will be possible to (1.3) raise some objections to particularism.

1.2. Moral principles and moral reasoning

1.2.1 Developing criteria for moral principles and a generalist ethic

Even with the outline of principles given above the reader may still be justified in finding the concept muddled. It has been a common charge that particularists operate with either no definition of the principles which they criticise, or that the definitions they give are so narrow that most principled ethics are unaffected by the criticism. I will therefore here give a set of criteria for something to count as a principle which should encompass a range of generalist views. My assumption is that the role of principles that is of interest is the role(s) they can play in reasoning, if some suggested principle cannot serve those roles it is beside the point in the generalist/particularist debate conceived as a debate about the structure of moral reasoning.

As mentioned, I will give criteria for principles fulfilling two roles, principles as standards and principles as guides. Let me deal with principles as standards first. McKeever and Ridge hold

⁵⁹ However, both Gleeson (2007) and Thomas (2011) argue for particularisms independently of holism. Another line of argument for particularism takes Wittgensteinian rule-following considerations as its starting point, see Garfield (2000) for such an argument and Lofti (2009) for a reply to such arguments.

that standards “must provide sufficient conditions for the application of a moral concept”⁶⁰. They qualify this both in terms of finitude, and in that the standard should be explanatory⁶¹. Moral standards are not necessarily easy to apply. They may be too complex or in other ways defective in terms of guidance. Therefore, principles as guides can become important for a generalist ethic. A moral principle as a guide need not be completely accurate. “A guide might not cover all cases and might even have some false implications. Instead, guides must only provide useful direction to a conscientious moral agent”⁶². The question to consider about guides is, according to McKeever and Ridge, “... whether there are guides for particular kind of agents in particular contexts.”⁶³. Guides can also play an important role in explaining how less than perfect moral agents can have a use for moral theory, even though one cannot always reach the standard one can become better at it. While an agent does not necessarily know, or grasp, the correct moral standard that does not make knowing a moral guide pointless. These two conceptions of a principle can be combined to make an action-guiding standard⁶⁴. Standards need not be absolute and can be hedged in various ways⁶⁵. A hedging condition can either be general (for example: lying is wrong *ceteris paribus*) or specific (for example: lying is wrong except in circumstances a and b).

What then are the roles of principles? Principles clearly can have an explanatory role (conceived of as standards). Explanation is here something stronger than just being a generalisation that holds, either defeasibly or without exception, and something weaker than making the act right⁶⁶. This criterion has its converse in justification. What can explain that my action was right (or wrong as the case may be) can also justify doing an action. It is important to note that justification is not necessarily right-making, what makes right is the feature of the situation that is cited by the justification (i.e. the content of the justification). If the principle “it is wrong to lie” is true, hedged or not, it explains because it correctly cites a feature that is wrong-making. In the hedged case we can of course be mistaken under

⁶⁰ McKeever and Ridge, 2008, p. 1179. Note that this conception of standard is slightly different from the one McKeever and Ridge gave in their (2006).

⁶¹ McKeever and Ridge, 2008, p. 1179

⁶² McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p. 8.

⁶³ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p. 9.

⁶⁴ McKeever and Ridge, 2008, p.1181.

⁶⁵ Väyrynen (2009) offers an account of moral principles as hedged. Albertzart (2014) offers an account of defeasible moral reasoning which amounts to a hedged principle.

⁶⁶ The notion of explanation comes up in much literature on particularism. An important question is for instance whether hedged principles are genuinely explanatory (McKeever and Ridge, 2008, p.1180).

certain circumstances if we apply the principle willy-nilly. The possibility of misapplication does not mean however that the principle does not explain when it is applied correctly⁶⁷.

Further note that moral principles are practical. Principles are supposed to guide us towards right actions. Mere guidance is not enough however as a particularist could happily accept a rule-of-thumb here and there. I will expand on this below, but the crucial difference seems to be that principles give fundamentally different support to a conclusion/action from rules-of-thumb or heuristics used in reasoning. McKeever and Ridge distinguish between standards and guides in the way outlined above at least in part it seems to me to avoid making the picture of the ethical agent too deliberative. They note that principles can guide moral perception and be applied/followed unthinkingly by being internalised by an agent⁶⁸. That is certainly true, for my purposes however what is of interest is how the reasoning that justified the behaviour could be represented. One should always recall that a moral theory that demands constant reasoning and deliberation would be widely at odds with our moral lives (and sometimes indeed thinking about it can be what is wrong in the first place).

Guidance then cannot be divorced from standards on a generalist account. This is not to say that the guidance must be provided by the same formulation of the principle as the standard. Generally, guides could be justified by making a moral agent better at reaching the demands of a standard. I will give two sets of criteria that apply to any generalist ethic. The first concerns the principles themselves and set limits to what counts as a well-formed principle. The second set of criteria concerns what it takes for a generalist theory as such to be well-formed. So, a mere guide cannot be a principle on its own, and a heap of guides would not make an ethic principled. Guides can be a part of a generalist ethic in which guides make up one level and standards another.

Let me begin by giving criteria for principles, and then move on to criteria for a generalist ethic.

⁶⁷ For related notions of explanation see Lance and Little (2008, p.54), and Väyrynen (2018, p.842).

⁶⁸ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, pp. 220 – 222.

1.2.1.1 Criteria for moral principles

We have in the above already identified two criteria. One we may call the explanatory/justificatory criteria associated with standards, and second the criteria given by guides.

Guidance: I will adopt this name for the criteria that follows naturally from principles thought of as guides. That a principle is to be applicable limits its complexity. A principle that has too many specifications cannot for instance cannot serve this function (example: “lying is wrong except in circumstances a, b, c, d...”, at some point such a list becomes unmanageable) ⁶⁹.

Justification/explanation: As mentioned already principles must justify action. That is to say that principles must take us from premises to conclusions. Note also that principles must be prior to the case to which it applies to serve this role and it must be specifying general features⁷⁰.

Substantiality: At least one additional criterion should be given for moral principles namely that of substantiality. A moral principle must be substantial. An example of an insubstantial moral principle is the following: if “lighing” is defined as all those lies which are wrong, then the principle “lighing is wrong” is insubstantial, or trivial. The reason it is of no use is that it does not tell us anything about which lies are wrong. The mistake in this case is that the principle “lighing is wrong” does not link non-moral content to a moral judgement. “Lighing is wrong” is certainly a true moral statement, but its truth does not matter at all. Moral principles must therefore link non-moral to moral contents⁷¹. Another way of putting this is to say that principles must have a descriptive shape⁷².

I will in the proceeding call general moral statements which fulfill these criteria moral principles.

⁶⁹ Dancy (2004, p.116-117) and Väyrynen (2018, p.842) also give what is essentially this criterion.

⁷⁰ For the most part I will simply use “justification” when I mention this criterion. See section 1.3.3 for an argument for why principles must be prior to the case in which they occur.

⁷¹ McNaughton gives this criterion as follows: “Moral principles [...] tell us which of the non-moral features of any situation are morally significant...” (1988, pp.191 – 192).

⁷² McKeever and Ridge (2008, p.1180) connect this to what is required for something to be explanatory. Väyrynen (2018, p.844) introduces a similar demand on principles to be substantive and informative.

1.2.1.2 Criteria for a generalist ethic

As stated, I will give two criteria for a generalist ethic. These are:

Coverage: Dancy states this criterion as follows: “The moral status of every action must be determined by the principles, in one way or another. (Otherwise the principles would fail to cover the ground.)”⁷³. First note that this criterion is not unproblematic, as Maike Albertzart points out it is not clear that for example Rossian generalism would count as a principled ethic on the coverage criteria⁷⁴. This as beyond *prima facie* principles there are no further principle that determines what one should do, it therefore does not fulfil a strict reading of the coverage criterion.

The coverage criterion seems very reasonable however, if an ethic did not cover the ethical ground it seems a poor moral theory. I suggest that we read “...determined by the principles, in one way or another” broadly so that the demand on an ethic is not to give a decision procedure for ethics, but simply that principles are *involved* in determining what is the right action. This revised coverage criterion would then identify Rossian generalism as generalism. The proper sense of being involved can be given as being part of a justification for the action in question (through providing support for a conclusion).

Epistemic plausibility: “We must be able to learn the principles, either from experience in some way or from each other, i.e. by testimony.”⁷⁵. Dancy’s epistemological criterion is straightforward enough, we must be able to come to know moral principles. Dancy does at times insist on another related notion that of particular cases being tests for a principle, I will not attach any weight to that here however⁷⁶. I take it that this criterion is not too problematic, and will therefore not spend much time on it as I proceed.

A principle then is a moral generality that provides justification and/or guidance. It is substantial, meaning that it connects non-moral to moral content. An ethic is generalist provided the principles in it cover the moral ground and are knowable. If an ethic has

⁷³ Dancy, 2004, p.116.

⁷⁴ Albertzart, 2014, pp.16-17.

⁷⁵ Dancy, 2004, p.117.

⁷⁶ See Dancy, 1993, p.68.

separate principles for guidance and justification, there must be established some connection between these.

1.2.2 A principled account of moral reasoning

Before stating what I will take moral reasoning with principles to be, I will say something about moral reasoning in general. Moral reasoning is first and foremost a process by which we reach moral judgements. Harman, Kilby and Armstrong distinguish between three senses of this process. Firstly, as unconscious processing of information and unconsciously formed judgements through emotion or intuition. Secondly, as conscious thought where we work out what we should do or believe. Thirdly, more extensive and reflective practices exemplified by the practice of philosophy⁷⁷. Of these it is the first two that are the object of this thesis.

The goal of moral reasoning is practical. By that I mean that we want to reason well about moral matters primarily for the purpose of acting well. Moral reasoning itself however need not be understood as terminating in actions, but can be understood as terminating in an intention to act or in a belief about what is morally right⁷⁸. I will not try to settle what moral reasoning terminates in, and will therefore speak of conclusions to moral reasoning in general. One attractive way of understanding success in moral reasoning is to understand that as responsiveness to reasons⁷⁹. I reason well then when I am responsive to the features which make something right or wrong. Two points should be noted here. First, this allows for unconscious as well as conscious reasoning to be evaluated on the same grounds. Second, someone may reason well on this account even if they do not do what they consciously concluded that they should do. Arpaly offers the illustrative case of inverse weakness of will here⁸⁰. For example, if someone has concluded that they should do x and fail to do x, they may be better off (in terms of being more rational) than if they did do x provided x was not

⁷⁷ Harman, Kelby, and Sinnott-Armstrong, 2010, p. 208

⁷⁸ See Dancy (2018) for an account of practical reasoning as reasoning to action, see Raz (2015) for an account of practical reasoning as reasoning to belief, see Broome (2013) for an account of practical reasoning as reasoning to intention.

⁷⁹ See Arpaly (2003) for an account of rationality as responsiveness to reasons. Kauppinen (2018) gives an overview of the reasons-responsiveness view of practical reasoning as well as contrasting it with a rule guided view.

⁸⁰ Arpaly, 2003, p. 9-11.

what they had reason to do⁸¹. All this is to say that I operate with a quite broad conception of reasoning here.

It is important to be clear on the point that the concern here is normative not descriptive. The question is not whether some of the reasoning people do is principled or unprincipled. It would in fact surprise me if some reasoning did not proceed by use of principle and some reasoning without principle. As the point is normative what is important is how we can evaluate reasoning (whether conscious or unconscious) as good or bad moral reasoning⁸².

When I offer an account of moral reasoning with principles below, it must first and foremost show how principles can be used to evaluate reasoning as good or bad morally. As reasoning includes both conscious and unconscious processes the account will also need to explain how unconscious or implicit reasoning can be understood as principled.

The most basic and perhaps classical picture of how this is to proceed we can call the deductive-subsumptive method of reasoning⁸³. A principle P1 states that “all instances of action x are wrong”. The agent then identifies some considered or done action as of type x, and concludes that that act is wrong. We can represent this as follows.

P1: All xs are wrong

P2: A is an x

C: A is wrong

The advantage of such a representation is that if we disagree about the wrongness of A that disagreement must either be a disagreement about whether A is an x, ie. A disagreement about a descriptive feature, or a disagreement about whether P1 is true. A further advantage is that the conclusion follows from the premises, we can therefore be justified in our belief in the conclusion or in acting on the principle. This offers a very clear way of evaluating whether a piece of moral reasoning is correct. In short, if we have the right moral principle and the right understanding of the case then our reasoning will be correct and nothing more can be said about the matter.

⁸¹ See Arpaly (2003, pp. 76-78) for an argument to this effect.

⁸² In the case of unconscious reasoning one must of course offer a reconstruction of that reasoning before one can evaluate it.

⁸³ Harman, Kelby and Sinnott-Armstrong, 2010, p.213.

There are however several reasons to think that this model is problematic. Firstly, the conclusion does not follow if the principle is hedged by some general clause. Secondly, it has not yet addressed how conflict between principles is to be solved. Thirdly, it fits badly with the holism of reasons. I will therefore now give an account of reasoning with hedged principles (and modify the simple model of reasoning given above). From that account I will draw out what a particularist account of reasoning must match to be successful (1.2.4).

A hedged moral principle in general can be given as “it is wrong to x, *hedging condition*”. Hedging conditions can as mentioned be specific (“it is wrong to x, except in a, b, and c”) or general (“it is wrong to x, normally”). A general hedging condition can require both skill and care in knowing when a principle applies. It is not clear whether this skill can be understood as dependent on principles⁸⁴. Given the revised coverage criterion given above however that is not an issue.

Maike Albertzart understands moral reasoning as defeasible reasoning along a model given by John Horty⁸⁵. Horty’s project is to develop a logic for non-monotonic (defeasible) reasoning⁸⁶. On this view a hedged principle supports a conclusion when its hedging clause is not relevant. Knowing when a hedging condition is not relevant can either be understood as knowing that there are no other moral principles that interfere in this case (or that principles having priority over other potentially relevant moral principles), or simply having the skill to know that it does not apply in this case (as this case is abnormal in some way)⁸⁷. Albertzart seems to prefer the first route writing that “Given that we agree on some principle of fairness or equal opportunity, nepotism is not a morally acceptable reason for favouring one principle over another”⁸⁸. If the principle of fairness did not apply that would require explanation, by another principle intervening⁸⁹. We could represent this (a bit clumsily) as follows:

⁸⁴ Albertzart (2014) argues that it can be so understood. Horty (2014, pp. 147 – 165) seems to require a non-principled understanding.

⁸⁵ Albertzart, 2014, p.170.

⁸⁶ See Horty (2014) for a development of this logic. Non-monotonic reasoning is reasoning in which given a set of premises which support a conclusion addition of further premises could undermine that conclusion.

⁸⁷ This skill can of course be subject to further analysis and some hedged principles have hedging clauses that give the general conditions for their own application. For an example see Väyrynen 2009, pp. 105-106.

⁸⁸ Albertzart, 2014, p. 170.

⁸⁹ Albertzart, 2014, p. 171.

P1: x is wrong, except when x is y⁹⁰.

P2: A is x

C: A is wrong

If we add:

P3: A is y

Then we get:

C*: A is not wrong.

Addition of still further premises could of course overturn this again (when considering a general hedging condition)⁹¹. What principles do in this kind of case is justify the conclusion when our description of the case is complete, i.e. when all relevant premises (reasons) have been cited. Many moral cases are of course far more complicated with some considerations pointing towards one conclusion and other considerations towards another. Several principles can be applicable, and even when ultimately defeated may leave residual responsibilities. Another option would be to say that one weighs the reasons for and the reasons against relative to each other. I will not employ this idea, both for reasons of simplicity and as the (kind of) model of reasoning given above can be understood as an alternative⁹².

Moral reasoning, conscious or unconscious, can be represented in this kind of model. To reason well in this context is to have the right principles and all the relevant moral reasons, and drawing the correct conclusion from that. Principles fulfil both of these roles. First, principles let one judge of some feature of the situation that it is a reason (as any feature that is not described by a principle is not a reason⁹³). Second, given the reasons present one can come to a conclusion.

⁹⁰ In the case of a general hedged principle this specified clause can be understood as the consequence of application of moral skill in this instance. Or it could express the judgement that no other principle applies to this situation.

⁹¹ I will not consider other complicating factors such as vagueness and indeterminacy here to keep the picture clear. See Albrecht (2014) for a discussion of both.

⁹² See Horty, 2014, pp. 2-4.

⁹³ Per the coverage criterion given at 1.2.1.2.

There is one further step in reasoning that I will note. Before deciding that some feature is a moral reason one must identify it as a possible moral reason. Principles can account for this as well. A principle, in the very least in the form of a guide, can be internalised⁹⁴. This internalisation leads to the agent being more aware of situations in which that feature which the principle mentions occurs, in short one learns to see certain considerations as important. Such internalisation can also account for how holding a moral principle can supply one with the moral skill necessary to apply it correctly. I do not think a generalist account needs to presuppose that this is the only way to identify possible reasons, but it is at least an option.

1.2.3 Moral heuristics

Before summing up what has been established about moral reasoning let me make a short note on moral heuristics. It would, I think, be silly to deny that there are many useful roles to which principles have been applied. Dancy suggested in his *Moral Reasons* that one way of conceiving of the usefulness of some principles is as a sort of reminder of the valence a feature may have⁹⁵. A proposed principle of chess “doubled pawns are to be avoided” can serve this role by alerting a chess player to the fact that in most cases doubled pawns will be a detriment to his or her position. Typically, the mistake is not that people do not allow their pawns to be doubled when they should, but the opposite, hence the reminder. The same can be the role of some moral principles. Most people lie more rather than less than they should, a reminder that most of the time lying is wrong can be useful for practical purposes. What the particularist must deny is that this reveals something terribly interesting about lying, and that it seems is an option that is still open.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, pp. 220-222.

⁹⁵ Dancy, 1993, p.67.

⁹⁶ Albrecht, 2014 p. 155 also argues that principles cannot be understood as heuristics of this kind.

1.2.4 Goals for an account of moral reasoning

I have in the above identified three steps to moral reasoning. Namely identifying some feature of a situation as a possible reason⁹⁷, deciding whether a possible reason is a reason and concluding from the reasons present as to what one should do⁹⁸. Moral principles can help with the first step through internalisation, features must further be given by a principle to be reasons, and principles provide justification for concluding from the reasons present. A particularist account of moral reasoning must be able to achieve these three steps without principles. Principles also allow for a clear location of disagreement either one disagrees about the principle or about what is the case. In section 1.3 below I will draw out why moral reasoning and moral guidance has seemed problematic for particularists.

1.3. Objections to particularism

Let me first sum up what has been established so far. At this point we have seen the building blocks of a particularist theory of ethics. The holism of reasons establishes the possibility of particularism. However, many forms of principled ethics can handle holism as well. Most challenges to particularism have accepted reasons holism, and I therefore take it for granted. There is by now general agreement that holism may be necessary for a plausible particularism but is not sufficient to rule out a principled ethic⁹⁹. I will, as stated, assume that the particularist denial of principle is largely correct for the purposes of this thesis.

In this section I will bring out three related objections to particularism. Objections that can make one question whether any particularist project could succeed as an ethical theory. Firstly, the flattening objection (1.3.1), secondly, the guidance objection (1.3.2), and thirdly the objection from reasoning (1.3.3). These objections are related in that they all question whether we can make sense of moral thought and judgement given particularism. In the next chapter (2.) I will look at some different responses particularists could give to these objections.

⁹⁷ Failure in identifying possible reasons can come in different degrees: one can fail to understand that there is anything to reason about, and thus fail to reason at all or one can fail to identify some of the reasons present and thus reach the wrong conclusion.

⁹⁸ McKeever and Ridge (2006, p.140) give essentially the same list as requirements for practical wisdom

⁹⁹ See for example Dancy (2004, p.82) and McKeever and Ridge (2006, p.45).

1.3.1 The flattening objection

The so-called flattening objection is a much-discussed objection to moral particularism¹⁰⁰. The problem emerges as which features can be reasons is not specified. In an oft-cited passage Little writes that “... any feature may assume moral significance, from shoelace colour to the day of the week: after all, against a rich enough story, there are cases in which the change from Monday to Tuesday makes all the difference”¹⁰¹. The flattening objection takes this as its starting point. There seemingly is a mistake in, even if any kind of feature could play a role, considering them on par with features such as lying and killing¹⁰². Even if one can exclude some features as possibly having relevance one might still argue that the flattening objection holds. Seeing and knowing the difference in the inherent moral status of certain reasons is part of being morally competent (if there is such an inherent moral status). A point here is that it is too demanding on agents that they should be able to be aware of reasons that are as bizarre as shoelace colour, and that how one could come to know that such features are reasons is perfectly unclear. The main particularist response to this has been to introduce so-called default reasons¹⁰³. I will return to that response in section 2.1.3.

1.3.2 Objections from guidance

I will here present three different objections that all question whether particularist theories can provide moral guidance.

1.3.2.1 Predictability

Brad Hooker illustrates this objection with an example. Consider Patty the particularist, “All you know of her is that she really does live by her particularist ethic”¹⁰⁴. “Now imagine that you can strike a deal with Patty. She asks you to help her get in her crop now in return for

¹⁰⁰ For a statement of the flattening objection see McKeever and Ridge 2006 p. 47-48.

¹⁰¹ Little, 2000, p. 291. As will become obvious as we go along this is not Little’s current view.

¹⁰² What is at stake is plausibly whether shoelace colour can have direct moral relevance, rather than trivially having relevance as the content of a promise for example. McKeever and Ridge argue this in their 2006.

¹⁰³ There are some responses to the flattening objection which are not based on default reasons. Thomas (2007) argues that the moral landscape is best understood as flat, while Hicks (2016) argues that particularism does not necessarily flatten the moral landscape.

¹⁰⁴ Hooker, 2000, p.17.

her promising to help you get yours in next month”¹⁰⁵. In this scenario we do not doubt Patty’s good intentions, she will do what she thinks is right. Hooker’s point is that one would not want to make a deal with Patty as she would be unpredictable. If Patty was a generalist agent we could, depending on the moral theory she supported, know that she would in the very least consider having given a promise as a good reason to keep that promise. There is I take it much that can be said about this case and its presuppositions. What is interesting here however is the picture of the particularist agent as a black box. As I have mentioned earlier particularists are committed to morality being rational and therefore to there being an explanation of what makes one case differ (morally) from another. It seems that if one can clarify how reasoning is supposed to look for particularists then this objection can be avoided quite cleanly.

1.3.2.2 Special pleading

Another objection to particularism is that particularism is especially vulnerable to special pleading¹⁰⁶. Special pleading is making an exception for oneself on spurious grounds. Psychologically special pleading is a well-known phenomenon. When principles are conceived as guides, with or without internalisation, one use of guides it is suggested is to avoid cases such as this. If I try to make an exception for myself in a case involving lying for instance the principle “it is wrong to lie” will if held force me to reconsider. Having internalised the principle should also make one especially aware of circumstances in which one is tempted to lie¹⁰⁷. If particularists cannot offer such general moral advice it is claimed special pleading, citing this or that feature of the situation as what makes a difference here, is far easier. Note that different generalist theories would be vulnerable to the same objection in varying degrees with the more inflexible theory being better suited to respond to the objection.

¹⁰⁵ Hooker, 2000, p. 17.

¹⁰⁶ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, pp. 202 -211.

¹⁰⁷ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, pp. 220-222

1.3.2.3 Framing Effects

Another issue raised first by McKeever and Ridge is vulnerability to framing effects. A framing effect is essentially that one way of formulating a problem, rather than another, can have profound influence on how people see it, even though the underlying material is the same¹⁰⁸. McKeever and Ridge point out that this might hold for the distinction between killing and letting die (if one assumes that too much weight is often put on that distinction). The generalist can recommend one way of framing that issue rather than another if that makes one less likely to distinguish between killing and letting die¹⁰⁹. They suspect, I think rightly, that particularists will be temperamentally opposed to the suggestion that one way of framing problems is always preferable¹¹⁰. If that approach is unavailable to the particularist, I take it that what we at the very least want from our theory is a way of distinguishing between a case where an issue has been framed correctly and an issue where it has been framed wrongly¹¹¹.

1.3.3 Objections from reasoning

Before considering particularist responses to these objections I will bring out one final worry in more detail. The question is essentially if particularists can make sense of moral reasoning and moral disagreement.

Lance and Little argue “In order for one to move in reasoning from *P* to *Q*, one must be able to ascertain *P* in a way that is epistemically prior to ascertaining *Q*. But for Dancy, *P*’s standing in a relation of ‘reason-for’ to *Q* is a stubbornly particular, brute metaphysical fact. *P* is a reason for *Q* *in this very context*, and nothing is thereby implied about whether it is a reason in any other.”¹¹². The point is that there is in the particularism I have presented no prior fact about what is a reason for what. Recall that reasons are features of situations, it is

¹⁰⁸ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p.211.

¹⁰⁹ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p. 214.

¹¹⁰ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p. 215.

¹¹¹ There is an empirical question here about what actually does allow one to avoid special pleading and framing effects. That empirical question I will not attempt to answer. The point when I return to these objections in 4.2 is that we can tentatively identify resources which seem to place particularists and generalists at equal footing with regard to special pleading and framing effects.

¹¹² Lance and Little, 2008, p.60.

in the situations in which those features occur that they become reasons for acting. A feature devoid of context, given the holism of reasons, is not reason for or against anything. A principle determines that a type of feature can be a reason prior to the situation. In the simple model of moral reasoning I gave this as P1: All xs are wrong, P2:A is an x, C: A is wrong. Lance and Little essentially argue that for the particularist P1 must be understood as P1*: x is wrong in this situation. P1* however is presumably a conclusion not a premise. In other words, particularism risks making itself dependent on an account of reasoning that requires that one always grasp what is the case all at once¹¹³. That seems to fit badly with experience, and offers no starting point for an account of reasoning.

Another way of thinking about the same problem is to consider moral disagreement. Imagine two particularist agents who disagree about a moral issue. They can describe the case to each other, enumerate reasons, but if they disagree about whether some specific feature is a reason there are no tools to provide us with an answer to who is right. If someone claims that lying is here not a reason against an action, and cite some considerations that supposedly show that lying is disabled (or not-enabled) as a reason, what can be said to show that this is not the case? The objections to particularism given in this section (1.3) seek to show that nothing (sufficient) has been said to answer that worry for particularists.

There is I take it need for a particularist account that can provide a response to the flattening objection, the objection from guidance and the objection from reasoning. I will in the next chapter consider some particularist responses to these objections. I will consider two suggestions made by Dancy. First, understanding justification in ethics as akin to narrative, and second the introduction of a special class of reasons called default reasons. I will argue that neither of these proposals succeed. I will then consider the contextualist position of Lance and Little as their account avoids the objection from reasoning and might seem a promising compromise for particularists. That will however fall prey to one of two worries. Either the account becomes principled or it must rest on a problematic conception of normality.

¹¹³ Lance and Little, 2008, p. 60.

Chapter 2: Particularist accounts of moral reasoning

In the previous chapter I have laid out an issue for moral particularists namely, how to account for moral reasoning. The flattening objection, the objection from guidance and the objection from reasoning all seek to show that particularists cannot offer a satisfactory account of moral reasoning. In this chapter I will evaluate some responses to this criticism available to particularists.

I will begin by considering what Dancy has had to say about moral reasoning and judgement more generally. Two salient points will be made clear. Dancy seems to hold a view of moral reasoning that is less demanding than the one I gave in section 1.2 (2.1.1), and Dancy is also hesitant about holding there to be something which explains why reasons are the reasons they are (2.1.2). He does however see an issue with regard to moral reasoning and proposes that one adopt so called default reasons to respond both to the flattening objection and to provide moral guidance.

I will therefore (2.1.3) consider whether default reasons are a promising suggestion that particularists should adopt. I will argue that default reasons are both lacking as a starting point for reasoning and that we lack a convincing statement of what default reasons are. As such they seem unpromising.

One option in response to this lack of promise is to adopt the account given by Lance and Little which sits somewhere between particularism and generalism (2.2.1). It is claimed that this contextualist position incorporates much of that which was attractive about particularism while still finding room for a kind of ethical generality¹¹⁴. There are at least two interesting points to make here. I will argue that Lance and Little's defeasible generalisations are in their current formulation quite ordinary moral principles (hedged to be sure, but not that different from other hedged principles) (2.2.2). I will further argue that in the formulation most amenable to particularists such defeasible generalisations must rely on a demanding notion of normality and that this makes the account unappealing (2.2.3).

The upshot of the chapter then is that notions of defaults and defeasible generalisations do not make for a particularist account of moral reasoning. Particularists must therefore look

¹¹⁴ Contextualism is Lance and Little's (2008) term for their position.

elsewhere. My suggestion, to be developed in the next chapter, will be that the most promising alternative is a particularist virtue ethic.

2.1 Dancy on moral reasoning

Dancy's perhaps most memorable statement about issues of moral judgement is "But really 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."¹¹⁵. At the same time Dancy is aware that there is a potential problem here, and he wishes to avoid "... the sort of pure variabilism that threatens to turn judgement into mere guesswork"¹¹⁶. I will now look at how Dancy attempts to avoid this problem.

2.1.1 Narrative, shape and justification

In his *Moral Reasons* Dancy suggested that justification in ethics would be realised by a well-constructed narrative¹¹⁷. There and elsewhere he also sees judgement as predicated on getting the "shape" of the situation right. In the account of reasoning presented earlier justification is achieved through subsumption under a principle. In the case of reasoning with hedged principles subsumption is more difficult, but hedged principles still provide support for a conclusion. Dancy wishes to reject this model, instead taking description to be sufficient for justification¹¹⁸. The idea is that when we give reasons what we are trying to do is to make others see the situation in the way we see it. Success is simply for that story to be convincing¹¹⁹. That is not to say that we cannot evaluate a story on grounds of its coherence,

¹¹⁵ Dancy, 2017. See however Dancy, 2004, p. 157 for a somewhat more conciliatory take, in which comparisons between cases may inform even though the focus is still on the case at hand.

¹¹⁶ Dancy, 2004, p. 185.

¹¹⁷ Dancy, 1993, p.113.

¹¹⁸ Dancy 1993, p. 113.

¹¹⁹ "We succeed in our aim when our story sounds right. Moral justification is therefore not subsumptive in nature but narrative", Dancy, 1993, p.113.

if a story or the shape we present of a situation is incoherent it can presumably be ruled out as irrational without any specifically moral criteria. Combining this with the categories of enablers and disablers, and attenuators and intensifiers given in chapter 1 we can perhaps say that for Dancy the narrative in question must also be able to give the features of a situation those roles to accurately capture the shape of the situation. For practical purposes one of course only cites those features which are of importance to the narrative.

Dancy has also recently further developed an account of practical reasoning¹²⁰. He there takes the starting point of moral reasoning to be "... beliefs about what will upset other people, what might help them – that sort of thing"¹²¹. This is of course completely in tune with the pluralism that has characterised Dancy's particularist project from its very beginning¹²². What Dancy does not do in that work however is give an account of moral justification. The shape of a situation is something we try to make our reasoning match, and matching that normative shape is what it is to reason well.

The issue at stake between the account of reasoning I gave earlier (at 1.2.2), and Dancy's conception of moral reasoning is a difference in what it would take to achieve justification. In the principled case justification is to have subsumed the situation under the principle, while knowing that the relevant hedging condition is not a concern (which we know either through a moral skill or through it not being in conflict with other principles). It is however not clear when narrative justification is successful.

To see this problem concerning justification consider special pleading and framing effects. If all narratives that were offered in defence of special pleading were incoherent one could of course consider this enough. Then the case would be that while one could not offer more concrete advice than "look again" one still could judge the case as defective moral reasoning, qua incoherent. However, that would not be available in the case of framing effects as the issue there is precisely that sometimes what seems a very convincing narrative might be wrong. The issue in both cases is not that people are vulnerable to special pleading and framing effects as such. What is problematic is that there is no way to determine that

¹²⁰ See Dancy, 2018. His primary target there is to establish the possibility of reasoning to action something I will not consider here.

¹²¹ Dancy, 2018, p.84.

¹²² See Dancy (1983) for an explicit treatment of particularism as a brand of moral pluralism.

the special pleader lacks justification. Dancy is not in this case without options, however. One option would be to shift the ground, while saying nothing more about what is a good narrative, Dancy could give an account of the good reasoner. What are the traits of the good reasoner, how can one determine who makes the right choice? Interestingly Dancy does not go down this route¹²³. I will return to why that might be the case in the summary of this chapter (2.3). Another possibility would be to specify what makes something a reason. Such a specification would allow us to see that some reasons cited in some narratives could not be sound. This Dancy is unwilling to do as will be seen below (2.1.2). Dancy instead chooses to turn to the notion of a default reason. I will argue that this move is unsuccessful and that as such Dancy's particularism is unable to respond to the objections from reasoning (2.1.3).

2.1.2. A structure to the shape?

One way to give more content to the narrative account would be to offer an account of how a feature could be a reason. This would tell us what to look for when we try to determine whether some piece of reasoning is good reasoning. Most of the time of course we are able to distinguish good from bad reasoning, just as we are able to know that this or that is or is not a reason for action. In difficult cases however what we are after is a way of telling whether someone has got the moral shape of the situation right or wrong. The issue for Dancy here seems to be that he is unwilling to give what he calls a meta-reason that "is a reason why whatever is a reason is a reason"¹²⁴. He writes "I am tempted to echo Prichard here: our sense that something is a reason is absolutely underivative and immediate, and can be given no independent theoretical support"¹²⁵. What Dancy here excludes, it seems, is the possibility of a solution to a moral disagreement if the views are not unreasonable. If two parties disagree about which reasons count in this case, there seems to be no way of judging who is right about what the reasons are.

Dancy gives the following example of a meta-reason "That it is the case that p is a good reason for A to ϕ if and only if there is some E such that, if fully rational and perfectly informed, A would desire that E and given that p , ϕ -ing subserves the prospect of its becoming or

¹²³ See Dancy, 1993, p.64.

¹²⁴ Dancy, 2004, p.160.

¹²⁵ Dancy, 2004, p. 160 – 161.

remaining the case that *E.*"¹²⁶. Now Dancy also advances a companions in guilt argument here noting that many generalist theories also offer no such general criterion¹²⁷. However, that seems overstated. While I suppose many would find it difficult to offer a criterion for reasons in general, most moral theories specify what it would be for something to count as a valid moral reason. That move limits both the kind of feature that could be a reason as well as giving a way of distinguishing between any proposed moral reason and actual reasons. Dancy seems to offer something of the sort when he writes that "A reason to act is such a reason because it reveals (or at least points us towards) some value there could be in so acting"¹²⁸. That will however only be enough if one can specify what value(s) we should pursue¹²⁹.

To exemplify the issue. Taking the first personal stance we might of course describe any kind of reasoning which aims to realise some value as an instance of moral reasoning. Good and bad moral reasoning however depends not just on being rational in a strict sense, but also on having a correct grasp of the moral content. If someone believes that maximising the number of shells in the world is a value certain features would count as reasons for action given that value. Now we would almost certainly disagree with this person on what was a reason for action, and we could trace this back to the absurd value held. What I want to say is that if morality is a rational enterprise, which is typically stated as common ground between particularists and generalists, we must have a way of going about determining whether something is a value or not, and therefore by extension whether some feature is to count as a reason.

Dancy of course contrary to the above holds that something being a reason is "absolutely underivative and immediate". I must admit I see no way of making headway here. If our sense that something is a reason is immediate in such a way then there is of course nothing further to say, but then as far as I can determine there is nothing to say in defence of particularism here. If reasons simply appear to us, then it seems that the picture of moral reasoning as a black box would have to persist. There would be no telling for what reason a particularist agent would or would not break a promise, other than our intuitive feel for

¹²⁶ Dancy, 2004, p.160.

¹²⁷ Dancy, 2004, p.161.

¹²⁸ Dancy, 2018, p.85.

¹²⁹ In any such specification one would of course have to be wary about introducing something that is always of value as that would be inconsistent with the holism of reasons.

what would count as such a reason. To hold this however would mean that the true question here would be what is sufficient for justification in ethics. Particularists would hold a standard that was less demanding and generalists a standard that demanded more. Whatever the merits of the case this seems an unhappy result for particularists. On such a view morality would not depend on principles only conditional on a far weaker demand for justification. It is then not clear that particularists can adjudicate well in cases of moral disagreement as long as there is disagreement on the reasons present. The particularist will have to say more: one option could be to develop a normative ethical theory that would determine which values are worth pursuing. As mentioned, Dancy does not take that route, instead introducing default reasons which has seemed an attractive way to respond to some of the objections to particularism.

2.1.3 Default reasons

Dancy introduces the concept of a default reason in his *Moral Reasons*, though he only endorses the idea fully later¹³⁰. A default reason is roughly a reason which comes with a specific moral valence already turned on. Recall that default reasons are introduced to face the flattening objection (see below at 1.3.1) against moral particularism and to avoid the “pure variabilism that threatens to turn judgement into mere guesswork”¹³¹. Default reasons are therefore doubly important for a particularist account of reasoning. It seems quite plausible that default reasons could figure in the account of reasoning I gave earlier, and in any case default reasons might give some structure to help the narrative account of justification. I will now state how Dancy suggests we should understand default status and point out some problems with this conception.

To be consistent with holism a default reason must be able to change valency. The initial idea of a default reason is a reason that comes with a particular valence already turned on. Coming already turned on is to be understood as a metaphysical property of that reason, not simply a useful short-hand. In “Defending the right” Dancy gives the notion further development as default reasons being reasons that need no help to fulfil their favouring

¹³⁰ Compare Dancy (1993) with Dancy (1999, 2004 and 2007a).

¹³¹ Dancy, 2004, p. 185.

role¹³². He writes “But some features do not need to be turned into reasons by the presence of some other feature, and these are the default reasons”¹³³. So, features which are reasons on their own and require interference to not be reasons are default reasons. There are two questions to ask here, can this way of drawing the distinction work and is this view of default reasons attractive to the particularist¹³⁴?

To the second question the answer appears to be no. One attractive feature of particularism, as I understand it, is that it deals with reasons as properly reason giving only within some context¹³⁵. Prior to considering or experiencing a wide range of situation in which lying occurs there is no way of specifying which properties lying has. Default reasons are however the reasons they are independently of context, and while certain other features may interfere the default status is not thereby disturbed. Now of course people do justifiably take certain things for granted. There are for example, many norms regarding conversations and many expectations regarding the world which inform what we take for granted and what we think needs explaining. The particularist should have no trouble admitting that. This at most amounts to saying that we use certain moral heuristics¹³⁶. Default reasons however require something more than such pragmatics to provide justification in our moral reasoning. Conventions can clearly explain why an agent takes something for granted, but whether this or that was an instance of good moral reasoning should not be explained simply by reference to the conventions to which the agent subscribes.

What should we then infer the default status of a feature from? One alternative is of course that the default status of any one feature could be argued for from within our ethical practice. That however makes it difficult to see how there could be a difference between a feature that has default status and a feature that simply seemingly acts in this way. As mentioned, Dancy proposes that default reasons should be understood as reasons that need

¹³² With the exception of enabling conditions with global range. E.g. That the action can be done is perhaps an enabling condition for all practical reasons which favour some action, but it is not to need help in the relevant sense to be dependent on such a global enabling condition.

¹³³ Dancy, 2007a, p. 92.

¹³⁴ In his 2004 Dancy distinguished between default and non-default reasons by positing that default reasons were reasons that did not need an enabler. McKeever and Ridge have (2006, pp. 48 – 55 and 2007) argued convincingly against that way of drawing the distinction. Dancy revises his view in his 2007a in response to that criticism.

¹³⁵ For a similar view see Little, 2000 pp. 281-282.

¹³⁶ See McKeever and Ridge, 2006, pp.72-75.

no help to be the reasons they are¹³⁷. McKeever and Ridge argue that the helper notion is not sufficiently developed by pointing out that helping is best understood as something that holds with persons, and that helping is best understood as a causal relationship. Further neither of these considerations are sufficient for Dancy's account of default reasons¹³⁸. I take the core problem to be that barring a fully worked out account of which reasons are default reasons it seems impossible to distinguish something that is a default reason from something that simply happens to be the case very often.

To take lying as an example, one way of understanding that lying seems to have a default status is to say that in our moral lives (as less than ideal agents) we are often tempted to lie when we should not lie. Perhaps in a different set of circumstances lying tends not to be wrong, we should lie quite often (perhaps in an oppressive society a greater amount of lying is morally praiseworthy). Clearly what we conceive as standing on its own is shaped by the circumstances we find ourselves in. The issue for me seems to be that if default status is to be conceived as metaphysical it is not clear how "needing help" is to be understood as a metaphysical relation. Or rather it is not clear to me how I could be certain that a reason did not need help as opposed to that it was dependent on enablers that are very often present (and which I am then not aware of). By severing default reasons from enablers/disablers it seems difficult to me to establish how we could learn of such reasons. Enablers and disabler are after all independent features that make a difference for a reason. A reason needing help or not needing help is not a feature that has an effect, but simply a trait of the reason as the reason it is. Understanding default reasons pragmatically, as heuristics that are inferred from our moral experience, allows a clear account of how they can come to be known. Such heuristics can however not be made to do work in moral reasoning in terms of justification.

2.1.4 Summary

There is then as I see it several considerations that count against default reasons. Firstly, they fit badly with other reasons in particularism, by divorcing the status of reasons from the situations in which reasons occur. That is not to say that default reasons are flatly

¹³⁷ "Needing help" should be interpreted literally to be an explication of the idea of a default reason. See McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p. 58.

¹³⁸ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p. 59.

inconsistent with particularism, simply that they fit uneasily into the whole¹³⁹. Secondly the needing help conception seems unsatisfactory on its own, as it is not clear how we can distinguish between some feature needing help to be a reason and some feature not needing help. Furthermore, understanding default reasons as moral heuristics or conventions (that is to say understanding default reasons pragmatically) seems to give us a satisfactory explanation of why we take certain considerations as counting in favour unless otherwise stated. What default reasons could be used to account for then has a far clearer explanation if we think of what we take for granted as expressed by moral heuristics.

I have also argued that lowering the demand on what it takes to be justified leaves the particularist in an awkward position. If there is no explanation of why something is a reason one cannot succeed in providing an account of moral reasoning. This as I gave the second step in a process of moral reasoning as determining of something that is a possible reason that it is a reason. Therefore, it seems that a particularist account must be willing to offer us a (moral) meta-reason, if it is to succeed as an account of moral reasoning. Those sympathetic to particularist claims must therefore look elsewhere for an account of moral reasoning.

For that purpose, I will now turn to Lance and Little. Their approach is I take it interesting to particularists as while they introduce some moral generalities, they take much of the particularist framework on board. Lance and Little have argued that particularism is unable to account for moral reasoning. Their own account can perhaps avoid that charge while still being attractive those sympathetic to particularism.

2.2 Defeasible generalisations

2.2.1 Lance and Little's account

Lance and Little have in a series of papers developed the idea of defeasible generalisations as central to ethics¹⁴⁰. They oppose the idea that "... generalizations must be exceptionless to do genuinely explanatory work"¹⁴¹. Their account can be read as a way to further develop

¹³⁹ This seems to have been Dancy's worry (1993) when he did not endorse default reasons fully.

¹⁴⁰ Especially Lance and Little (2004) and (2008), see also their (2006a and 2006b).

¹⁴¹ Lance, and Little, 2008, p.54.

the idea of default reasons¹⁴². This even though Lance and Little have moved away from particularism to what they call contextualism¹⁴³. Lance and Little call their view contextualist as they adopt many of the assumptions and goals of particularists more generally while insisting that there is some role for generalities in ethics¹⁴⁴¹⁴⁵. I will in the following (2.2.2) argue that defeasible generalisations are either hedged moral principles or (2.2.3) they rely on a problematic conception of normality.

First however let us get clear on what a defeasible generalisation is. The core idea of defeasible generalisations is given as “ ... [of] something [that] has a certain feature, sometimes what we really want to say is not that such a connection always, or even usually, holds, but that the conditions in which it *does* are particularly revealing of that item’s nature.”¹⁴⁶. Note especially that this connection is not intended to necessarily hold most of the time. Defeasible generalisations are therefore clearly distinct from moral heuristics. Lance and Little give defeasible generalisations as generalisations which hold in privileged conditions¹⁴⁷. A defeasible generalisation is intended to be explanatory even though it is “shot through with exceptions”¹⁴⁸. Conversely then we can say that defeasible generalisations provide justification without being exceptionless¹⁴⁹.

To give an example: There might be a defeasible generalisation against lying. If asked to explain why a lie is wrong one can simply point to the defeasible generalisation “in privileged conditions lying is wrong”. When lying is not wrong the conditions are exceptional in some way. According to Lance and Little then part of what understanding the nature of lying is, is to understand that those cases in which it is not are exceptions. Lance and Little further write that “The ‘defeasibly bad-making’ nature of lying thus leaves a trace: a proper moral understanding [...] includes an awareness of the fact that one is in a non-privileged

¹⁴² Dancy (2004) and McKeever and Ridge (2006) read their project in this light.

¹⁴³ Their project has in many ways remained the same through this terminological change. I will below present two ways of understanding their view, one that is straightforwardly generalist and one which might be interesting to particularists.

¹⁴⁴ It is not clear that this immediately makes their view non-particularist given the wide variety of particularisms. Perhaps Lance and Little then are best understood as particularists about a more limited class of principles than say Dancy. See Lance and Little (2008, p. 73) and (2006a) for some support for such a view. This merely classificatory point will be of little importance as we go along.

¹⁴⁵ For two somewhat related approaches see Celano Bruno (2012), and John Horty (2014: pp.147-165).

¹⁴⁶ Lance and Little, 2004, p.441. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁷ See Lance and Little, 2004, p.441 and 2008, p.62.

¹⁴⁸ Lance and Little, 2004, p.451.

¹⁴⁹ I comment on the relation between explanation and justification at 1.2.1.

situation”¹⁵⁰. This understanding sometimes but not always means seeing the non-privileged situation as a morally defective situation¹⁵¹.

The appeal of this view with regard to reasoning should be clear enough. It is not simply that one is justified to begin by assuming the defeasible generalisation to hold, but that the generalisation should inform one’s reasoning in cases in which it does not hold. One can it seems here adopt the account of reasoning with hedged principles more or less wholesale. Defeasible generalisations allow for a way to determine whether some possible reason is a reason. As well as offering justification/explanation for a conclusion drawn from the reasons present in a situation.

The natural question to ask, given this good fit, is whether such defeasible generalisations simply are hedged principles. This hangs on how we come to identify something as a defeasible generalisation. Lance and Little have, it seems to me, given two importantly different suggestions for this. One is the understanding of privileged conditions being determined by some specific moral theory. The second is the understanding of correct defeasible generalisations as simply given by which conditions are privileges¹⁵². I will now (2.2.2) briefly outline how defeasible generalisations as given by a theory become indistinguishable from hedged principles, and therefore not a compromise view that a particularist could adopt. Then I will argue (2.2.3) that the sense of privileged conditions given by Lance and Little is implausible making that option unattractive as well.

2.2.2 Defeasible generalisations as given by a moral theory

Dancy holds that the early formulation of Lance and Little’s position is not a principled ethic¹⁵³. Whether that holds for the later formulation as well is what I’ll consider here. If the correct defeasible generalisations are given by some specific moral theory how are defeasible generalisations different from hedged principles? I gave the criteria of guidance,

¹⁵⁰ Lance and Little, 2008, p.69.

¹⁵¹ Lance and Little, 2008, p.69.

¹⁵² See Lance and Little (2004) and (2008). One should note that the target of the (2004) paper was primarily epistemological, while the target of the (2008) paper was ethical. It is not clear then that Lance and Little conceive of these as different approaches for defeasible generalisations in ethics. As I show below however, we can distinguish between these two approaches.

¹⁵³ See Dancy, 2004, p.116-117.

justification, and substantiality for moral principles earlier. The sense of privileged conditions as given by a specific moral theory can be quite clear. If we assume that some ethic of defeasible generalisations holds the following “in privileged conditions lying is wrong” then this is true insofar as that theory is concerned, and the theory must also explain why certain cases are privileged. This can be done by first identifying lying as a wrong-making feature, and then determining the situations in which lying is not wrong as exceptional.

Dancy argued that defeasible generalisations do not provide guidance, fail in covering the ethical ground, and do not explain the moral status of actions¹⁵⁴. As I already have mentioned Dancy’s interpretation of the coverage criterion for a generalist ethic seems too strict¹⁵⁵. I gave the weaker version of the criterion as claiming that principles were to be involved in some way or another in deciding what the moral status of an action is. If we can make sense of the idea of a trace, then defeasible generalisations seem to cover the ethical ground.

This idea of a trace is also central if the defeasible generalisations are to be applicable outside of normal situations. The idea is that the exceptions are to be explained in part by the normal cases. When playing a game for instance, Lance and Little hold that lying might be morally acceptable or even proper only against the background of a notion of consent which itself relies on lies being abnormal¹⁵⁶. A defeasible generalisation therefore does give some guidance outside of those situations in which it does apply directly.

Finally, it seems that defeasible generalisations can be substantial principles in that they link non-moral to moral content. One possible objection here is that the defeasibility is moral in character and that such generalisations therefore are not substantial. That however would not be a point about defeasible generalisations as such but all hedged principles with general hedges. To argue in this way then would make particularism the minimal claim that principles as exceptionless generalisations are not true. It does seem that defeasible generalisations are substantial and can determine exceptional circumstances without invoking moral content.

¹⁵⁴ See Dancy, 2004, p. 116 – 117.

¹⁵⁵ See section 1.2.1.2

¹⁵⁶ Lance and Little, 2008, p.69.

In addition to this defeasible generalisations are explanatory/justificatory as I pointed out in 2.2. Therefore, it seems we should say that defeasible generalisations understood in this way are principles. Importantly it seems to me that they are hedged principles in a quite straightforward way¹⁵⁷. Then it seems that Lance and Little have failed in giving an account that marks off their contextualist position from more robustly generalist positions. It does not seem then to be a compromise view at all in the debate between particularism and generalism, rather than a particular kind of generalism with hedged principles.

However, one move is still available to the particularist who wants to make such a compromise. Rather than understanding the correct defeasible generalisations as determined by a theory, one could claim that certain defeasible generalisations emerge when considering (a range of) individual cases. This would differentiate the view, from generalism, as the priority of individual cases would be preserved. Something along these lines is far more present in Lance and Little's earlier formulation of their view¹⁵⁸. The difference is that while which principles are true is something we can determine ahead of time, which defeasible generalisations are the case can only be discovered after looking at particular cases. This would preserve the relation of priority between case and generality that a particularist would want. In the next section I will argue that this too cannot be made to work for the particularist, but for a different reason than that it ultimately becomes principled.

2.2.3 Defeasible generalisations as given by privileged conditions

If we understand defeasible generalisations as read off from what holds in privileged conditions rather than the privileged conditions being determined by some prior moral theory the picture becomes somewhat different. It seems that one could hold a particularist view overall while still believing that what holds in normal conditions is amenable to a principled formulation. Those defeasible generalisations must be the case on their own so to speak. If then our understanding of moral concepts rests on a grasp of such defeasible generalisations we again seem able to account for reasoning, without fully committing to a

¹⁵⁷ Compare with the defeasible principles proposed by Albrecht (2014, p.140), and the hedged principles proposed by Väyrynen (2009, p.87).

¹⁵⁸ See Lance and Little (2004).

generalism. This puts all the theoretical weight, so to speak on “in privileged conditions”. Lance and Little technically propose to understand “in privileged conditions” as a modal operator the semantics of which is understood in a possible world framework¹⁵⁹. As what I have to say is somewhat more general, I will not spend much time on that more technical side of their account.

McKeever and Ridge raise a challenge to the view expressed by Lance and Little by querying on which grounds one would be wrong to be treating pain as defeasibly good-making when constitutive of athletic excellence¹⁶⁰. The claim is that “... understanding how pain makes it difficult (in the sense of taxing one’s willpower) to continue and indeed finish a [marathon], for example, does not seem to require understanding how in other contexts pain is a reason to stop running.”¹⁶¹. The point is that if there are some cases in which pain is a good-making feature some of these cases can be seen as essential and revealing parts of the nature of pain. Clearly understanding that pain is uncomfortable is part of understanding its nature, understanding that the discomfort is bad-making seems to be another thing. If which defeasible generalisations hold must be justified as part of a moral theory this question can of course be raised and answered within that theory. As we saw above such a theory would be generalist in a full sense. If which defeasible generalisations hold is to be determined simply by the nature of pain and a sense in which those cases are privileged the picture is not so simple.

Now one way of moving forward is to say that there is a normative point to a concept like pain, which one must get to understand it. This normative point then would somehow explain why pain is defeasibly bad-making not defeasibly good-making. That however threatens to get things the wrong way around. The normative status of pain was supposed to be explained by a defeasible generalisation, understanding of which would be understanding pain, now it seems that understanding pain justifies holding the defeasible generalisation¹⁶². So, it seems far more attractive to say that we can give a wholly naturalistic explanation of what pain is, before getting to its moral consequences. If such a naturalistic understanding of pain is not available, it seems pain already has moral content

¹⁵⁹ Lance and Little, 2004, p.442-443.

¹⁶⁰ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p.71.

¹⁶¹ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p. 71.

¹⁶² Alibertart, 2014, p.88.

and any principle that mentions it becomes insubstantial¹⁶³. If defeasible generalisations are insubstantial, they could it seems not explain anything at all.

If we then take “pain” to be understood naturally the defeasible generalisation is substantial, but it is unclear why pain during athletic accomplishments is not to be understood as defeasibly good-making as regarding them that way is not to have misunderstood the nature of pain. To see pain as defeasibly good-making is of course to think about pain differently than is common for us, but that is simply a pragmatic point. There might be a way out here however. If the goal is to “justify ethics from within”, to use a phrase from McDowell, we can perhaps say that to see pain this way could never be part of our ethic. That however does not seem to be Lance and Little’s project and depends upon the notion of an ethical sensibility¹⁶⁴. However, if an ethical sensibility of the kind envisioned by McDowell is available it seems that the defeasible generalisation does no work. Further such an ethical sensibility is best understood I would argue through the concept of virtue. To argue for such a conception of ethics seems to me, and will be shown in chapters 3 and 4, to allow for other ways of accounting for moral reasoning, making defeasible generalisations superfluous in our account of reasoning.

What truly seems to be at issue is simply the notion of what it takes for a case to be privileged. If we consider some of the examples that Little and Lance give what becomes apparent is that these cases have very clear starting points¹⁶⁵. They exemplify the notion of a riff, or variation, through riffs on football. In which all riffs adjust themselves relative to the football governed by the FIFA rules and regulations. It is easy to imagine a world in which what is today FIFA football is understood as a riff on what to us is simply a variation. I take it that there would be no settling between that world and our own which was a riff on the other even though both would be counted as football in both worlds. That of course is not intended to be the case with moral defeasible generalisations that are supposed to have a more intimate connection to that which they explain¹⁶⁶.

¹⁶³ The fact that it does not seem insubstantial perhaps points to either our understanding of pain to be without moral content or simply to use being so used and comfortable with the extensions of common concepts like pain that the difference between cases strikes us as obvious.

¹⁶⁴ See McDowell, 2002.

¹⁶⁵ Dancy (2004, p.114) makes this point as well.

¹⁶⁶ That must at least hold it seems if they are to be prior to any given process of reasoning.

What I take McKeever and Ridge to have shown is that that connection is not established on the grounds of understanding the concepts which figure in our reasoning. What is at issue is that Lance and Little require a sense of normality that is non-pragmatic, and which will allow them to distinguish between the normality of pain being bad-making and the good-making pain not being defeasible on the same grounds. But as applied to moral matters the defeasible generalisations must also be of the right kind. However to see that pain is defeasibly bad-making involves taking a specific moral stance that cannot be provided by the concept which the defeasible generalisation is meant to explain. There is no vantage point except the one we inhabit from which we could judge that pain was defeasibly bad-making or good-making and therefore no sense that is not merely pragmatic, and that would again merely establish a moral heuristic.

In conclusion, this notion of privileging cannot ground defeasible generalisations as more than moral heuristics. It is therefore not an advancement on the default reasons account given by Dancy.

2.3 Summary

In this chapter I have looked at two responses that deal with the problems particularism faces with regard to moral reasoning. Both default reasons and defeasible generalisations have been shown to lack a good formulation that takes them beyond the pragmatic, while at the same time remaining unprincipled. While I will argue (4.2) that such heuristics are part of a response to the objections from guidance they cannot provide justification and therefore cannot be the whole story of moral reasoning.

The objections raised against particularism (in 1.3) then have not been given a satisfactory answer that remains particularist. It is exceedingly difficult to offer an account which without a more extensive normative moral theory can answer these objections.

Particularists it seems would be better off if they attempt to develop a normative ethic which is consistent with particularism. Such an ethic I will argue can show that the flattening objection and the objections from guidance are misguided, and offer an account of moral reasoning. Such an account of moral reasoning would then show that moral reasoning need not depend on moral principles. In the next two chapters I will offer such a positive account.

Chapter 3: Developing a particularist virtue ethic

In the preceding chapters I have presented the theory of moral particularism. I have argued that it is hard to see how a particularist agent can reason about moral matters. The three main tasks for an account of moral reasoning is firstly that it should say something about how one can identify something as a possible reason, secondly give a way of deciding whether a possible reason is a reason, and thirdly give a way of justifiably moving from the reasons present to a conclusion.

The role of principles in moving from reasons to conclusion is that a principle is applied to a particular situation to provide justification through subsumption. This approach can allow for principles that are hedged in one way or another. Specifically, this can be done by (1) allowing defeasible principles to limit one another so that where there is conflict this is explained by a principle or (2) that they become certain only against the background of a skill of moral judgement.

Hedged principles also function as ways of representing features as possible moral reasons. Principles can be adopted by some agent as a way of shaping that agents' sensibilities and priorities and thereby making the agent sensitive to such features. Furthermore, for any feature that is a reason we can presume that it is described by a principle. I gave the following criteria for principles (at 1.2.1.1): guidance, substantiality, and justification. For a generalist ethic I gave the criteria of coverage and epistemology (at 1.2.1.2).

One approach that could provide a starting point for a particularist is the notion of a default reason. As was seen however we lack a convincing account of what default reasons are that at the same time could make default reasons central in moral reasoning. Defeasible generalisations either became principles in their own right, or rested on an ultimately problematic conception of privileged conditions. Particularism then is still vulnerable to the objections raised against its ability to give an account of moral reasoning and moral guidance raised in 1.3.

I will now begin the positive part of my thesis. I will introduce some key notions for a particularist virtue ethic, before outlining elements of a particularist virtue ethical account of reasoning. The main achievement of this chapter will be to make sense of some ways in which possible reasons for action can be identified, and that I can provide particularism with

an explanation for why moral reasons are reasons (i.e. provide a meta-reason for moral reasons). In addition, I will introduce the virtue concepts that are derived from the virtues, which will make up the core of my account of reasoning in the final chapter. To do this I will first (3.1.1) explain why virtue ethics might provide a promising starting point for particularists and (3.1.2) introduce the basics of such an ethic. Then (3.2) I will explain how virtues are to be understood in this account, as well as resolve some potential problems. At the end of the chapter (3.3) I offer an account of how an agent can identify features as possible reasons within a particularist virtue ethic.

3.1 Virtue ethics and particularism

3.1.1 Why virtue ethics?

In this chapter I will begin developing an account of moral reasoning for a particularist virtue ethic. Virtue ethics has seemed the most promising place to start for many particularists¹⁶⁷. As has emerged along the way Dancy does not take this route, believing very little can be said about the virtuous person. This is a bit strange considering that for example McDowell argues for a view that is both particularist and virtue ethical in his “Virtue and Reason”¹⁶⁸. Also, the debate about the codifiability of ethics associated with virtue ethics is reminiscent of the particularist position. Particularism can be read as an argument in favour of uncodifiability and therefore as an answer to that challenge to virtue ethics. Now one reason to not take this route is of course to avoid tying particularism to any particular normative commitments. This shows an important difference of focus in Dancy’s project and my own. Dancy wants to show that moral thought and judgement do not depend on principle in general, if Dancy adopted a virtue ethical approach he would only have shown what I argue for namely that moral thought and judgement is possible without principles¹⁶⁹. So, Dancy

¹⁶⁷ Leibowitz (2009, pp. 193-194) suggests virtue ethics as a way to develop particularism. Some work in this direction has been done, see Swanton (2001, 2010 and 2015) for a target- hitting virtue ethical account drawing on particularism. Erin Frykholm (2014) develops a Humean particularist virtue ethic. Andrew Jordan (2013) argues for virtue ethics strengthening particularism. Stangl (2010) provides a particularist virtue ethical definition of right action. From a somewhat different direction Svensson (2011) argues that a plausible eudaemonist virtue ethic would need to presuppose particularism.

¹⁶⁸ Though of course McDowell does not use the term particularism. See Smith, 2011, p. 39-43 for a particularist presentation of McDowell.

¹⁶⁹ In this spirit Dancy can write “... it would be a cosmic accident if *our* morality could be expressed in this way, but the same would apply to any workable moral scheme” (2004, p.82, emphasis in original).

perhaps cannot adopt a virtue ethic because his goal is to show that principles do not fit with morality. What I do in this thesis is focus strictly on principles not being necessary for moral reasoning by showing that we can give an account that is without principles. In essence what I do is defend particularism from the charge that reasoning and guidance become incomprehensible without principles. What Dancy does, in contrast, is to argue that no principle should be part of our moral reasoning. The issue is that Dancy speaks as if no further theory than that provided by particularism is necessary for a positive account of moral reasoning. As I have shown in the previous chapter however the default reasons approach cannot deliver such an account. Therefore, a normative ethic must be shown to be compatible with particularism. A normative ethic which then can provide both a meta-reason for moral reasons and an account of moral reasoning.

Another reason why a particularist might be hesitant to adopt a virtue ethic is that if there are virtues it might seem obvious that there are principles connected to those virtues. Several authors arguing against particularism have introduced principles such as “do what is just”¹⁷⁰. Some particularists (including Dancy) have argued that even thick concepts such as these shift valences depending on the circumstances¹⁷¹. If thick concepts, including the virtue concepts, shift valence being virtuous cannot plausibly be identified with getting it right¹⁷². I will argue that this hesitancy is misguided as it rests on a mistaken understanding of virtue concepts as reasons for action.

This difference in goal and this, in my view, mistaken understanding of virtue concepts may be what has led Dancy to not adopt a virtue ethical approach. Given that drawing a distinction between different sorts of reasons seems unable to account for moral reasoning in a satisfactory way this seems the way to move forward to provide a particularist account of moral reasoning. Let me now then lay the ground for a particularist virtue ethic.

¹⁷⁰ See e.g. Crisp (2000) and McNaughton and Rawling (2000). Independently of the particularism/generalism debate Hursthouse (2010) also introduces virtue-rules. I discuss such rules at 3.2.3.

¹⁷¹ See Dancy (2013).

¹⁷² I will return to thick concepts below. In brief a thick concept is a concept which has both descriptive and evaluative content. Just, courageous, and kind are all examples of thick concepts. Right and good are examples of thin concepts with only evaluative content.

3.1.2 A particularist virtue ethic

Virtue ethics is, as mentioned, often identified with the claim that ethics is uncodifiable. John McDowell put it like so “... to an unprejudiced eye it should seem quite implausible that any reasonably adult moral outlook admits of such codification”¹⁷³. Much recent virtue ethics has also rejected various degrees of codification as a goal for ethics¹⁷⁴. What is involved in that rejection as regards particularism is however less clear. Rosalind Hursthouse has described herself as “anti-generalist” rather than particularist¹⁷⁵, and is clearly open to some absolute prohibitions though she invests these with little importance for action guidance¹⁷⁶.

Following Hursthouse I will take *eudaimonia* to be central to ethical activity. *Eudaimonia* is commonly translated as well-being, happiness or flourishing, and can be seen as the complex that is the human good¹⁷⁷. *Eudaimonia* is not meant as a subjective criterion, one can be mistaken in believing one’s life to be *eudaimonic*¹⁷⁸. Hursthouse argues for a naturalistic interpretation of *eudaimonia*¹⁷⁹. The view runs roughly as follows: based on us being rational social animals it is possible to say something about that which is good for human beings. Our ability to reflect and set goals for ourselves as rational beings complicates this picture, but we can still say something about what a good life could consist in¹⁸⁰. It is important to note that it may be difficult for the non-virtuous or vicious to see what is good with the pleasures of the virtuous. This as in Aristotle’s claim that the pleasures of the moderate need not be understood, or seen as pleasures at all, by the glutton¹⁸¹.

¹⁷³ McDowell, 2002, pp.57 - 58.

¹⁷⁴ Van Zyl, 2019, p. 145.

¹⁷⁵ See Van Zyl, 2019, p. 156.

¹⁷⁶ Hursthouse, 2010, p. 58. It is a bit unclear how we should understand Hursthouse here as she gives both quite general examples (when quoting Aristotle) and far more specific examples. Most particularist I take it only mind the more general of these claims considering the specific claims, just like Hursthouse I might add, to be theoretically unimportant.

¹⁷⁷ Hursthouse, 2010, pp.9-10.

¹⁷⁸ From now on I will leave “*eudaimonia*” without emphasis.

¹⁷⁹ It is of no importance to my account that the understanding of *eudaimonia* must be naturalistic in this sense.

¹⁸⁰ For Hursthouse’s full account see (2010, especially pp. 192 – 238).

¹⁸¹ My intention is not to claim that particularism is dependent on an *eudaimonistic* virtue ethic. It is simply easier to present how reasoning is supposed to go on against the background of a fleshed-out theory. Svensson (2011) argues that an *eudaimonistic* virtue ethic can give an account of right action, and still remain a distinctive position, only by being particularist. So, perhaps there is an opportunity for some mutual support here between particularism and *eudaimonistic* virtue ethics.

A virtue is defined as a character trait that is required for eudaimonia¹⁸². As a character trait a virtue is a stable disposition to act in certain ways. An agent will not be virtuous one day and vicious the next. Being virtuous also involves that one gets things right. Getting it right is not simply a question of doing the right action, but doing so for the right reasons, in the right way, and with the right motives. Virtue on this view then is demanding and is not just concerned with actions as such. It worth underlining that in part eudaimonia simply is possession of virtue.

There might seem to be some discrepancy here. In this thesis I have been focused on reasons for action, but I have now shifted to talking about virtues and eudaimonia. The picture presented has been something like the following: some features of situations are reasons for action, these reasons combine with other features (enablers/disablers and intensifiers/attenuators) to yield a combined favoured response which we can describe as what there is reason to do. Reasons have been the basic normative unit. My suggestion is that the eudaimonistic virtue theory under consideration here is intended as an explanation of how some features come to be reasons while others do not¹⁸³. Any feature can be a reason in so far as it can be related to the human good.

That is to say that eudaimonia functions as the kind of meta-reason Dancy wanted to avoid, saying of any reason why it is a reason (within this ethic). This is not the same however as eudaimonia being a reason for action. The relation between the human good and reasons is this: an action is made right or favoured by reasons, reasons are features of situations, a feature of a situation is a reason in virtue of being conducive to the human good(eudaimonia)¹⁸⁴. Virtues are special in that they both are part of this human good and in that they are the traits that are geared towards achieving this human good. In such a theory then we have very good reason to (attempt to) become virtuous.

¹⁸² Hursthouse, 2010, p. 29.

¹⁸³ There might be good cause for virtue ethicist to develop an account of reasons in any case to give a definition of right-action. See Tiberius, 2006.

¹⁸⁴ That is to say that compared to Dancy's view in which a reason to act is a reason because of "some value there could be in so acting" (2018, p.85) I have given eudaimonia as an explanation of why certain features are of value.

3.2. Issues for a particularist virtue ethic

While virtue ethics and particularism at some level seem to hang together it might seem that virtues are a too potent source of ethical generality. On one conception of what being virtuous in some regard involves it involves a guarantee of rightness. To be virtuous is to get it right in terms of motives, actions, and emotions. Further we can argue that an action being kind will always be seen as a reason to do it by the kind agent¹⁸⁵. Hursthouse illustrates this point more specifically by claiming that it is plausible that the practically wise agent sees debts as the kind of thing to be repaid, and also allows for some absolute prohibitions¹⁸⁶.

There are two related and important questions to ask concerning virtue. Is the thesis of the unity of virtues the case, and can an action be worse off for being virtuous? The unity of the virtues is the thesis that any given virtue cannot be had by itself, to possess a virtue necessitates being virtuous in all other respects¹⁸⁷. We can distinguish between stronger and weaker versions of the thesis. The question of whether an action can be worse off for being virtuous is especially critical for a particularist virtue ethic. On the one hand, if an action can be worse off for being virtuous it might seem that virtues cannot be of aid in constructing an account of reasoning. On the other hand, if actions cannot be worse off for being virtuous will that not simply mean that a principled account can be built on the virtues? I begin with the second question and as we will see the first question will allow us to disentangle the seeming knot posed by the first.

3.2.1 Are virtues morally variant?

To begin with consider an example: is it kind to wipe the torturer's brow and is that kindness is a reason to do the action?¹⁸⁸. Christine Swanton allows for such cases of valence switching for thick concepts generally as well as for virtue concepts¹⁸⁹. Her conception of virtues is as hitting the target of that virtue. To be kind is to be disposed to hit the target of the virtue

¹⁸⁵ Stangl (2008) argues that this is plausible.

¹⁸⁶ Hursthouse, 2010, pp. 85 – 87.

¹⁸⁷ Rebecca Stangl (2008) argues that a particularist virtue ethic must either adopt the thesis of the unity of the virtues, or accept an unsatisfactory model of moral motivation. Her argument is directed at the kind of particularist virtue ethic which understands virtues as reasons, but a similar issue appears below.

¹⁸⁸ This example from Dancy, 2017.

¹⁸⁹ Swanton, 2015, p. 45.

kindness. From the target of a virtue you can for Swanton derive a virtue-rule¹⁹⁰. A virtue-rule for Swanton is a default rule (as given by Horta) that codifies some default relationship between, for instance, being kind and being a reason¹⁹¹. Hursthouse also allows for virtue-rules, but does not give them in default form (for example: do what is just). Virtue-rules will also generally turn out to presuppose a particularist evaluative dimension which makes them action-guiding in a proper way only for someone who is already keyed into that conception of the virtue, or so I will argue.

For the sort of eudaimonistic ethic I present here we can envision some different alternatives. We can allow that virtues do sometimes conflict. If so being a virtuous person means that one at sees the sweat on the torturer's brow as a reason to kindly wipe it off, while also being aware that this action should not be done. However, this seems unattractive on two counts. Firstly, it is counter-intuitive to say that the individual that is not at all responsive to this reason is worse ethically (in terms of being less kind) than the one who is somewhat motivated to act. Secondly, it is unattractive to abandon the idea of the virtuous person as the person who gets it right not just in terms of act done, but also in terms of which reasons were relevant to the decision.

What it seems one would want to say is that kindness is not a valid concern here, at least not directed towards the torturer. This is the sort of consideration it seems that would give support to the notion of the unity of the virtues. Further one should note that there will be good reason to think that virtues and virtue concepts are not reasons at all¹⁹². I will argue that the unity of the virtues implies invariance for virtue concepts. And therefore, that given a proper understanding of kindness it is always right to be kind. If virtues are not reasons however that will not be a problem for a particularist virtue ethic.

3.2.2 The unity of the virtues

The thesis of the unity of the virtues holds that to have any virtue one must have them all. I would like to follow Hursthouse in holding a limited or weak unity of the virtues, where "...

¹⁹⁰ Swanton, 2015, p. 40.

¹⁹¹ Swanton, 2015, p. 48.

¹⁹² Andrew Jordan argues for this in (2013).

the fact that practical wisdom cannot occur in discrete packages [...] and also the fact that [virtue] is not an all-or-nothing matter.” both hold¹⁹³. If such a thesis is plausible where does that leave us with regard to kindness?

In the example given above the issue is that it does not seem to be a mistake to describe the wiping of the torturer’s brow as a kind act (even though it is a bit strange), but it also seems that kindness is not called for here. If virtues are not had in isolation one would expect that a virtuous agent is not motivated by some act being kind in such circumstances. But if *ex hypothesi* kindness is a virtue this seems doubly strange. I think we should in this instance be willing to see our concept of kindness as distinct from the virtue concept kindness which ranges over those reasons which are reasons for being kind (thick concept) which the virtuous agent would be motivated by.

The sort of disposition that would motivate someone to do any- and everything that might be described as kind is far closer to a natural proclivity than a virtue¹⁹⁴. The virtuous person is describable in terms of virtues. Virtues that define the proper range of virtue concepts. I will therefore distinguish between the thick concept kindness as people use it and the virtue concept kindness. Another way of putting this is simply to say that the correct understanding of kindness is given by the virtue concept kindness. The thick concept kind can be used in a variety of ways, but I will take the virtue concept kind as giving the correct understanding of kindness.

Now the unity of the virtues is a controversial thesis¹⁹⁵. I will not have time to enter a protracted debate on the issue here, but will simply note that if reasons function holistically we might have some additional support for a weak unity thesis. The holism of reasons means that the same reasons will get different valences depending on the circumstances. Virtues are understood as character traits that both make one motivated to act in certain ways for certain reasons and allow one to get things right. No single virtue then seems to be up to the task as it in some cases would go wrong, but if virtues involve getting things right then it is not clear that character traits independently can be virtues. This is just to say that for a

¹⁹³ Hursthouse, 2010, p. 156.

¹⁹⁴ See Hursthouse, 2006, pp. 292-293.

¹⁹⁵ For an example of the criticism of the unity of the virtues see Williams (2011, p.41). See Hursthouse (2010, pp. 153 – 157) and Badhwar (1996) for discussion and defence of a limited or weak unity thesis.

character trait to be a virtue it must be balanced by other character traits, in essence the unity of the virtues. Given the holism of reasons then the unity of the virtues receives some support, given the way I understand virtues here. The unity of the virtues further coheres well with the kind of eudaimonistic virtue ethic developed by Hursthouse where conflict between candidate virtues can be resolved by the eudaimonia they in part constitute¹⁹⁶.

3.2.3 Virtue-rules

If virtue always leads to right action (or at least the action favoured by those reasons that could be known) and virtue concepts are defined in terms of virtue it might seem obvious that virtue-rules as proposed by Hursthouse follow. Even if virtues are not reasons one might say with Jordan that "... the architecture of moral thinking has a place for general principles that [...] [structure] the mental workings of a good moral agent..."¹⁹⁷.

In responding to this challenge the following should be noted: virtue concepts as introduced above are a subset of thick concepts and either represent the correct understanding of concepts like kindness, or are related concepts. In any case their evaluative part is particularist in shape. To see this, consider what was the mistake in seeing the sweat on the torturer's brow as a reason to wipe it. The mistake lies not in a descriptive feature, but in evaluating it as kind because kindness is not called for here. The kindness is not at issue because action should be oriented towards stopping the torture (out of considerations of kindness to the victim, or perhaps considerations pertaining to justice). Virtue concepts are then best understood as shapeless thick concepts¹⁹⁸.

A virtue-rule which says "do what is kind" does not link some definite descriptive features to an evaluation, grasping what is kind, given the unity of the virtues, is not being able to give a definition of kindness. So, while it is certainly true that one should follow any rule of the form "do what is *virtue-concept*" this tells us very little if we do not already grasp which actions are implied by a given virtue concept. A virtue-rule therefore becomes equivalent to

¹⁹⁶ See Hursthouse, 2010, pp. 153-157.

¹⁹⁷ Jordan, 2013, p 268.

¹⁹⁸ I return to this below. Shapeless concepts are concepts which have no definite descriptive shape, ie. There is not a finite descriptive characterisation of them. Their shape is determined by the extension of their evaluative part.

“do what is right”, with the exception that certain actions that are right are not commanded by any single virtue-rule (though all right actions are commanded by some virtue-rule). In short, virtue-rules fail to be substantial, and therefore are not moral principles. This point is similar to another made by McDowell, there is no need to conceive of seeing the point of some concern as being already principled, there needs to be no principle that grounds my ability to go on to new cases¹⁹⁹. For instance, if what is truly just is limited by the demands of generosity then the virtue-rule “do what is just” is only informative to someone who already grasps the evaluative point of justice (to respond with the norms and responses characteristic of justice when generosity is called for is best described as being strict and formalistic, not as being just). Virtue-rules of the form proposed by Hursthouse are therefore not substantial principles, and therefore cannot ground a generalist ethic (they do not link non-moral to moral content. There are therefore no interesting principles to derive from the virtues.

3.2.4 Virtue concepts

Dancy distinguishes between contributory reasons and what there is overall reason to do²⁰⁰. A concept like right belongs to what there is overall reason to do, overall reason is made by contributory reasons (which are the reasons I have been discussing in this thesis). If my action is right, there cannot be more reason not to do the action as then it would not be the right one. A contributory reason is that which favours some response or another. Overall reason is that which is made by contributory reasons.

Virtue concepts on the current understanding identify features that determine the overall rightness of an action. If an action is just it is the right thing to do. This is consequent upon the notion of the virtuous person as a person who gets it right. The role of virtue concepts in reasoning is therefore more limited than one might suppose, and their primary purpose will be justificatory. It was right to do the act qua just act, the act was just because features x, y, z made it just. It was not the justice of the action that made it right to do, the action was made just by some reasons. Anyone applies these concepts according to their understanding

¹⁹⁹ McDowell, 2002, p. 62.

²⁰⁰ See Dancy, 2004, pp. 17-25.

of them. Ultimately the correct understanding is given by the understanding of (the) virtuous agent(s)²⁰¹.

Given the descriptive content of virtue concepts certain features point towards certain virtue concepts. If one is discussing how to share a reward, then considerations of justice seem to come to the fore. Certain contributory reasons give a clue to what overall concept will decide the issue by placing us in this or that domain. Allowing virtue concepts to be overall concepts fits well with the natural notion that something is always just for a reason and that it is for those reasons it is to be done. Just as my reason for doing something cannot simply be that it is right (there must be something which makes-right) my reason for doing something cannot simply be that it is virtuous (there must be something which makes it virtuous). That it would be virtuous therefore cannot be a reason to do an action, the features that make it virtuous are the reasons to do it. This fits well with a general point about the motivation of the virtuous agent, which should likewise be directed at the reasons in the case. To give an example: I should visit my friend to cheer him up, because he has been feeling depressed lately, not because I would be kind for visiting my friend to cheer him up. Sometimes of course we speak as if the kindness of an act is why it is to be done, but I do not think it is attractive to deny that the kindness is always made by some further feature. If my friend is not depressed, I might still want to visit him, but my visiting him is not obviously kind.

3.3 Identifying and structuring reasons

I am now ready to approach the main questions of this thesis namely those to do with reasoning. The account I will now begin presenting will account for three steps in moral reasoning, namely identifying possible reasons, determining that a possible reason is a reason, and drawing a concluding from the reasons present. In this section I will give an account of how we can identify a possible reason through emotional responses. I will also comment on the place of description in this account of reasoning. Above I gave a way through its relation to eudaimonia, to determine that some feature is a reason. In the next chapter I will primarily be focused on accounting for justification, as well as showing how

²⁰¹ This formula allows for some variation among virtuous agents, which might be desirable.

moral heuristics can be of use in moral improvement on this account of particularist virtue ethics.

As I take it there are three elements of moral reasoning in which virtue plays a central part, and through which we can come to have warranted moral beliefs in particular cases. These elements are the role of the emotions in identifying reasons, the role of description in understanding a case, and the role of virtue concepts in deciding on an evaluation. Before that however I will make note of an important distinction. Giving an account of elements of successful reasoning does not amount to a way for agents to make their decisions. This is not as such an attempt to provide a manual for decisions, but rather to let us look at how one can be justified in holding some specific moral belief. My goal here is to outline the role of emotional responses in identifying as a possible reason, the importance of description in giving these an order and in the next chapter illustrating how we can give justification in terms of virtue concepts.

3.3.1 Emotion

As mentioned, emotions are in virtue ethics a possible source of praise or blame. Someone who consistently does the right thing, but feels inappropriate emotions is not fully virtuous (that is just to say that possessing a virtue is about more than having certain beliefs about what one should do). Hursthouse gives the useful example of racism²⁰². Someone who has racist emotional responses but does not act on them is morally worse off than someone who does not have that emotional response. As regards reasoning I would like to say that this is because in their case their emotional response leads them to identify the wrong features as possible reasons. It might seem that emotion and reasoning are opposed, sometimes I reason to what I should do and sometimes I just feel that something is the thing to be done. While it might be the case that in certain situations I do not have time to reason about what I should do, that does not make the emotions any less irrational one might argue. Nomy Arpaly has however convincingly argued that in some cases the explicit reasoning goes wrong and that it is not then necessarily rational to follow the conclusion of one's

²⁰² Hursthouse, 2010, p. 144.

reasoning²⁰³. It is not necessarily rational for an agent to do A just because a piece of reasoning that the agent engaged in concluded in A²⁰⁴.

What we feel can be an important signpost in discovering what we should do, or so I will suggest. The terrain covered by my talk of emotion is somewhat the same as that covered by talk of moral perception and moral intuition²⁰⁵. I do not speak of moral perception as I am unable to detach it from the merely metaphorical. Likewise, I wish to avoid talk of moral intuition to avoid smuggling in an intuitionist epistemology. I believe we can get a clearer idea how we can come to trust that some of our emotional responses take us in the right direction.

How then can we be justified in moving and reasoning based on emotional responses? The racist presumably has emotional responses that fit the belief that people from other races are inferior. Those responses do not give some reason to hold the racist beliefs. This discrepancy is perhaps most clearly seen in someone who has reformed their beliefs, but still struggle with inappropriate responses. The former racist should not take a feeling of disgust, when looking at someone, as reason to reaffirm their earlier racist beliefs, but rather as a reason to work harder at reforming themselves. This possibility, that we might take our emotional response as support for a moral belief or as a moral fault illustrates something important. It is perfectly possible to think that some of one's emotional responses are irrational or mistaken. The reformed racist believes that some of her emotional responses lead her wrong, but she may have greater trust in other emotional responses as these cohere with her moral beliefs. One could very well take one's emotional reaction to seeing poverty as ground for action. At the very least it should be enough to question whether that state of affairs is good. This is the role I suggest that our emotional responses play in reasoning. The response picks out possible reasons and might start a chain of reasoning. Much as wanting to do something might require reasoning about whether it should be done, feeling that something is a reason might require thought about whether it is.

We come to have particular emotional reactions through training and habituation, just as we come to virtue through training and habituation. In the ideal case someone well-brought up

²⁰³ See Arpaly, 2003, pp. 33 - 66

²⁰⁴ I touched on this earlier as well, see section 1.2.2.

²⁰⁵ Talk of perception and intuition has also been motivated as an attempt to argue for moral realism.

will have proper emotional responses that are grounded in actual reasons. When the virtuous person feels that something unfair has happened it is because something unfair has happened. One could justifiably become more certain of one's emotional responses (in some domain) if one experienced that what one felt initially very often ends up being what one's reasoned opinion is. On the other hand, one might find that what one feels initially when coming to different cases very often ends up being insupportable or just plain wrong. Then of course increased humility and uncertainty might be the best response. People are of course very seldom ideal in any sense of the word, least of all when it comes to changing one's mind. There are certainly many who always find that their emotional responses are correct because they reason badly. This does not to me seem to make it unreasonable that a decent agent could be justified in taking one's emotional response in some ethical case as a good guide to what the correct answer could be. This does not amount to certainty of course, but setting certainty as the demand seems to set the standard to high.

Our emotional responses must be part of beginning a process of reasoning. If a (non-virtuous) agent feels shame for an action that might, given the context, be sufficient ground to evaluate whether that action was right (sometimes shame is inappropriate even when deeply felt). If an agent has emotional responses that are off either by nature or training it might be very difficult to change, and exceedingly difficult to get things right in reasoning. This is not surprising however, as Aristotle argued, it might be very hard or even impossible for someone who has not been brought up in the right way to become virtuous. So, one can account for how an agent can identify possible reasons through the emotional responses of that agent. The virtuous agent characteristically identifies the right possible reasons through their emotional responses. This should not be surprising as what is a reason and what is a virtue are both related to eudaimonia. If some candidate virtue involved having emotional responses that typically did not pick out actual reasons it seems difficult to explain how it could be a virtue.

3.3.2 Description

Before turning to reasoning and guidance more explicitly in the last chapter, let me outline how description is important in morality. Before attempting to make any judgement about a

situation one must, of course, have a description of it (by this I simply mean that one must understand it in some specific way). If the description of a case is wrong the conclusion drawn from that situation will also be mistaken. Returning to an earlier example, describing something as a killing, but failing to mention that it was in self-defence and unintended would it seems be a misguided description of the situation (as it does not mention all the relevant features). Dancy's idea of narrative justification utilised precisely this, sometimes a judgement seems to simply follow from a description²⁰⁶. Description can also have a role to play in moral improvement. Iris Murdoch gives such a case in which a mother makes the choice to describe her daughter-in-law differently, to herself, precisely for the purpose of changing her view of said daughter-in-law²⁰⁷. How one describes something then also has a moral dimension, it does not simply amount to listing the facts of a case, but in understanding those facts in a particular way.

Describing situations correctly is therefore of importance if the virtuous person is to act rightly. The question then could be what a good description would be. What counts as a good description is to some degree determined by which moral theory one assumes. A utilitarian would list those features of a situation which concerned pain and pleasure. Other elements of the situation could be dispensed with as they are not relevant. Any ethical theory which does not try to provide a decision procedure presumably does not hold that the task of describing a case is simply a question of getting one's (non-moral) facts straight, but finding an appropriate description of those facts. However, when description is more than a list of facts, describing the case becomes part of the process of moral reasoning and cannot be treated as a given²⁰⁸.

Describing a situation well is both a question of what is the case, and how one might respond to what is the case (which alternative courses of action one might consider). For a virtue ethic this seems to be a task of practical wisdom. Hursthouse has offered what she has called a mundane account of practical wisdom, in which possession of practical wisdom for the most part is possession of knowledge of other people, what is clever to do and so on and so forth²⁰⁹. Describing a case well then is what the one with practical wisdom succeeds in. If

²⁰⁶ See Dancy, 1993, pp.112-113.

²⁰⁷ Murdoch, 1985, pp.17-22.

²⁰⁸ See Millgram, 2005, p.175.

²⁰⁹ See Hursthouse, 2006.

one often misunderstands what the situations one finds oneself in call for as one misconstrues what is the case one would not be fully virtuous (perhaps one too often take people (no matter who they are) at their word). Possession of practical wisdom (and hence virtue) then demands experience (and knowledge) of both the world and other people²¹⁰.

Giving a full account of what a good description is would take me too far afield. Let me then simply make some minimal suggestions. A good description should mention the reasons present in a situation (and other relevant features), it should be coherent, and I suppose that for pragmatic reasons it should be capable of receiving some public acceptance. Which possible reasons are reasons is as mentioned above defined as reasons being (features which are) conducive to eudaimonia.

In addition to practical wisdom, the virtuous disposition with appropriate emotional responses and motivations is the guiding light of description. Those who are not virtuous have no other method for describing the case than those who are virtuous, everyone must construe the situation they evaluate in some way. Of course, those who lack practical wisdom will get their descriptions wrong from time to time, or even consistently (and therefore even if well-intentioned miss the mark²¹¹). In the next chapter I will offer an account of how virtue concepts serve as conclusions in reasoning. From a practical perspective the question an agent should ask of a proposed action is whether given the description of the situation doing this or that action can truly be described as just, generous, courageous and so on.

To briefly sum up, in this chapter I have introduced a particularist virtue ethic. I have explained which features can be reasons and stated how an agent can identify something as a possible reason, and stated the importance of getting the description of the situation right. Getting the description right as seen requires practical wisdom. The virtuous agent is the agent who gets these things right. I will now move on to the final chapter in which I will attempt to answer the objections to particularism that were raised in the first chapter.

²¹⁰ Hursthouse, 2006, pp. 307-308.

²¹¹ See Hursthouse, 2006, pp. 292-293.

Chapter 4: Moral reasoning

In the thesis I first presented the theory of moral particularism. The claim of that theory is that morality in no way depends on moral principles. As we saw, in contrast to generalism, there is some difficulty in knowing how moral reasoning and moral guidance is supposed to look given particularism. I then argued that Dancy's conception of default reasons is problematic as it stands as well as being somewhat at odds with the rest of the particularist framework. Default reasons it seems cannot be given as more than moral heuristics, which cannot justify moral judgements. Another alternative which could be attractive to particularists is provided by Lance and Little. I have argued that their account rests on a too demanding conception of normality (as privileged conditions) or becomes principled and thus unavailable to particularists. For a particularist then the supposedly default status of some reasons is best explained as a pragmatic convention, i.e. as a moral heuristic. That did however leave us without a promising starting point for a particularist account of reasoning that did not also have substantial ethical commitments.

In chapter 3 I began my positive account of moral reasoning and guidance by showing that virtue ethics could be consistent with particularism. I have shown that there is a conception of the virtues that is available to particularists. That conception of the virtues in turn did not give rise to substantial moral principles or rules. I also offered a brief account for how something can be a moral reason within this virtue ethic (which of course commits me to a specific kind of virtue ethic). This was the claim that for a feature to be a reason it is so by being conducive to eudaimonia. Then I gave an account of the emotional response of the virtuous person which explains how one can come to identify possible reasons. Having such a response is of course part of what possessing virtue involves. I also argued that giving a correct description of a situation could be understood as dependent on possessing practical wisdom.

In this chapter I will answer the objections to particularism I presented in 1.3. I will show how moral heuristics may be used by particularist agents to avoid problems of guidance, and give an account of moral reasoning which does not require moral principles. To do this I will first (4.1) revisit what an account of moral reasoning must contain, and I briefly restate the objections that were raised in 1.3. Then (4.2) I will provide an account of the role of moral heuristics in moral guidance, attempting to answer the objections from guidance (4.2.2) as

well as the flattening objection (4.2.1). That account of guidance should answer the worry that the account of (good) reasoning is only available to the virtuous. Non-virtuous agents can use moral heuristics for the purpose of moral improvement. I then (4.3) turn to the account of moral reasoning proper. First, (4.3.1) by returning to the relevant understanding of thick concepts and (4.3.2) how practical wisdom is here understood. Then I show (4.3.4) how virtue concepts can be applied to yield conclusions as to whether some instance of reasoning is to count as good moral reasoning, through considering moral disagreement. Finally, (4.3.4) I give an example of how such reasoning can be represented.

Before the concluding, I consider two questions. First, (4.4.1) how and whether the account of reasoning given meets the criteria for an account of moral reasoning. Second, (4.4.2) the question of whether this account remains particularist.

In the end (4.5) I give a conclusion to the thesis and allow myself some general remarks.

4.1 Moral reasoning

As a start, I will summarise the model of moral reasoning I gave in 1.2. This thesis attempts to offer an account of moral reasoning which does not require moral principles. The goal is normative not descriptive. The concern then is what it takes for something to be good moral reasoning. An account of reasoning in this sense involves not only being able to evaluate actual instances of reasoning as good or bad, but also being able to judge whether some implicit reasoning is good or bad. By reasoning being implicit I simply mean that even if we often act without deliberating, we can still give a reconstruction of the reasoning that would justify that action²¹². Deliberation may indeed sometimes be a mistake as the appropriate response should be immediate and without conscious thought²¹³. Such cases may also be reconstructed even though we would feel the agent would be mistaken in deliberating. Such a reconstruction may be understood as the explanation of why an action was right or wrong.

²¹² I distinguish between reasoning and deliberation here simply to distinguish between the entirety of reasoning and consciously thinking it through. Deliberation here is part, but not the whole, of reasoning.

²¹³ Sometimes indeed one might act contrary to what one has concluded is the right action and in this succeed morally. The case of Huckleberry Finn is a classic example. See Arpaly (2003) for an argument to this effect, and also Bennett (1974) for a classical treatment of this example.

If someone, for example, tells us that a killing was wrong one way of reconstructing their reasoning is to say that for this belief to be justified there must be a principle to the effect of “killing is wrong”. The particularist must of course deny that a reconstruction must involve a principle to be justified, and that is what I will try to do below. This justificatory/explanatory function is the central role of a principle in reasoning, along with principles determining whether possible reasons are reasons, and possibly identifying possible reasons.

I argued earlier that we can distinguish three steps to any process of moral reasoning which an account of moral reasoning must handle. First identifying possible reasons, Second, determining whether those possible reasons are reasons, and third, drawing a conclusion from the reasons present²¹⁴. One possible moral failure is of course to not start reasoning at all, that failure I understand as a failure in identifying something as a possible reason²¹⁵. My understanding of reasoning then is quite broad. In the principled case the failure to begin reasoning can be understood as a failure to apply a principle that was in fact applicable. Identifying possible reasons should then be understood as both a conscious and unconscious process²¹⁶. Sometimes we think about what might be the reasons for or against, while other times some feature strikes us as a possible reason (or perhaps more often it strikes us as a reason, and we must evaluate whether it truly is). Once we have identified something as a possible reason then further reasoning can take place. The goal of moral reasoning, I understand as responding to the reasons present in the appropriate way, i.e. being responsive to the reasons present in the case²¹⁷.

The role of principles in moral reasoning fulfil the second and third steps in a straightforward way. Identifying a possible reason, to which we might add describing the situation, requires something more. This can be understood as practical wisdom, or less demandingly as a more general moral sensitivity²¹⁸. Through internalisation this skill can be read as dependent on

²¹⁴ I discussed this at 1.2, specifically I gave these “steps” in 1.2.4.

²¹⁵ As I mentioned earlier this can be a failure with different degrees. One can fail to realise that there is anything to reason about at all by not identifying any possible reasons (unconsciously), or one can fail to identify some of the reasons in a situation.

²¹⁶ Harman, Kelby and Armstrong (2010, p. 208).

²¹⁷ See Arpaly, 2003 for an account of rationality as responsiveness to reasons. Antti Kauppinen (2018) gives an overview of the reason-responsiveness view of practical reasoning, as well as contrasting it with a rule guided model.

²¹⁸ This followed from the treatment of principles as standards. See McKeever and Ridge (2006) and (2008) for an exposition of principles as moral standards.

principles, as the person who has adopted it as a principle to not lie will be more sensitive to the cases in which he or she feels tempted to lie²¹⁹. When principles are hedged the demands put on practical wisdom or moral sensitivity increases, but do not *ex hypothesi* become too demanding.

One of our criteria for something being a principle was that it provided justification²²⁰. Justification occurs through the principle being a premise which supports a conclusion. Depending on the reasoning (and one's general theory of practical reasoning) this conclusion can be a belief about what one should do, an intention to act, an action, or a belief about the rightness or wrongness of something already done²²¹. A principled account also importantly allows for a clear location of disagreement. Either one disagrees about what is the case, or one disagrees about what the principle states. In the case of hedged principles one can also disagree about whether the principle should be applied, in addition there can be both vagueness and indeterminacy to the relevant hedge²²². As already pointed out such disagreement can be solved either through reference to practical wisdom or through principles being in conflict.

4.1.1 Goals for an account of moral reasoning

I here quickly list the goals for an account of moral reasoning I gave in 1.2.4.

- (A) Identifying possible reasons: An account of moral reasoning must explain how one can reliably identify possible (moral) reasons.
- (B) Determining which possible reasons are reasons: An account of moral reasoning must allow us to determine which of the possible (moral) reasons are reasons in this situation.

²¹⁹ Both McKeever and Ridge (2006, pp.220 -222)) and Albrecht (2014, pp. 191-203) offer this suggestion for how principles can be of aid even when not consciously applied.

²²⁰ See section 1.2

²²¹ I do not take a stance on whether practical reasoning terminates in belief, intention or action. See Dancy, (2018) for an account of practical reasoning as reasoning to action, see Raz (2015) for an account of practical reasoning as reasoning to belief, see Broome (2013) for an account of practical reasoning as reasoning to intention.

²²² Albrecht, 2014 discusses both vagueness and indeterminacy. We may of course disagree about whether something is a lie or not, though I expect most such disagreements occur because there is some implicit moral judgement in calling something a lie.

(C) Concluding from the reasons, determined to be so per B, on what to do: An account of moral reasoning must justify drawing a conclusion as to what to do from the (moral) reasons present in the situation.

4.1.2 Restating the objections

I earlier raised three general objections to particularism that all can be related to moral reasoning and moral guidance. I will now very briefly restate these objections. The objections were:

(D) The flattening objection: The flattening objection charges particularism with wrongly treating all reasons as on par morally²²³.

(E) The objections from guidance (predictability, special pleading, and framing effects): These three objections, in order, state that particularist agents would not be predictable and therefore that particularism would interfere with practices which require predictability, that particularism is especially vulnerable to making exceptions for oneself, and that particularists have no plausible way to avoid framing effects²²⁴.

(F) The objection from reasoning: The objection from reasoning states that particularism cannot account for moral reasoning as moral reasoning requires something that is prior to the situation at hand from which to judge what to do²²⁵.

The task of this chapter then is to show that the particularist can offer an account of moral reasoning that meet A, B and C, and that the objections D, E, F can be avoided. I will now first respond to D and E in 4.2 before giving an account of reasoning in 4.3 which I will argue in 4.4.1 meet A, B and C, and thus avoid objection F.

4.2 Moral guidance

Moral theories must be able to provide some moral guidance²²⁶. As I have argued that substantial principles (in the form of virtue-rules) cannot be derived from the virtues I need

²²³ I discuss this objection at 1.3.1

²²⁴ I discuss these objections at 1.3.2

²²⁵ I discuss this kind of objection at 1.3.3.

²²⁶ See Väyrynen, 2006.

to offer some account of how agents can both be guided by theory and guide themselves. I will in this section suggest that moral guidance can be achieved through use of moral heuristics. This account will not be sufficient as an account of moral guidance on its own but will be reliant on the account of moral reasoning I offer below (4.3). First, I will respond to the flattening objection against particularism.

4.2.1 A virtue ethical response to the flattening objection

The flattening objection has been raised against moral particularism in part because it seemed that anything and everything could be a reason. Against the background of virtue ethics however this seems implausible. To take the case of shoelace colour again, it is very difficult to imagine how shoelace colour could matter for a virtuous person in making a choice. Now on the virtue ethical view this is explained by shoelace colour having no connection to eudaimonia. That is not to say that there are no decisions about shoelace colour to be made, those are however just not moral decisions²²⁷.

This was the criterion for being a moral reason I offered in chapter 3: To be a moral reason is to be conducive to eudaimonia. If we accept the view that this is about more than simply possessing virtue, though possession of virtue is necessary for eudaimonia we get a wide range of considerations which could be moral reasons²²⁸. Shoelace-colour is I take it not a concern that is directly relevant to the human good. This allows me to say that not just any feature can be a reason, that part of the flattening objection then falls away. Whereas lying for instance can be a moral reason as the telling of lies, sometimes at least, both has a deleterious effect on the liar and the lied-to. The flattening objection seems like something one could raise against particularism because particularist authors wished to avoid taking on board any substantial moral commitments. Once one does that however the concern simply fades away.

One might further structure the moral landscape by seeing some concerns as more central to the flourishing of human beings than others. The kind of ethical naturalism offered by

²²⁷ Recall that the issue is whether shoelace-colour can have direct moral relevance.

²²⁸ I restate here the important difference between virtues being a reason for doing something and having reason to be virtuous. While we have reason (by definition) to be virtuous, the virtues are not reasons for acting.

some virtue ethicists allows for that kind of differentiation²²⁹. That would make sense of certain moral infractions being seen as more serious than others as they trespass on more essential parts of the human good. If such a structure was offered one could make sense of why some types of immoral behaviour tend to be more serious than others. I cannot here offer an exposition of such a structure, but it seems possible for a virtue ethic to provide this. That would then be an explanation of a claim like “murder is worse than lying”.

This means that the virtue ethical particularist can avoid the flattening objection in two ways. First, not just anything can be a reason for a virtuous person. Second, one might provide structure to those features that might be reasons as certain concerns are more central to the human good. The flattening objection therefore fails as an objection to virtue ethical particularism, and I suspect to other particularist normative theories²³⁰.

4.2.2 Moral guidance through moral heuristics

The three objections cited in E all have to do with moral guidance, at least in part. It might seem that virtue ethical particularism is no solution to that problem as virtue ethics more generally has been argued to fail in terms of moral guidance²³¹. I will now argue that moral heuristics can provide moral guidance for a particularist virtue ethic. Let me turn to special pleading first.

Special pleading covers those cases in which one makes an exception for oneself. On a generalist account this is an exception contra some principle. The particularist denies the principle and is thereby supposed to be more vulnerable to special pleading. There is I suppose an empirical question here, that I will not attempt to answer, about whether some agent without principles will in fact be more vulnerable to special pleading²³². What I will suggest however is that an agent can apply moral heuristics here which might do some of the work that a principle could do.

²²⁹ See for example Hursthouse (2010, pp.193-238) who distinguishes between the four naturalistic ends appropriate to social animals and underlines the effect that human rationality has in transforming those ends.

²³⁰ There is little work on a particularist normative ethic outside of the work done on virtue ethics, though see Bakhurst (2013). See also Svensson and Olson (2003) for an argument for a consequentialist particularism.

²³¹ See Hursthouse, 2010, pp.35-39.

²³² Zamzov (2015) offers a general argument that empirical considerations make particularism a poor theory for decision-making.

First note that any aid to this issue from any moral theory presupposes that the agent is either challenged on, or doubts, whether this case is truly different enough to be an exception. Now a principled account can claim that having internalised some moral principles will make it easier to notice such things. If that assumption is allowed however it should also be allowed to presuppose that the agent in question is not devoid of virtue. Being at least somewhat virtuous I assume will also make one more aware of cases in which one tries to make an allowance for just oneself. At the very least one sometimes becomes aware of this, or becomes aware of this at some time (perhaps after the fact). That said, being aware that there might be an issue here an agent can refer to a moral heuristic. In the case of lying this amounts to seeing that there needs to be something that explains why lying is not a reason against in this case, while being a reason against in another broadly similar case. The moral heuristic serves as a reminder that some explanation of this difference must be given. If an agent attempts to improve morally adopting such a reminder may be a useful tool for becoming better.

Moral heuristics is a subpar solution to an issue from the perspective of virtue ethics, as the goal must be to become a virtuous person. However, moral training might involve use of heuristics, insofar as that is efficacious. How to become a better person is a natural question for a virtue ethic that is not entirely pessimistic about the prospects of moral improvement. If an agent who tries to improve morally notices, upon reflection, that he or she tends to twist things in order to make allowances for him- or herself in some domain (whether that be lying, sharing fairly, or simply more general concerns about justice) it seems perfectly fine for that agent to adopt a moral heuristic to correct such behaviour. That is something that can be done without assuming there is some true moral standard that must underlie one's heuristic.

Improvement in the lying case would presumably be that one has stopped lying when one ought not lie. If that is the case then the heuristic simply cannot be applied, as any response to special pleading requires that one is (or is made) uncertain about whether one makes an unwarranted exception for oneself. I take it that if the agent sometimes lies and sometimes does not, and takes this to be the right way to go about, representing that agent as applying

the moral heuristic simply makes no sense²³³. This as the agent would not have any need for a reminder by his or her own lights. The thought process of someone applying a heuristic could I suppose be represented in much the same way as someone applying a principle, but the heuristic would not be (correctly) identified as that which justified action. That is to say that we can treat heuristics as reminders to ourselves and others about typical failings either personal or general.

Framing effects are a somewhat different issue. The assumption in this case needs to be that some way we tend to frame an issue is wrong. McKeever and Ridge give the difference between internalising these two proposed principles as an example: “(SL) If an action would save a life then that is a moral reason to perform an action.” And “(CL) If not performing an action would lead to someone’s death then that is a moral reason to perform the action”²³⁴. The assumption is that people in general typically rely on something like SL and would do better (morally) if they relied on CL. They suspect that particularists will want to avoid saying that issues should always be framed in one way rather than another²³⁵. Their suspicion I take it is correct. It is however not clear to me why moral heuristics are not also helpful here. If a moral agent becomes aware that he or she tends to frame issues in a way that upon reflection seems to yield the wrong result then consciously trying to frame those kinds of issue in another way seems a perfectly sensible thing to do. My suspicion is that McKeever and Ridge do not consider this option as their way of conceiving principles as guides is very broad. However, heuristics need not be part of a moral theory, need not be useful for all agents, and crucially do not touch on what makes an action right. I argued in chapter 1 that guides without a relation to a standard could not count as a principled ethic²³⁶. Even so, the above considerations in mind, heuristics seem capable of being of aid in moral decision-making. Heuristics may serve as a tool for taking a second look at a situation, in essence serving the role Dancy suggested for principles namely as a reminder of what may be important²³⁷. A principled ethic may serve one better in that regard, but from a virtue ethical

²³³ Or rather it only makes sense if one assumes that there must be some rule of whatever kind that underlies the reasoning of such an agent. The main aim of this chapter is of course to provide an account of reasoning that needs to assume no principle, at 4.3 and 4.4.

²³⁴ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p.213.

²³⁵ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, p.215.

²³⁶ Section 1.2

²³⁷ Dancy, 1993, p.67.

perspective it is not surprising that approaching moral questions through rules is not the most effective way to act well, as that would be what one needs a virtuous character for.

So, to sum up, moral heuristics may account for much moral guidance. Any agent who has some habitual failings might reasonably use a heuristic as a tool to reach better decisions. Becoming a more moral person involves becoming aware of some failing one has and taking steps to avoid that failing. Moral heuristics are one way to do this that is available to a particularist agent. In that role then heuristics may be part of the story of how one can become a better person. The role of heuristics in our reasoning then is to identify possible reasons and, so to speak, tell us to look again at the case in question. This then is a role for heuristics in the reasoning of those agents who are not fully virtuous. Agents of course tend to fail morally in many of the same ways. One may therefore expect to find that many decent, though not fully virtuous, agents share the same moral heuristics. I mentioned earlier the practice of giving reasons in general terms (e.g. “lying is wrong” rather than “this lie is wrong”). As our moral heuristics are often shared the practice can be explained as citing moral reminders that need not make a claim to being true if taken as absolute statements. This explains, for the particularist, why there often seems to be widely shared moral principles, and why moral reasons are typically given in general terms.

Before moving on to consider issues in reasoning proper rather than moral guidance, I will quickly note the relation between moral heuristics and moral justification. As I have stated repeatedly throughout the thesis heuristics do not confer the right kind of justification for moral reasoning as they do not say anything about what makes-right. The heuristic cannot be part of an explanation of why an action is right or wrong. Noting that one has broken with a heuristic one has previously used with success signifies no exceptional or extraordinary occurrence, and does not mean that there is anything wrong with the situation one is in. Moral heuristics are useful as reminders, as a way to catch oneself from making a habitual mistake, but they do not feature in a reconstruction of a piece of reasoning with a view to explain why an action was right or wrong.

The final worry that I noted in E still seems to have some pull, namely that a particularist agent is not predictable. Moral heuristics may if widely shared provide some predictability, but how a virtuous agent reasons is still unclear. To answer that worry and the points raised

about reasoning as such will require precisely the justification which heuristics do not provide.

4.3. Moral reasoning with virtue concepts

Not all good moral reasoning uses moral terms²³⁸. To recall this is important as what I provide below is not a mould for all reasoning to pass through, so to speak, but a way of deciding whether some piece of moral reasoning is good qua moral. So, while I will now see good moral reasoning as reasoning which uses virtue terms like justice, generosity, kindness, courage etc. that should not be taken to mean that one necessarily needs those concepts to be virtuous. Rather those concepts are implicitly had by being virtuous, i.e. we can *represent* a virtuous agent as possessing these concepts. This as a virtuous agent acts (and thinks) in a way that is consistent with virtue. Acting (and thinking) in such a way does not commit one to possessing virtue concepts, but rather to acting for the reasons present (in some situation). As virtue concepts are not reasons there lies no moral fault in not being aware of them. The important point is that one's reasoning insofar as it is good reasoning can be reconstructed as reasoning which involves virtue concepts.

The kind of justification offered by the model of defeasible reasoning came in two forms. If all principles were ranked relative to each other it would be deductive, and a matter of application to get it right. If principles have to be balanced by each other and limited by each other on a case by case basis (with an eye towards overall coherence) justification is slightly weaker. Recall also that we want something stronger than that which is provided by Dancy's notion of narrative justification as that seems unable to distinguish between good and bad cases of reasoning²³⁹. Mere agreement then is not enough, but neither can we expect to find certainty.

Virtue ethical particularism it seems to me has only one tool that can serve as this sort of function in reasoning, namely virtue concepts. Recall that virtue concepts are defined by reference to the virtuous person. This had several consequences: first virtue concepts are not contributory reasons. That means that no action is made better for being just, right

²³⁸ Sometimes indeed explicitly thinking in moral terms might show a lack of virtue rather than its presence.

²³⁹ I argued for this in 2.1

actions are right qua just (or some other virtue term)²⁴⁰. This understanding of virtue concepts allows me to echo Anscombe's point that one should use terms such as just and unjust rather than morally right and wrong²⁴¹. Secondly, given the unity of the virtues there is no definite descriptive shape to any virtue concept. This it is important to note holds independently of whether any other thick concepts are similarly shapeless. Clearly if the shapelessness of the thick could be established independently that would make the account of the virtues more plausible, but it seems just as possible that some thick concepts have a definite shape and others do not as that some have variant and others invariant moral valence.

My suggestion generally will be this: possession of a virtue concept implies that one has a grasp of certain features that can make actions just or unjust. Given a proper description of a case such virtue concepts can be applied to a case and one can conclude from that which act is the right action. This is by no means intended to be a simple task, both getting the description right and applying the concept properly may require practical wisdom²⁴². The criteria for some piece of moral reasoning being good then is that it can be explained as issuing in a judgement containing a virtue concept. For any right action it will be possible to say not just that it is right, but that it is (inclusive) either just, generous, brave, kind, and so for any and all virtues. As mentioned above saying that a virtuous act is the right action is superfluous as any right action is captured by a virtue concept.

There are several elements to unpack in this already: how is such conceptual competence obtained how can disagreements on what a given virtue concept is be settled. I will treat of these two questions in the remaining, as well as further clarifying that practical wisdom is possible for a particularist agent.

²⁴⁰ There are some circumstances where this way of talking seems strange I suppose. For example: One might want to avoid doing something (tentatively described as) unfair, even though this case viewed in isolation would call for that unfair action, because it now was important in the broader context to show that fair treatment was given. In such a case I would want to say that the fairness of the action is not the reason for acting, but rather that the consequences of the fairness is the reason.

²⁴¹ See Anscombe, 2013, p.34. The point in my case is that for any action which is right it is true that it is also expressive of some virtue concept.

²⁴² As I understood this in 3.2 practical wisdom involves knowledge and experience of the world and other people. Practical wisdom also involves "cleverness" in knowing what are the relevant possibilities, see Hursthouse (2006).

4.3.1 Competence with virtue concepts

As I have noted virtue concepts are shapeless thick concepts. Thick concepts have been put to a number of uses in metaethics, especially since Bernard Williams *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*, but are introduced at least as early as with R. M. Hare²⁴³. What needs to be spelled out here is simply that one can be a competent user of the shapeless virtue concepts. The shapelessness of the thick has also been offered as an argument for particularism and holism more generally²⁴⁴. I am not committed to the view that all thick concepts are shapeless only that virtue concepts are. That virtue concepts are shapeless is as we saw plausible given that all the virtues are defined by their relation to eudaimonia. If a given concept is shapeless it follows that its descriptive content cannot be disentangled from its evaluative content²⁴⁵.

I propose that we understand being competent with a given virtue concept as knowing certain prototypical or paradigmatic instances and being able to further apply this concept as the virtuous person would. To reiterate, as the virtue concept need not appear in moral reasoning for it to be good moral reasoning this should not demand of an agent that they explicitly possess the concepts involved (there might for instance be, as Aristotle held, some virtues which are nameless²⁴⁶). I take it one must hold that such virtue concepts have truth conditions associated with their evaluative content (the semantic view of thick concepts). If the evaluation contained is a matter of pragmatic practice (through conversational norms etc.) then the application of the concepts as expressing an overall judgement cannot get to correct or incorrect, but only to usual and unusual²⁴⁷.

²⁴³ See Hare (1952, p.123 (in Väyrynen, 2013, p.10)) and Williams (2011). See Kirchin (2013) for a recent collection of papers on thick concepts, see also Eklund (2011) for a useful overview of the debate on thick concepts.

²⁴⁴ See, Roberts, 2011. Väyrynen (2013, pp.186-214) offers an argument against shapelessness.

²⁴⁵ Disentangling is a more general thesis about thick concepts. Entanglers hold that the descriptive and evaluative content of thick concepts cannot be pulled apart, disentanglers believe that it can.

²⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethic*, 1127a15.

²⁴⁷ See Väyrynen (2013) for a statement of the pragmatic view, and Kyle (2013) for a statement of the semantic view. I will briefly note here that this issue perhaps can be avoided by stating that there is a way of understanding and applying virtue concepts which is particular to the virtuous agent even on a pragmatic view of thick concepts. For moral purposes then, applying a concept like justice might not be a matter of the evaluative part making up the truth conditions of application (of a thick concept), but of inhabiting the point of view of the virtuous agent. Note though that such a move might commit one to further views about moral properties and moral realism/anti-realism.

This is all rather technical, what is important here however is that the virtuous person has a way of understanding, seeing or reacting to the world which one can grasp. Even if one is not fully virtuous one might know some paradigmatic or prototypical cases of virtuous behaviour. Perhaps one can even gradually approach the evaluative “outlook” which unifies these different cases²⁴⁸ Understanding then reveals itself in an agent when that agent applies the concept in the same way the virtuous person (implicitly perhaps) does.

4.3.2 A comment on practical wisdom

Earlier I presented, following Hursthouse, a “mundane account” of practical wisdom²⁴⁹. There might be a question of whether this can work for the particularist though. McKeever and Ridge have argued that a particularist account of practical wisdom runs into serious problems²⁵⁰. They argue that a particularist account of practical wisdom relies on there being an unmanageably large number of possible reasons, defeaters and enablers. As I have shown above when answering the flattening objection that does not hold true for virtue ethical particularism²⁵¹. The person of practical wisdom is also, qua virtuous, equipped with emotional responses which reliably identify the right reasons. That might go some way to explain why the agent with practical wisdom can be relied on also in situations that are unfamiliar (to that agent).

McKeever and Ridge also argue that a plausible explanation of moral knowledge presupposes moral principles²⁵². The problem they see for particularists is that moral knowledge must be knowledge of highly particular facts (that this is a reason here and now). As we have seen however particularism is consistent with virtues. Knowledge of the virtues, and of what is virtuous is of course a kind of general knowledge, though as we have seen one that is not amenable to expression in a principle. Virtue ethics can therefore supply particularism with an account of practical wisdom that is non-principled. This I take it further illustrates Swanton’s point that particularism needs development as a normative ethic to be

²⁴⁸ Note that this also gives some additional resources for guidance for a particularist virtue ethic. In short, those who are not fully virtuous might emulate virtuous agents in an attempt to get closer to virtue themselves.

²⁴⁹ Hursthouse, 2006.

²⁵⁰ McKeever and Ridge, 2006, pp.138-176.

²⁵¹ Section 4.2.1.

²⁵² McKeever and Ridge, 2006, pp. 158-160

a viable ethical theory²⁵³. In summary, a particularist virtue ethic can account for practical wisdom. Let me now turn to moral reasoning, and how it can be represented.

4.3.3 Resolving moral disagreement

I will now clarify how virtue concepts can provide justification for a conclusion in moral reasoning. Reasoning is in this case, I think, best understood in the context of a moral disagreement.

Let us assume that Alice and Bob are both decent and well-meaning persons. Given virtue ethical particularism this should be possible without either of them being principled people. Decent and well-meaning people can however still disagree, and the issue has been that it seems particularism offers no way forward in such cases. Imagine then that Alice promised to send comments on Bob's draft by Thursday. If Thursday came and went, Bob might confront Alice about this and be surprised to find that Alice believes she acted rightly. In proceeding to discuss whether it was actually all right to break this promise Bob might give the reason for why it was wrong simply as R(eason)1: "it broke a promise"²⁵⁴. Noting further that D(isabler) 1: "the promise was extracted under duress or threat" was not present. R1 is plausibly a reason because it relates to the virtue of trustworthiness (and ultimately to the value of trust for the human good). Alice might claim that R1 was not a reason in this case for two general reasons. Either there is some further disabling condition that was present (for example: (D2) Bob sent the paper to her so late that she could not reasonably respond, (D3) she received some terrible news earlier that day (that makes her blameless for not fulfilling the promise etc.)) or promise breaking does not bear on trustworthiness in this situation. Giving further disabling conditions or listing reasons to do something else, is what I have given as description²⁵⁵. If Alice and Bob understand the concept of trustworthiness in the same way they can reach agreement simply through reaching agreement on the features

²⁵³ See Swanton, 2015, p.39.

²⁵⁴ I assume here that there is no moral limitation to which promises counts as promises. In essence, a promise extracted under duress is still a promise, just a promise I often will have no reason to keep (or perhaps even some reason to break).

²⁵⁵ See chapter 3, section 3.2 and also section 2.1. As has been pointed out by many authors description is often all we need to come to agreement, when we agree about a description of a case we tend to agree on the moral conclusion as well. Both Anscombe (2013) and Murdoch (1985) spell out the crucial role of description in this regard.

of the case. Is then trustworthiness a principle? If trustworthiness is limited as I have stated earlier by other virtue concepts, then I frankly don't see how it could be substantial and interesting as a principle. This as the principle would simply be parasitic on a prior conception of trustworthiness²⁵⁶.

I take it that the interesting case is the case in which Alice and Bob cannot resolve their disagreement about whether breaking the promise was wrong because they disagree about whether keeping the promise would exhibit trustworthiness. The question then is what they could do if they disagree about whether a given virtue concept which applies to their situation. If we assume that all competent users of a virtue concept refer to roughly the same paradigmatic or prototypical instances, then certain conceptions of any given virtue concept can simply and easily be taken as wrong. If someone tells lies solely for the purpose of scamming others out of their money that cannot be an instance of trustworthy behaviour or show any anything other than a vicious character. So, in some cases such disagreement can be given a clear statement to the effect that either Alice or Bob are mistaken about what the relevant virtue is²⁵⁷.

The interesting cases I take it are to be found at the margins. I must admit that I know of no method to determine which of two differing plausible conceptions of a virtue is the correct one. That is to say other than reaching towards a consensus by precisely arguing. That means that while the criterion for good reasoning is clear enough how to apply that criterion can be challenging. It seems the lesson to be drawn from this is that a good moral agent in hard cases should precisely express humility and uncertainty about whether they always have gotten it right. Applying virtue concepts is no cure all for moral doubt, precisely for this reason then we can justify focusing on those character traits we deem good, as attempting to develop a virtuous character and reaching towards practical wisdom is the only certain way to become a better person.

Let me comment on this issue of some final indeterminacy now. First note that we are able to evaluate and consider many cases of moral reasoning. Imagine the following piece of

²⁵⁶ Its prior moral content is what would determine the extension of the principle, or the application of the concept by the virtuous person.

²⁵⁷ Ultimately in the eudaimonistic model of course what decides a correct understanding of the virtue is its relation to eudaimonia.

practical reasoning: I want a beer, I have brought no money with me, conclusion: I should steal a beer. If we evaluate this chain of reasoning morally the question to ask is whether the reason cited (wanting a beer), is enabled to support the conclusion given the feature (that I have brought no money with me)²⁵⁸. The question then is whether such a piece of reasoning can be expressive of some virtue, or be described by some virtue concept. Stealing something as trivial as a beer because you want it, I suppose could not be described as just or temperate. The case it seems is rather one of impulsiveness and intemperance and thus expressive of vice. If someone insists that the act is virtuous, I suspect that the virtue-concept they operate with could not be linked to eudaimonia. This is parallel to disagreement about which principle follows from a more general principled moral theory. If the case involves a disagreement between plausible conceptions of a virtue-concept then that means that both conceptions of a virtue can be linked to eudaimonia. There are some different alternatives in how to take this that I consider below.

One option is to consider both virtue concepts as expressive of the virtue, by supposing that there are certain acceptable variations in virtuous behaviour. It might in some limited instances be right for me to do an action and wrong for you, given our different but acceptable understandings of virtue. That is to say that while much of morality might be non-relative parts might be relative to the agent. Alternately one could hold that one of those conceptions of virtue must be the correct one and that this can be determined through the relation to eudaimonia, one of the two conceptions of a virtue would not fit with the other virtues. I have nothing as such against this suggestion, but simply have little hope of determining which of two broadly similar conceptions of a virtue is correct in any straightforward way. Which of these suggestions seem appealing I take it is to a large extent dependent on how serious the case under consideration is and how different actions the differing virtue concepts recommend. It seems plausible to me that this range is fairly limited given the sort of understanding of eudaimonia presented by Hursthouse²⁵⁹. If that is true then the account of reasoning given here allows for a, in principle, straightforward judgement about whether some piece of reasoning is good or bad moral reasoning.

²⁵⁸ I assume that wanting to x might be a reason to x, as long as x can be part of flourishing (eudaimonia).

²⁵⁹ See Hursthouse, 2010, p.259-260

The justification is in this case provided by reasons which are reasons in virtue of their relation to the eudaimonia being describable as expressive of a virtue, through a virtue concept. Which traits are virtues is again given as a function of eudaimonia.

4.3.4 Representing reasoning with virtue concepts

The account of reasoning I offered at 1.2.2 has the clear advantage that it admits of a quite clear representation. My account given above can be represented, roughly, as follows:

P1: Action x, has features a, b, and c.

P2: Features a, b, and c are reasons (by being conducive to eudaimonia)

P3: Reasons (a, b, and c) are not compatible with v-concept

C: Action x is not v-concept (alt. action x is wrong)

or:

P4: Action y, has features d, e, and f

P5: Features d, e, and f are reasons (by being conducive to eudaimonia)

P6: Reasons (d, e, f) are compatible with v-concept

C: Action y is v-concept (alt. action y is right)

The real judgement is of course contained in P3 and P6, and in some cases disagreement here may be difficult to settle (as noted above). Where it is settled it is settled with reference to virtue concepts. The virtues are limited by each other, and ultimately defined in terms of their part to play in eudaimonia. Given the semantic view of the thick the content of P3 and P6 have truth conditions, and we may differentiate correct from incorrect use on evaluative grounds. We may struggle to determine fully what those truth conditions are as they depend on getting the evaluative point of the virtue. As far as I am aware, we lack convincing statements that spell out what the specific virtues demands²⁶⁰. Tough that is perhaps not very surprising given the holism of reasons.

²⁶⁰ This of course is not surprising if one accepts the unity of the virtues as then any single virtue is not something that can be had independent of other virtues.

Identifying which features (P1 and P4) an action (in specific situation) has is essentially the task of describing the situation correctly. The features which are reasons (P2 and P5) are so by being conducive to eudaimonia. If acting on those reasons is expressive of a virtue concept, then so acting is justified (P3 and P6). The conclusion then follows. In cases which various reasons pull in different directions the process of justification is the same as in cases in which all the reasons call for the same action, though additional requirements may occur. Practical wisdom is therefore also essential in determining which courses of action one considers.

To return to Hookers objection (to do with predictability) given that we share at least partly an understanding of what the virtuous person would do, we can in general predict what a particularist agent of this type would do. When we do not, we should expect to find that we have different conceptions of the virtuous. I take it that this is sufficient to show that moral reasoning in particularist virtue ethics is not a sort of black box. Those who are not virtuous can either through knowing about what is considered virtuous, or having seen examples of virtuous behaviour have a good enough idea of what would make a virtuous person act in a certain way.

4.4 Two questions

I will now argue that this account both matches and satisfies the constraints on an account of moral reasoning and that it is recognisably a particularist account.

4.4.1 Is this a successful account of moral reasoning?

As I outlined above any account of moral reasoning must be able to say something about both how we identify reasons, and how we can conclude that some feature is a reason. I have argued that we can make sense of the virtuous agent identifying possible reasons through emotional responses, and that one can determine that a feature is a reason by it being conducive to eudaimonia. The most challenging part of moral reasoning is moving from reasons to a conclusion in a way that provides justification for the action, or conversely an explanation of the rightness or wrongness of that action. In the above I have suggested

that this is done through the application of virtue concepts. To explain the rightness of an action is to correctly state that it falls under some virtue concept. If one agrees that an action is virtuous, then one also agrees that it is right.

As mentioned above we can then consider many instances of moral reasoning as good or bad. Some cases will be quite clear while in others we may struggle to determine which act is actually virtuous. That is to say that application of virtue concepts is not a decision procedure, and cannot reliably be done by those who are not virtuous. If we however presuppose that some specific understanding of the virtue concept is correct, then we can determine between even small differences in understanding and judgement. Whether such a final determination is available relies on how specific a conception of virtues can be derived from the goal of the virtues (namely eudaimonia). I have left that question open, but suggested two ways of answering it²⁶¹.

It thus seems to me that, by adopting a particularist virtue ethic, particularists can say that moral reasoning is possible without principles. Unlike the suggestion of narrative justification offered by Dancy we have clear criteria both for something being a reason and for something being a correct conclusion from the reasons present. I freely admit that determining in actual cases what is the correct course of action is often difficult, but that it seems is something shared by both particularists and those who argue for varieties of hedged principles, and thus poses no special problem to particularists.

4.4.2 Is this a particularism?

If one finds this kind of accounting of moral reasoning attractive either in whole or in parts I suspect that the further question will be whether this is particularist at all. On some level I take it that it clearly is given that it applies no principles as these have been given. Perhaps the proper question then is whether it is particularist in spirit.

I have given what Dancy called a meta-reason by stating that whatever is a reason is a reason as conducive to eudaimonia²⁶². Some particularists I take it might object to such a

²⁶¹ In 4.3.3.

²⁶² Other virtue ethics would have to give some other criterion for what it is to be a reason.

move as it limits what can be a moral reason while they would argue that this is a dubious move²⁶³. There seems to be nothing in accepting reasons holism that forces this on us. But in this sense what I adopt is perhaps a minimal particularist program²⁶⁴. It is however difficult for me to see how one can maintain that any feature can have moral relevance while morality still remains a rational enterprise.

Particularism as I have conceived it might be reasonably argued does not take us much farther than claims of uncodifiability which have been present in virtue ethical debates. This I think is broadly correct. Particularism does however provide arguments in favour of this uncodifiability. By adopting the reasons and enabler/disabler model of right-making and favouring one might, as I hope to have shown above, be better placed in understanding moral reasoning than virtue ethics without these elements.

In summary then this is a particularism, even if perhaps a minimal particularism. Individual cases still have to be considered on their own merits, and there is nothing that forces us to accept that if a reason plays one role in a specific case it must play a similar role in another.

4.5 Conclusion

This thesis has worked under the assumption that a principled account of moral reasoning is unattractive given the arguments offered by particularists. The worry however has been that without principles moral guidance and reasoning cannot be made sense of. The two most promising starting points for particularist(ic) accounts of moral reasoning I took to be the account of default reasons offered by Dancy and the account of defeasible generalisations offered by Lance and Little. As we saw however both of these suggestions have serious problems. Default reasons, I argued, both sit uneasily within the particularist framework, and lack a convincing formulation. Defeasible generalisations on the other hand either become a principled account in so far as the generalisations are to be found in a theory, or rely on an assumption of normality that is too demanding. The negative point of my thesis

²⁶³ Perhaps Thomas (2007) could be seen as arguing for such a view as he sees the moral landscape as properly understood as flat.

²⁶⁴ See Hicks (2016).

then amounts to, that those accounts which could give a particularist account of reasoning without first-order ethical commitments failed.

I then proposed that one turned to virtue ethics as the starting point for a particularist ethic. This virtue ethic as was seen requires that one does not conceive of virtue-concepts, as reasons for action but rather as judgements as to the overall rightness and wrongness of an action. Virtue concepts so conceived seem to be descriptively shapeless, and the virtues make up a unity. The unity of the virtues is of course a contentious claim, but seems reasonable given shapelessness, shapelessness in turn seems plausible given the holism of reasons that underlies the particularist project. The unity of the virtues as such is then not so problematic for a particularist. Or at least so have I argued.

An account of reasoning has to account for how we identify something as a potential reason, how we decide that a potential reason is a reason, and tell us how to move from the reasons to a conclusion. I have argued that one can identify something as a potential reason given one's emotional response to a feature. Having the correct emotional response is an important part of possessing a virtue. Something can be determined to be a reason by its relation to eudaimonia, if some feature of a situation is conducive to eudaimonia then it is a reason. The most challenging step in accounting for reasoning for the particularist is the move from the reasons present to the conclusion. The role of principles here is of course to provide justification. I have argued that virtue concepts can fill this role. Virtue concepts can be correctly or incorrectly applied, but that correctness is given by its evaluative point. Possessing a virtue is precisely inhabiting that evaluative point of view. In this way then we can evaluate whether some piece of reasoning is good on several counts. We can answer whether the reasons given are reasons in this case with reference to eudaimonia. We can also answer whether the conclusion drawn from some reasons in an instance of reasoning is good or bad. Being correct in describing some action as virtuous then provides us with justification for doing or having done that action, and also the reasons of the case make up an explanation of why it is good or bad. I have however also outlined that this process need not be able to determine every case, deciding what is virtuous is sometimes difficult. It is not clear to me however that the particularist is in worse shape here than those who argue for a generalist ethic of hedged principles.

I would like to note that even if this account is seen as successful in accounting for reasoning it makes several assumptions that are contentious. As mentioned, the thesis of the unity of the virtues has to some seemed problematic²⁶⁵. The specific conception of thick concepts assumed is also a contentious issue which I have not had the space to consider in great detail, especially the shapelessness of thick concepts has only recently been explored at length²⁶⁶.

With those constraints in mind however it seems that a particularist account of reasoning can be defended. As has been suggested, developing a particularist virtue ethic is a necessary step to make particularism a plausible moral theory. Questions of moral reasoning cannot it seems be handled solely as meta-ethical questions, but must rather be approached through a normative ethic which supplies the criteria by which we decide whether some action was right or wrong.

This thesis then set out to defend the claim that moral principles were not necessary for moral reasoning by giving an account which did without principles while still remaining particularist. This has shown itself to be possible, and particularists, of a virtue ethical bent at least, can in this way respond to objections from moral reasoning and guidance.

²⁶⁵ I discussed this at 3.2.2.

²⁶⁶ On shapelessness see Kirchin (2010), Roberts (2011), and Väyrynen (2013, pp.186 -214).

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