A Particularist Account of Moral Principles

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In this article I respond to Rebecca Stangl's criticism of Jonathan Dancy's outline for a particularist account of moral principles which identifies a number of important problems that call for a response from particularists. In order to give such a response I develop a novel particularist account of moral principles that avoids the problems in question. By clarifying the distinction between articulating a principle and examining its truth I explain, *pace* Stangl, how moral principles can be derived from imaginary or actual individual cases, how principles derived from particular cases can create general moral presumptions, how such principles can be justified, and what the truth of moral principles consists in. I conclude with a discussion of the employment of principles to justify moral judgments, and explain how the proposed account of moral principles avoids a problem concerning moral responsibility that arises for generalist accounts of the justificatory use of principles, such as Stangl assumes, according to which a principle ought to show the actual moral relevance of a property in a given case. Overall my aim is to articulate, by answering six puzzles that Dancy has raised for moral philosophy, an alternative to the traditional generalist picture of the role and significance of moral principles in/for moral thought.

1. Particularism and Dancy's account of moral principles

A central issue in the debate between particularists and generalists is whether principles must play a role in philosophical explanations of morality.[1] Whilst modern moral philosophy has historically tended to assume a generalist position, this has been challenged by particularists. As Jonathan Dancy writes in an oft-quoted passage: "[…] morality has no need for principles at all. Moral thought, moral judgment, and the possibility of moral distinctions—none of these depends in any way on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles" (Dancy, 2004, 5, cf. 73). According to Dancy, our grasp of moral situations doesn't have to be explained as based on or involving moral principles, either as something tacitly assumed or explicitly relied upon, and moral deliberation need not be analysed in terms of such principles. Neither are principles required to explain the possibility of moral value. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that a particularist couldn't recognize that principles play a role in moral thought. This is unproblematic as long as principles are not necessary for morality, and the account of their function is consistent with the commitments of particularism. Dancy writes:

> It seems wise for particularism to allow *some* role for moral principles, somehow conceived, rather than simply announce that everyone is completely mistaken about them and their importance for ethical thought and education. […] So particularism needs to provide some account, within the constraints which it accepts, of what is a very common practice of somehow appealing to general

truths and previous cases in the course of reaching moral judgment, and in the justification of one when reached (Dancy 1993, 67).

Although this doesn't yet tell us much about Dancy's view of moral principles, it reveals that he regards principles as expressing *general truths*. More specifically, Dancy contrasts such general truths with what he calls "substantial principles" which he regards as incompatible with particularism. Characteristic of such substantial principles is that they hold without exception about the right- or wrong-making properties they concern. Thus conceived, a property would count invariantly in favour or against the rightness or wrongness of an action possessing that property, even though the reason that the property constitutes for regarding the action right/wrong might sometimes be disabled or defeated by some other considerations that recognize the presence of other morally relevant properties. Still, the property would always point in the same direction or have the same moral valence as right/wrong-making, and this is what a substantial principle would identify.[2] As Dancy characterizes such principles, "the properties that feature in them play the same role on every new appearance" (Dancy 1993, 66). *Ethics without Principles* refers to this kind of account of the behaviour of moral reasons as "the kitchen scale model" (Dancy 2004, 10).

Rather than taking principles to show how things are always or invariantly, Dancy ascribes to them a different modal role. "The suggestion I want to make is that a moral principle amounts to a reminder of the sort of importance that a property *can* have in suitable circumstances." (Dancy 1993, 67; original italics) This view, he claims, can make "good sense of a number of puzzles in moral philosophy", including 1) the problem of how the possession of principles puts a person "at advantage when coming to a decision in a particular case" (ibid.). Dancy's proposal in this regard is that a principle functions as a "sort of checklist" that can be used to ensure that one doesn't miss a property relevant for a moral decision or judgment (ibid.). As he explains, principles thus understood "create order" into "what would otherwise be a bewilderingly random list of properties which can matter in suitable circumstances". This principles achieve by indicating that some properties are generally, though not always, "more 'central' than others" along with an in principle limitless number of potentially relevant features (Dancy 1993, 67-68). Moreover, 2) this account of principles is also intended to explain the use of principles to justify moral judgments. As Dancy explains, to cite a principle such as "it is important to be honest" constitutes an appeal to the importance of honesty in the particular case at hand. If correct – for example, if there is nothing more important, incompatible with honesty, to be considered in the circumstances – such an appeal can justify a decision such as that the honest line of action is the right one (Dancy 1993, 68).

Further, Dancy argues that 3) his account can explain what he describes as "the main question in moral epistemology", namely, "how knowledge of a moral principle can be derived from what we can see in a particular case" (Dancy 1993, 68). This is then also intended to explain, 4) how particular cases can "function as some sort of test for moral principles", given that on this account principles are not fixed independently of particular cases and therefore are "not immune to the behaviour of particular cases" (ibid.). Relatedly, he holds that his account of principles gives us 5) "at least part of the answer" or "some understanding of the

appeal to imaginary cases to help to decide what to do about a case before us" (Dancy 1993, 68-69). The problem here is how to explain the possibility of our being able to "transport" a decision from such a case "to the actual case", given that if an imaginary case is to serve its purpose, it needs to be free of the complexities and problems with the actual case (ibid.). Or as he also puts the problem: "How can an imaginary case help, if essentially we have to make up our minds about the moral make-up of the actual case before we can come to a view about whether the imaginary case is after all a reliable guide?" (Dancy 1993, 69) For example, in order to take guidance from an imaginary case we need to know that it doesn't simplify misleadingly, but this seems to already require comprehending what is relevant in the actual case. Dancy's response is, briefly, that part of the function of the imaginary case is to make it easier to see the relevance of the feature in question. "An imaginary case might be an abbreviated sketch of a situation where a property can be seen to be important: where the importance it can have is revealed" (Dancy 1993, 69).

Finally, Dancy's account is intended to explain 6) "the idea that moral principles, if true, are necessarily true" (ibid.), a point which he needs to explain independently of, and wishes to contrast with, generalist explanations of necessity that take truth in one case to imply truth in all other relevantly similar cases. As he explains: "Everybody here faces the same difficulty, that of showing both how the truth of a moral principle can be discerned in a particular case, and how what we are there discovering is a necessary truth" (Dancy 1993, 70). His own answer is derived from his account of moral principles as showing what relevance a feature can have. "What we are observing here is already modal, and if our observation is correct, there cannot be a situation in which our property *could* not have that importance if the circumstances were suitable. Hence what we observe, if true, is necessarily true" (Dancy 1993, 70; original italics).[3] However, as Dancy emphasizes, the last point must be distinguished from the claim that the property must always have a certain moral importance in particular kinds of circumstances which an exceptionless generalist principle would specify in advance of moral agents encountering them.

Now, although the critics of particularism have portrayed it as assuming a negative attitude towards moral principles – for example, according to McKeever and Ridge, "all particularist positions can be characterized by a negative attitude towards moral principles" (McKeever and Ridge 2005, 84; cf. 2009, 5, 14, 178ff.) – the preceding shows that the truth is more nuanced. Particularism only adopts a negative attitude towards failure to recognize the complexity of moral considerations, and towards misleading simplifications in terms of principles. But so should all moral philosophical theories. Moreover, although particularism doesn't regard principles as metaphysically or conceptually necessary for morality, it can recognize their practical significance for moral thought. Accordingly, it need not promote "principle abstinence", the view that we should not rely on principles as guides because they offer poor guidance, a reservation associated with particularism by McKeever and Ridge (2009, 17ff.), and Väyrynen (2008, 75-76). Ultimately, as I explain, the key difference is merely that particularism explains the modal role of moral principles differently from generalism. Far from making it unable to explain how principles can be advantageously employed in moral thought, however, this enables particularism to avoid a problem about moral responsibility that seems to arise on a different account of the modal role of principles which Stangl relies on, and according to which a

principle ought to show the actual relevance of a property in a case to be judged. In order to bring relevant issues more sharply into focus, let's turn to Stangl's criticisms of Dancy.

2. Stangl's criticism of Dancy's account of moral principles

Stangl (2006) has put forward detailed criticisms of Dancy's account of moral principles, or of his "radical particularist thesis" "that there are no substantive moral principles, though there may be some kind of moral generalizations" (Stangl 2006, 203).[4] These criticisms bring to view certain important difficulties faced by his account that question its capacity to resolve the aforementioned puzzles 1-6. Thus, it is helpful to look at Stangl's criticisms in some detail in order to see how a particularist can avoid and address the difficulties that she raises for Dancy.

To give a brief overview, Stangl discusses two interpretations of Dancy's account of moral principles which she describes as "a heuristic model of moral principles" (Stangl 2006, 208), and a third account, a possible alternative to the second interpretation drawing on Margaret Little's account of moral principles, "the default view of moral principles". On the first interpretation Dancy's view that principles show the relevance that a property can have is construed as a definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. This view, Stangl argues, can't explain our "ordinary practice" of using moral principles, in particular their justificatory function (Dancy's puzzles 1-2). It also fails to explain how a principle can be derived from and tested against a particular case, as well as to make sense of the role of imaginary cases (Dancy's puzzles 3-6). On the second interpretation, Dancy makes a weaker claim that only states something necessary. Whilst this avoids certain problems with the first interpretation, it achieves this by stating something trivial. Thus, Stangl argues, Dancy's account faces a dilemma of falsity vs. triviality (Stangl 2006, 214). This leads her to consider Little's account. But this modification of Dancy's view seems similarly unable to solve relevant puzzles. Let's briefly look at each point.

On the stronger interpretation there is a moral principle for every property that can be morally relevant. However, because almost any property can have relevance in suitable circumstances, and because Dancy's account offers no basis for distinguishing between more and less important or fundamental principles, this leads to a limitless multiplication of principles. Stangl considers as an example the relation between the principles "bravery is good" and "folding one's hands on top of each other three times in an hour is good", assuming that doing the latter can in suitable circumstances constitute a brave act. Dancy's account, however, can't distinguish between properties that have moral relevance on their own (for example, bravery) and properties whose moral relevance depends on something else (like folding hands). Consequently, although such a multiplication of principles might not be "logically absurd", this problematizes Dancy's explanation of our "ordinary practices" of using moral principles for guidance, as there would be too many of them (Stangl 2006, 209-210). "In making a decision there is something to be said for simplicity. For this reason, a person with such Dancian generalities, it seems to me, would be at a *disadvantage* in coming to moral judgment in a particular case" (Stangl 2006, 210).

Moreover, since to show that a principle can be relevant is not the same as showing that it is actually relevant in a given case, Dancy's account of the use of principles to justify judgments seems problematic too (Stangl 2006, 210). That a property can have a certain valence in particular circumstances, "might give us very little reason to suppose that it actually has that valence in the case at hand" (ibid.). Similarly, Stangl argues that Dancy's imaginary cases are "epistemically irrelevant" because such a case ought to give reasons to think that a relevant property actually has a certain valence in a given case (Stangl 2006, 211). Since Dancy only speaks of possible relevance, Stangl takes him unable to explain this. "Contrary to what Dancy says, then, his model doesn't seem to account for the central role such principles play in reaching and justifying particular moral judgments" (Stangl 2006, 211).

For related reasons Stangl remains unconvinced by Dancy's account of how particular cases could function as a test for moral principles. According to her, insofar as a principle only says that a property can have a certain moral relevance, all that is needed to establish the principle is a single case where the property has this relevance. But this makes Dancy's principles immune to rejection, except in a very weak sense. If we only need to produce one case as a test, all other cases where the property doesn't have the same moral relevance turn out to be irrelevant for testing a principle. Hence, "[…] Dancy's moral principles are actually immune to refutation by particular cases, except in an extraordinarily weak sense" (Stangl 2006, 213).

By contrast, the weaker interpretation maintains, not that there is a moral principle for each potentially relevant property, but that there is a potentially morally relevant property for each principle. This releases Dancy from the problem of limitless multiplication of principles. Principles such as the one regarding folding hands can now be admitted, but this isn't merely because of the potential moral relevance of the action (Stangl 2006, 213-214). A different problem arises here, however. If not all potentially relevant properties determine principles, which ones do? Trivially, true principles must pick out morally relevant properties. However, if this is all the account tells us, we seem to have only replaced a false account with a trivially true one. This gives rise to a dilemma: "if we read his account of moral principles as providing necessary and sufficient conditions, it seems obviously false. If we read it as providing only necessary, and not sufficient, conditions, then it is true but only trivially so" (Stagl 2006, 214).

Moreover, the weak interpretation inherits some problems of the stronger one. The problem seems to persist that principles concerning potentially morally relevant properties can't show the actual relevance of a moral property in a particular case. Thus, the weaker version doesn't seem able explain the use of principles to justify moral judgments either. The questions regarding the role of imaginary cases, and testing principles against particular cases remain unanswered too. Since only one case is needed to establish potential moral relevance, and imaginary cases can't show the actual relevance of a moral property, principles remain immune to refutation with reference to particular cases, except in a very weak sense (Stangl 2006, 214). Stangl concludes: "The lesson, I think, is that moral generalities can't be mere reminders of the sort of relevance that a property may have. In order to generate a meaningful theoretical account of moral generalities, we need to specify some further property that moral generalities pick out beside the possibility of moral relevance" (Stangl 2006, 215).

Candidates for such a further property include being normally, usually or often morally relevant. Or more generally, "What the particularist needs, it seems, is something stronger than mere possibility of moral relevance but weaker than a guarantee of moral relevance" (Stangl 2006, 215). As Stangl observes, something like this can be found in Dancy, namely his view of default reasons that possess a certain default moral relevance (for example, that killing innocents is wrong) and properties referred to by thick moral concepts that also possess default moral valence (Stangl 2006, 215-217; Dancy 1993, 227-230 and 2004, 112-116). This allows one to regard bravery, but not folding hands, as possessing default moral relevance. More generally, particularist moral generalities would now "direct us to properties that are likely to have a certain moral relevance" or "are presumptive of a certain kind of moral relevance" (Stangl 2006, 215, 218). Thus, the default view releases us from treating almost anything as having moral relevance, but gives us more than the triviality of the weaker interpretation.

Nevertheless, worries arise about the acquisition of principles. Default status can't be established with reference to a particular case, since it involves a claim about a property possessing general moral relevance. Moreover, Dancy must reject the possibility of codifying defeaters for a default reason on pain of the collapse of particularism into generalism, since the possibility of codifying defeaters implies the possibility of invariance of moral relevance. Hence, although a generalist might try to use the invariance of moral reasons to explain the derivation of principles from particular cases, this move is not available to Dancy. "[…] to be a default reason is not to be an invariant reason" (Dancy 2004, 113; Stangl 2006, 217-219).

This leads Stangl to Little's account of presumptive moral principles that connect the moral with the non-moral, and inform us when the presence of non-moral property indicates a moral one. While not being law-like generalizations, such presumptive principles would nevertheless constitute "sufficiently robust patterns" so as to offer reliable guidance to agents with a skill to recognize when such a pattern is robust enough. Accordingly, it seems that such "moral generalities" could play a role in moral justification (Little 2000; Stangl 2006, 220-222). Here the details or subsequent developments of Little's account need not concern us, but we can focus on how Stangl explains it: "Mature moral agents have experienced many particular moral situations, about many of which they have come to form justified moral judgments. From this base the mature moral agent can make an inductive inference and conclude that, most of the time, certain non-moral properties are presumptive of certain moral judgments" (Stangl 2006, 220; cf. 223). For example, we rarely encounter non-cruel instances of stabbing, and this may warrant a presumptive principle regarding its cruelty. However, this won't guarantee its cruelty in every possible case, and if defeaters are not codifiable, the principle won't be invariant (Stangl 2006, 220-221). Could this solve the problem about the derivation of principles for Dancy?

No, because Little's account is not compatible with Dancy's view that a principle can be acquired from a single instance. This Stangl considers important to preserve, agreeing with Dancy that there are cases where an actual or imaginary single instance suffices to establish the wrongness of something. For example, one actual example of bullying might do so, changing one's view about more innocent looking cases that might otherwise be considered as harmless with positive toughening effects. Similarly, literature or imaginary

examples might show us something general about a case at hand, and justify the adoption of a moral principle (Stangl 2006, 220, 223-226). "The judgment about the imaginary case creates a presumption about relevantly similar cases" (Stangl 2006, 226).

More specifically, Stangl raises the problem that, even though Dancy can accept defeasible presumptive principles, they couldn't be derived from particular cases unless there is "something about the property itself that is general, which we are able to observe here and now" (Stangl 2006, 224). However, Dancy's particularism about the relevance of moral properties and reason-holism[5] don't allow him to accept that a single instance could give us an insight into the behaviour of a property more generally. Yet, he can't accept principles based on inductive generalization either, without giving up on the view that a principle can be derived from a single case. Hence, Dancy seems unable to explain the possibility of deriving, from either particular actual cases or imaginary cases, moral insights regarding the presumptive default moral valence of properties or default reasons expressible in principles (Stangl 2006, 226-227).

Stangl concludes: "A solution to this problem [of how a principle can be acquired from single or an imaginary case], I take it, would go a long way towards articulating a plausible radical particularist account of the role general truths play in the structure of our moral knowledge" (Stangl 2006, 228; my square brackets). In the remainder of this article I introduce a particularist account of moral principles intended to solve this problem, to avoid the problems raised by Stangl, and to answer Dancy's puzzles 1-6.

3. A particularist response to Stangl

The first step towards solving the problems Stangl raises is to distinguish, or to emphasize the distinction, between a) articulating a moral principle with reference to a particular case, and b) examining or establishing the truth of a principle. That two logically distinct steps are involved in acquiring a true moral principle is evident in that it is not possible to adopt a principle without it having been articulated (one would then not know which principle one is adopting), and that it is possible to articulate false principles or suspend judgment on the truth of moral principles, whilst acknowledging them as possible ones. Although Stangl implicitly acknowledges that there is such a distinction, since the very possibility of raising questions about the truth of principles presupposes the possibility of false principles or principles the truth-value of which is unclear, she obscures the distinction in her criticism. This problem comes to view in the assumption, which her criticism depends on, that the only basis to examine the truth of principles is the same cases from which they were derived. This creates the impression that as soon as a principle has been articulated with reference to a particular case, it will already also have been established as true. In other words, the case from which the principle was derived seems to automatically establish the principle as true, because Stangl assumes that the truth of principles is established with reference to the very same cases from which they were derived. A limitless multiplication of principles seems to follow (on the strong interpretation of Dancy). But this is only due to Stangl's exclusion of other cases from consideration. A particularist who wants to explain the derivation of principles from a particular actual or imaginary case only needs to regard principles as

articulated with reference to particular cases, and need not accept Stangl's assumption that runs together steps a) and b).

How one might come to lose sight of the distinction between a) and b) seems understandable enough. Normally we are not interested in articulating false principles. When articulating a principle we keep an eye on its truth and, so to speak, take the two steps at once. (This is analogous with articulating a theory and putting it forward as true. While articulating a theory is evidently distinct from establishing its truth, the goal of articulating a true theory informs theory construction.) Nevertheless, a principle such as "actions done on a Tuesday are wrong" is a possible moral principle. Cases where it says something true can be constructed, even though they are unusual. Thus, judgments in accordance with the principle will generally be false, which gives a reason to reject the principle as false. (I return to the truth of principles shortly.) However, the possibility of the Tuesday-principle brings to view yet again that the steps of a) articulating a principle and b) establishing or examining its truth are logically distinct, and that acquiring a true principle is logically a two-step process. With a view to developing an account of principles that avoids Stangl's criticism, let me start from step a).

If we consider what deriving a principle from a particular case involves, an important component is what might be described as abstraction. By abstraction I mean isolating a specific feature or features from the other features of a case, which then allows a moral agent to focus their attention on this/these feature/features. Abstraction in this sense is a familiar phenomenon. For example, it allows moral agents to compare particular cases with regard to their specific features, such as the feature that an action involves stealing. Consequently, abstraction enables agents to compare cases that might otherwise be quite different and share no other features, as might be with instances of violent robbery and white collar theft. Similarly to how it plays a role in comparing cases, abstraction can also provide the basis for moral principles in that, once a property has been abstracted from a case, it is also possible to articulate a principle that features it. But although abstraction may therefore be regarded as important for articulating principles, the latter involves more than comparing particular cases.

There may be important similarities between using a particular case as an aid in judging another case, and using a principle to judge a case. Nevertheless, a principle involves no reference to any particular case or cases by contrast to comparing cases directly. For example, "lying is wrong" doesn't speak of any particular instances. By its form the principle is universal or exceptionless, applying to any or all cases of lying (unless qualifications are added). In order to address the problems raised by Stangl about the derivation of principles from particular cases, I therefore need to explain how the transition is made from considerations relating to a particular case to considerations relating to all or many cases.

The proposed account is metaphysically light. The absence of reference to any particular cases of stealing need not be interpreted as meaning that, instead of speaking about particular instances, the principle speaks about some metaphysical abstract property or entity, such as a law that connects the feature of stealing with wrongness in every possible instance of stealing or with certain qualifications. Rather, when articulating a principle we simply cancel references to any particular cases, whereby the principle acquires an exceptionless or universal character. We can speak here of non-temporal and non-spatial use of principles, as

when one cites a principle without it being applied to any particular case, and speaks abstractly about lying and its wrongness. Relatedly, the derivation of a principle from a case or cases can be described as involving non-temporalization and non-spatialization, that is, cancelling references to particular cases, considered either individually or generalized over. Here the notion of non-temporal/non-spatial use spares us from postulating any metaphysical properties or regularities as what the principle speaks about. *Pace* Stangl, no such postulates are needed on the proposed account to explain how an individual or imaginary case can give a moral agent a general or default moral presumption.[6] (I return to this shortly. How formally exceptionless principles are re-connected with actual cases is explained in section 5.)

To bring this account of step a) to bear on the problems raised by Stangl, if principles are derived from particular cases through abstraction and non-temporalization/non-spatialization, there is no difficulty about how imaginary or actual particular cases can serve as the basis of principles. For on the proposed account, examining the truth of principles is distinguished from their articulation. This makes it possible to solve the problems raised by Stangl about how imaginary cases can help to judge actual cases, how an individual actual case can help to judge other cases, and how an imaginary case or an individual actual case can create a general moral presumption. I outline this shortly, but the basic point is simple. The possibility of using a principle to justify a moral judgment depends on the principle's truth. The truth of a principle, however, is not tested with reference to anything imaginary or on the basis of considerations that only apply to some single individual case. Hence, there is no reason to think, for instance, that imaginary cases might somehow serve as input for inductive generalizations (*pace* Stangl 2006, 225).

More specifically, the point that the truth of a principle is not established with reference to a particular actual case, or an imaginary case, makes it possible to respond to Stangl's key criticism of Dancy that a particularist can't explain what it is to examine the truth of a principle, except in a very weak sense that makes particularist principles immune to falsification. Crucially, however, this problem arises only, if we ignore the distinction between a) of articulating a principle and b) of examining its truth. All that is really required to explain the derivation of a moral principle from particular actual or imaginary case is an account such as the preceding that explains the derivation of a principle through abstraction and non-temporalization/non-spatialization. Consequently, Stangl's assumption that the only basis for examining the truth of a principle is the very same case from which the principle was derived can be rejected, and replaced by a different account of what it is to examine or establish the truth of a principle. Let's turn to this.

Having rejected Stangl's problematic assumption, a natural alternative is to see testing principles as requiring their examination in light of many cases or in light of considerations that have bearing on many cases. This corresponds to the idea that moral principles have general applicability. Thus, whilst a moral judgment is true if things are as it says in the case or cases it concerns, the truth of a principle is general and open-ended. Although neither Dancy nor Stangl explains in any detail what is to be understood by the truth of principles, this presumption of the generality of their truth is indicated by Dancy's characterization of moral principles as expressing general truths (Dancy 1993, 67; see section 1). Similarly, Stangl notes: "[…] most of us probably think there is a general moral principle to the effect that lying is wrong. Few of us, however, think

that there is an absolute constraint on lying" (Stangl 2006, 217). By "absolute" she means exceptionless, and by there being a principle that lying is wrong I presume her to mean that she accepts this principle as true. In line with this, what it is for a moral principle to be true can be explained by saying that a principle is true insofar as moral judgments regarding particular cases that accord with the principle would be true. For example, we can say that the principle "Lying is wrong" is true, insofar as it is or would be correct to judge instances of lying to be wrong by virtue of their being lies. (Of course, the truth of a principle doesn't depend on anyone actually making any judgments about relevant cases.) The principle "Lying is wrong" is therefore made true by the cases in which lying is wrong, i.e. would be correctly judged to be so. Similarly, the generality of a principle depends on whether judgments regarding particular cases in accordance with the principle would be generally true. Accordingly, the truth expressed by the principle about lying is general, whilst the preceding Tuesday-principle is not. This leaves it vague how general the truth of a principle must be in order for a principle to count as true, but this is not problematic as such. In any case, since Stangl is willing to tolerate this vagueness, as shown by her recognition of the principle about lying as true even though it is not exceptionless, I shall accept it too. Exceptions to a principle then are cases where corresponding moral judgments wouldn't be true.

This suggestion about the truth of principles doesn't mean that their truth would be established through an inductive generalization over particular cases. Although, it may be important to consider a variety of cases, the purpose need not be collecting data against/for something, as if making an inductive generalization. Here it is important that, even if counting instances where lying is wrong as opposed to right or neutral might support a presumption that lying is mostly wrong, such generalizations tell us neither which cases of lying are wrong, nor why lying is wrong in those cases. Accordingly, the point of considering different cases, when trying to establish the truth of a principle, lies elsewhere. In short, considering different cases can help one to achieve a better understanding of what doing so and so morally amounts to, and why doing it is right/wrong. For example, seeing what is common to cases where lying is wrong (or common to many of them) can put one in a position to justify the truth of the principle about lying in general terms. One might point out with Kant, for example, that lying compromises the ability of agents to set and pursue their goals, because it misleads them about how things are and what their options are. Lying therefore is disrespectful of their autonomy. This is to clarify what doing so and so amounts to with the purpose of explaining why it is wrong. Consistently with particularism, however, such justifications can be context-sensitive. For instance, immoral goals need not be respected. Lying therefore isn't wrong in such cases, or it might even be right. On other occasions lying might constitute a genuine harm, but this harm might be eclipsed by some greater harm resulting from not lying, and so on.

This account of establishing or examining the truth of principles can also explain how a single case can make one realize the truth of a principle, as in Stangl's example of bullying, where a single example makes an agent change their view about its wrongness (Stangl 2006, 227). One may be brought to such a realization by an example that clearly reveals what bullying amounts to (or more generally, what doing so and so really amounts to), while a complicated and unperspicuous case is unlikely to have this effect.

Consequently, it may be unnecessary to consider other cases. In this way a single case can change one's view about doing so and so in general, so that one comes to regard the principle against it as true, and the fact that an action would constitute doing so and so emerges as a general presumption or default reason against it. (For Dancy's notion of default reason, see Dancy 2004, 112-113.) More precisely, on the proposed account, the default moral status of a property depends on whether what a principle says about that property is generally true about relevant cases, for example, whether instances of lying are generally (as opposed to rarely) wrong. In this sense a principle with a default status reveals more than what moral importance a property *can* have. Thus, we can also agree with Stangl that default status depends on the likely moral importance of the property, taking this to be a function of how generally or rarely the property is right/wrong-making (Stangl 2006, 215). However, on the proposed account there is no need to think that individual cases would possess some peculiar property that by itself creates a general moral presumption (*pace* Stangl 2006, 224).

It is noteworthy that this account of examining the truth of principles is consistent with Dancy's account of the possibility of invariant reasons, i.e. that something might always be a reason for/against doing something, without this compromising his holism about reasons. According to Dancy, "Invariant reasons, should there be any, will be invariant not because they are reasons but because of their specific content. And this is something that the particularist, it seems, should admit" (Dancy 2000, 136; cf. 2004, 77). In other words, insofar as feature X is always a reason against, this has to do with what X is. For example, that an action constitutes a murder might always be a reason against doing it, and this is so because of the kind of action murder is. Hence, one can justify the truth of the principle that murder is wrong by clarifying what kind of action murder is, similarly to the preceding explanation about lying, except that in the case of murder there might be no contextual considerations (at least not realistic ones; see below) that affect its value.

It should be noted that these considerations about establishing the truth of a principle can be regarded as merely illustrative as far as concerns the argument in this section. (I will make further use of them in the following section.) The important point is that, *pace* Stangl, a particularist need not maintain that the truth of a principle depends on the same case with reference to which a principle was articulated. Given the distinction between step of a) articulating a principle and b) examining its truth, other ways of establishing the truth of principles are available to particularists. Thus, because Stangl's criticism relies on an assumption that particularists can reject, it is no obstacle to a particularist account of moral principles.

My account of particularist principles also provides an answer to another problem Stangl raises for Dancy. Not all potentially relevant properties determine true moral principles, but only those that correspond to generally correct moral judgments. Hence, both the problem of the multiplication of possible principles (on Stangl's strong interpretation of Dancy) and Dancy's apparent failure to explain which potentially relevant properties determine principles (on the weak interpretation) have been solved. It is also an advantage that the proposed account can explain what it is to establish the truth of a principle in cases where it is derived from a single actual or imaginary case, and where a single case creates a general moral presumption (Stangl 2006, 224). Thus, I have answered Dancy's "main question in moral epistemology" of "how knowledge of a moral principle can be derived from what we can see in a particular case" (see section 1).

4. The use of principles in moral thought and their advantages

The preceding section outlines answers to puzzles 3-5 from Dancy: 3) How knowledge of a principle can be derived from a particular case; 4) How particular cases can function as a test for moral principles; 5) How imaginary cases can help to judge actual cases. I conclude by explaining how the proposed account helps to deal with the rest of Dancy's puzzles: 1) How principles are advantageous for making moral decisions; 2) How principles can be used to justify moral decisions (section 5); 6) How moral principles can be understood as saying something true a priori or necessarily. As my proposed answer to the last question is implicit in the last few paragraphs, I start from that.

According to Dancy, "a moral principle amounts to a reminder of the sort of importance that a property *can* have in suitable circumstances" (Dancy 1993, 67). This formulation seems problematic in that, whilst I agree that the role of a moral principle is to remind a moral agent about the importance a property can have (see below), the words "in suitable circumstances" seem to add something wrong. When the circumstances are specified in relevant respects, the moral value of the property in its circumstances is also determined[7] – as a far as it can be. Perhaps indeterminacy and reasonable disagreement in judgments can't be excluded (see example below).[8] Indeed, Dancy's formulation seems to be in tension with what he says about necessity a few pages later: "What we are observing here is already modal, and if our observation is correct, there cannot be a situation in which our property *could* not have that importance if the circumstances were suitable. Hence what we observe, if true, is necessarily true" (Dancy 1993, 70; but see note 3 for Dancy's modification of his view). The latter point agrees with the explanation in the preceding section, according to which the moral value of doing so and so depends on what kind of action doing so and so constitutes in specific circumstances. For instance, given its circumstances, there may be no option but to judge a certain action of lying to be wrong. This will be so if, for example, the lie is designed to ruin the reputation of someone who is not guilty of what the lie claims, and who has never been anything but good towards the liar and others. If these are the relevant features of the action in its circumstances, the lie must be judged wrong. Although it is contingent that an action of lying with these characteristics ever took place, its wrongness is not a contingent feature of the action in addition to its genuinely contingent features. Rather, its contingent features in the circumstances (or descriptions thereof) entail its wrongness. Thus, the judgment about the wrongness of the action can be justified a priori with reference to those features.[9] Relatedly, although every instance of lying might not be wrong, wherever the principle "lying is wrong" does apply, the corresponding judgment is true necessarily, i.e. entailed by the features of the action. Now, because the truth of relevant judgments is necessary, we can also say that the corresponding principle it is true necessarily, wherever it holds. The principle is therefore absolute in Dancy's (but not Stangl's) sense, i.e. the circumstances allow for no other judgment. But the principle is not exceptionless unlike substantial generalist principles (cf. Dancy 1993, 230). Herewith an answer has been sketched to puzzle 6).

On this basis, I propose to modify Dancy's account of moral principles as follows: "A moral principle amounts to a reminder of the sort of importance that a property can have", or "A moral principle amounts to a reminder of the sort of importance that a property would have in suitable circumstances." Crucially, the latter formulation is consistent with particularism insofar as it is not possible to codify information into principles about all circumstances where they apply, so that the principles would be exceptionless. Moreover, as there seems to be no reason independent of generalism to believe that every situation where a principle applies could be determined in advance, it is up to the generalists to show that the contrary is true. Indeed, there are reasons to think that the understanding of moral agents about morally relevant features in circumstances is ultimately not specifiable in advance of their encountering those circumstances. If so, the possibility of exceptionless principles becomes questionable. For instance, is it wrong for me to murder my murderous double-ganger created by an evil scientist? Perhaps not. The point is that even though the principle "murder is wrong" might hold without exceptions in normal situations, this doesn't cover every possible situation. Consequently, it seems impossible to determine in advance what might count as a morally relevant consideration so that this is settled for every possible situation. (For instance, the development of medicine creates new situations where previously unforeseen features of situations might become morally relevant.) If so, the proposed reformulation of the function of moral principles avoids collapsing into generalism.[10] Let me therefore move on to Dancy's puzzle 1).

On 1) I agree with Dancy that a main function of moral principles is to help moral agents to manage the complexity of situations. Principles create order, helping to narrow down the potentially morally relevant features of situations by indicating which features are generally/likely important, or particularly important even if more rare (Dancy 1993, 67-68; see quotes in section 1). Accordingly, a principle that abstracts such a feature or features for consideration can help a moral agent to see relevant situations in a more orderly way, and help them to focus on what is morally relevant in them. Moral principles can in this sense be understood as principles of organization that are employed by moral agents as devices of clarification with the purpose of helping them to judge moral situations.

The usefulness of principles for moral agents (generally speaking) can be further clarified by considering how moral thought in terms of principles differs from thought informed by comparisons between cases. Rather than having to directly compare cases with regard to their value-determining features, a principle provides moral agents with a simpler instrument for judging value in targeted cases. A principle might in this regard be compared with a measuring rod which releases an agent from having to drag two objects next to one another to compare their spatial dimensions. But whilst a measuring rod constitutes a mode of representing objects with regard to a certain specific and easily determinable feature, moral principles constitute modes of representing actions (and so on) in light of a variety of value-determining features whose behaviour is much more complicated. Thus, the principle "lying is wrong" represents actions of lying as possessing negative value, or insofar as it is not exceptionless but still general, it represents lying as generally/likely wrong-making. The principle thus singles out lying as something for moral agents to attend to, even though it doesn't specify the cases in which lying is wrong. As opposed to comparisons between cases, a principle has the

advantage of simplicity, given that cases used as objects of comparison will possesses a variety of features that won't be relevant for judging the target case. Such features make the comparison more difficult, and might confuse the judgment-maker. This indicates how principles help to manage complexity. They help agents to focus on morally important features through abstraction resulting in simplification, whereby the importance of simplicity is shown by how the clarificatory value of a principle decreases in proportion to an increase in its complexity. (Imaginary cases, which usually are simpler than actual cases, but more complex than principles, stand somewhere between actual cases and principles with regard to complexity.) It is also important that judging a case in light of a principle makes it unnecessary for an agent to have experienced similar situations so as to make comparisons between them. Thus principles widen the capacity of agents to deal with cases beyond their experience. This may partly explain their pedagogical importance.

Beyond serving as devices of clarification, the principles of agents partly determine their moral outlooks, indicating what they think is morally important and requires attention. Relatedly, when a principle is internalized, it can guide an agent's actions and perception by directing their attention in specific ways. This means that, *pace* Stangl on Dancy, the significance of principles is not merely heuristic, whereby a principle would only offer rule of thumb kind of guidance that an experienced moral agent might not need. To the extent that principles are partly constitutive of the moral outlooks of moral agents, their significance is only partially captured by describing them as heuristic. (A particularist, of course, need not regard principles as necessary for moral outlooks. Besides principles, various other things, such as stories and allegories may play a role in determining an agent's moral outlook.) Herewith answers have been outlined to question 1), regarding the advantages of principles for moral agents and decision making.

5. The use of principles to justify judgments

How we move from the point that principles highlight potentially morally relevant features to establishing what features are actually relevant in given cases is the core of question 2) about how principles help to justify moral judgments. A particularist, of course, need not deny that principles can be used to justify moral judgments, only that the justification of judgments always depends on principles. It is also clear that a correct moral judgment must be based on what is actually relevant for judging a case. Potential relevance therefore doesn't suffice to justify a moral judgment.

One might wish to object to the proposed account of principles as devices of clarification by saying that insofar as the possibility of moral value depends on there being principles, the proposed account of their function can't be correct. This general objection against particularism need not be accepted, however. It is question-begging, and it is not necessary to understand the role of moral principles in these terms. Instead, the function of principles can be explained as follows. A moral principle is a general rule that such and such features matter morally, for example, that lying does. But that such features matter morally doesn't depend on the existence of any general rule or principle. They may simply matter (to certain kinds of beings) just as, for example, the deadly consequences of a certain action may matter, regardless of any questions of generality.

(The possibility of particularism in general depends in this. Dancy makes a similar point in 1993, 105-106.) Therefore, strictly speaking, it is not principles that justify moral judgments. Rather, a principle indicates what the justification of a moral judgment depends on. For example, it is not that the utility-principle justifies an action with happiness maximizing consequences. It is the happiness maximizing consequences that justify the action, whilst the utility-principle generalizes the observation regarding the relevance of happiness maximizing consequences into the rule that such consequences, and only them, matter morally. Correspondingly, it is not any principle about the wrongness of lying that justifies the judgment that a particular lie is wrong. The judgment is justified by the features of the action in its circumstances, and the principle merely emphasizes the importance of paying attention to lying as generally/likely wrong-making, acting as a reminder.

A principle that allows for exceptions, its truth being general but not universal, doesn't tell moral agents to which cases it is correctly applied. Rather, applying principles correctly is the responsibility of moral agents. To see why this is important for the justificatory use of principles, recall, first, that principles, as I explained their derivation in section 3 in terms of abstraction, don't refer to any particular cases as they stand, but constitute non-temporal/non-spatial statements. Accordingly, it is essential, on the proposed account, that principles are applied (or misapplied) to cases by moral agents. How agents do this is simple to explain: principles are applied to actual cases by comparing those cases with principles, and by examining the cases in their light. Moreover, the fact that the application of principles is the job of moral agents is important also because this helps to expose a problem with the often assumed account of the justificatory function of principles that Stangl relies on too, i.e. that a principle should show the actual moral relevance of a property in a case. Let's now address this final issue.

On the proposed account the justificatory function of principles can't be explained by saying that a principle establishes the truth of a moral judgment.[11] Rather, principles help agents to identify relevant features on which the justification or truth of moral judgments concerning those cases depends. Thus, whilst principles can in this way help to justify judgments, their function is to clarify the grounds for the justification of moral judgments. Importantly, this excludes the possibility that a principle would guarantee what the actual moral valence of a property is in a particular case, and that the responsibility of agents for correct judgments could, consequently, be delegated to principles. Why the latter is problematic has to do with what Lars Hertzberg has described as moral escapism, a tendency to go along with what is generally accepted or to delegate moral decisions to moral experts (Hertzberg 2002)[12]. The problem with moral escapism is the following. Decisions in many areas of life can indeed be delegated to experts, for example to legal or medical experts, so that if the expert's advice is wrong and things go badly, the expert may be held responsible. For instance, if I follow the advice of a doctor about administering medicine to my grandmother, but she dies from the medicine, the fault is not mine, but it might be the doctor's. Crucially, however, this delegation of responsibility doesn't seem to extend to morality. If I follow moral advice, and a disaster ensues, the responsibility for having followed the advice is mine. Here it is not possible to justify the faultlessness of my

action, and absolve me from responsibility, by saying that I followed an expert's moral advice. The responsibility remains with me for having followed the advice.[13]

This point about experts can be extended to moral principles in that, however rigorously a moral principle might seem to have been established, if I follow the principle in a particular case and make a wrong decision, the responsibility is mine. But if this is correct, it is morally problematic to appeal to principles without taking responsibility for their correct application in particular cases. Accordingly, it is problematic to argue, as Stangl does, that moral principles (or imaginary examples) should not merely indicate the potential relevance of moral properties, but their actual relevance in given cases (Stangl 2006, 201-211). This requirement is not consistent with the recognition of the non-delegateable responsibility of moral agents for their moral judgments and employment of principles. Instead, the expectation that a principle should show the actual relevance of a moral property seems to invite an attitude towards principles that undermines moral seriousness and encourages moral escapism in Hertzberg's sense. Consequently, the account of moral principles that Stangl regards as desirable seems problematic not only philosophically, insofar as moral philosophy ought to clarify our "ordinary practice" of moral judgment-making, including moral responsibility and the possibility of delegating it, but morally.

Therefore, even if generalists succeeded in developing exceptionless moral principles, their alleged exceptionlessness can't release moral agents from their responsibility to judge whether a principle actually applies in a particular case. As the problem of escapism indicates, assurances about the exceptionlessness of principles are at best irrelevant in practice, if not positively misleading, because moral agents will nevertheless remain responsible for the application of principles and the resulting judgments. Conversely, it should not be counted against a particularist account of principles and moral justification that it doesn't explain moral justification as dependent on and delegateable to principles. Rather, avoiding the risk of moral escapism is an advantage for particularism.[14]

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Endnotes

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[1] This question can be understood in a practical sense, concerning the issue whether principles are required as guides or standards in moral deliberation, or in a theoretical sense, concerning the question whether principles are required to explain the possibility of moral thought or why the objects of moral evaluation possess the value they do. Mostly my focus will be on the practical or epistemological side, though I will occasionally comment on relevant metaphysical or conceptual issues too.

[2] I discuss some qualifications to this in section 3. Dancy (more recent personal communication) says that he doesn't want to allow for "particularist principles". However, given that on the proposed account such principles come much to the same as Dancy's general truths, and that such principles can be clearly distinguished from generalist ones, I don't see a substantial disagreement.

[3] Dancy has revised this point, proposing that the relation between properties and the moral judgments they ground is one of entailment and a priori, but nevertheless contingent (Dancy 2008). As space doesn't allow me to discuss the notion of contingent a priori (cf. Kripke 1981), I will side step this issue by speaking of entailment in relevant contexts (see section 4).

[4] 'Moral generalities' is Stangl's term for particularist moral principles which is intended to avoid begging questions against the particularists' rejection of principles (Stangl 2006, 202, note 3).

[5] According to reason-holism, reasons are context sensitive, so that what is a reason against in some context might be a reason for or neutral in another context, and non-additive, so that combining to reasons for something might not add up to a stronger reason for but constitute a reason against (Dancy 2000, 132-133 and 2004, 73ff.).

[6] Non-temporal/non-spatial use of signs is typical in mathematics. 1+1=2 doesn't speak of any particular individuals in that its validity is not limited to counting certain two apples, for example. It is also noteworthy that non-temporalization/non-spatialization as a mode of generalization differs from induction. While the latter involves

generalizing over cases, the former cancels any references to cases. An imaginary case, if it is abstractly enough described might already be non-temporal/non-spatial in the relevant sense.

[7] It would seem better for Dancy to use "would" instead of "can" in formulating his point.

[8] Reasonable disagreements may relate to what features of an action are relevant for judging it, although ignorance of relevant features can also lead to misjudgements.

[9] The situation is analogous to this: given the rules of chess, a certain move can't but count as checkmate. This is consistent with the fact that given some other arrangement of chess pieces on the board, exactly the same move wouldn't count as a checkmate. Similarly, the moral value of the same lie might be different in other circumstances. The negative analogy here is that whilst it is possible to calculate all possible circumstances for a certain move to count as checkmate, the possible circumstances of human life and what might be morally relevant in them don't seem calculable (see below).

[10] Here we come to another discussion about principles, i.e. whether principles with qualifications built into them could give generalists what they want (Crisp 2000). However, if such qualifications are added to a principle one by one, and there is no principled place to stop adding them, principles of this kind turn out to be indeterminate and impossible to complete. For hedged moral principles that have qualifications built into them as generalizations, and which seem able to avoid the problem just described, see McKeever and Ridge 2009 and Väyrynen 2009. However, if such hedged principles can't be given specific content without relying on the comprehension of moral agents regarding the particular circumstances of their application, hedged principles remain empty formulae. If so, they can't support to generalism either, but lead to its collapse into particularism. The discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

[11] If, as explained in section 3, the reason to regard a principle as true is that it corresponds to true moral judgments, then the truth of principles depends on the truth of judgments, not the other way around.

[12] Related issues have been addresses in the context of discussions on moral deference, though in different, epistemic terms. See, for example, McGrath 2011, and Davia and Palmia 2015.

[13] This doesn't imply that moral experts should not be consulted, only that those following them can't delegate the responsibility to them. Possibly, moral responsibility might sometimes be shared by the agent and the expert. But here the point still holds that following someone's advice won't release an agent from responsibility for their judgments or actions.

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