***The Explanatory Role of Moral Principles***

*Scientific abstract*

This project examines whether moral principles play an explanatory (or grounding) role in ethics. Many philosophers and laypeople assume that principles are essential to moral theory, since they underlie moral judgment and determine what is right and wrong. Moral particularists reject this assumption, and one central debate between them and their critics turns on whether principles truly explain anything. Recent grounding theory has developed powerful tools for understanding metaphysical explanation, but these have not yet been applied to moral particularism. The project aims to close this gap and, in doing so, to develop a new and more compelling version of particularism.

The research can be divided into three parts. First, it critically examines the leading arguments *both* for the claim that moral principles must explain (or ground) their instances, and for the opposite claim that moral principles *cannot* explain (or ground) their instances. I intend to show that despite their prominence, both these arguments are ultimately unsuccessful; particular moral facts *can* be explained without recourse to moral principles even though moral principles *can* play some explanatory role. Second, it explores whether the failure of these arguments might support a new formulation of moral particularism, one that preserves its central motivations while avoiding traditional pitfalls – namely, a version of particularism that is not at odds with the existence of exceptionless moral principles. Finally, the project addresses a key challenge for moral non-naturalists: explaining the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral. Here I intend to show how, contrary to what is commonly assumed, this explanatory burden can be met by the suggested new version of moral particularism without appealing to general moral principles.

Thus, the project aims to provide a better understanding of the supposed explanatory role of moral principles, to offer a comprehensive critique of existing arguments both for and against the view that moral principles must play such a role, and thereby to both construct and defend a new and better formulation of moral particularism.

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*Detailed description of the research program*

1. *Scientific background*

It is often thought, among philosophers and laypeople alike, that moral principles play a crucial role in moral theory, since principles are indispensable in determining what is right and wrong and in making moral judgments. Thus, it is assumed that the role of moral theory is to accurately codify the moral landscape by providing an adequate set moral principle. Moral particularists deny these tenets. In past research (2020, 2021, 2025a, 2025b), I developed implications of this unorthodox outlook. A central point of disagreement between particularists and their critics concerns the explanatory role of moral principles. While the notion of metaphysical explanation has been the subject of sustained discussion in recent grounding theory, this body of work has not yet been brought to bear on debates in moral particularism. The absence of such engagement leaves a significant gap in the literature—one that the proposed project seeks to fill. More specifically, in this project I plan to focus on the supposed explanatory, grounding role of moral principles using tools from recent grounding theory, with the ultimate goal of suggesting and supporting a new and compelling version of particularism.

By metaphysical explanation, I do not mean an activity or speech act intended to clarify something and make it understandable to one's audience. Rather, I mean the reasons why something is the case, the content of the answer to the question why it obtains or what its grounds are. Such answers take the form of "because" claims. There are, roughly speaking, two kinds of because claims that can answer why questions: causal and non-causal, both of which point to some underlying real-world relation. The explanatory role that moral principles are supposed to play is a non-causal one, and such non-causal explanations have been labeled in recent literature – grounds. The literature on grounding has been growing in recent years, and it provides a new theoretical framework for assessing the debate regarding the explanatory role of moral principles.

Many theorists believe that moral principles explain their instances, e.g., the principles of fidelity explain why it is that in a particular situation you ought to keep your promise. This explanatory relation between principles and their instances also supposedly explains the manifestation of patterns in the moral landscape as well as the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral (i.e., the fact that there cannot be a difference in moral state without a corresponding difference in some non-moral facts). The proposed project will first examine and criticize purported arguments both for and against the claim that moral principles play a significant role in grounding (i.e., explaining) their instances. It will then examine the other supposed explanatory benefits of moral principles. I believe that these discussions will provide novel arguments as well as a more refined formulation of a compelling version of moral particularism.

1. *Research objectives and Expected Significance*

The research objectives are threefold. First, the project will provide a deeper understanding of the supposed explanatory role of moral principles and the reasons for accepting or denying it, thereby also shedding light on moral particularism as a viable alternative. Second, it will offer a comprehensive critique of the existing arguments for and against the explanatory role of principles. Finally, the project aims to develop an improved formulation of moral particularism and to advance novel arguments in its favor. Even if some of these arguments do not ultimately succeed, the investigation will yield valuable insights into the structure of moral explanation and the stakes of the particularism debate.

1. *Detailed Description of Proposed Research*

I am currently developing two papers on the arguments for and against the claim that moral principles explain their instances. Initial drafts of these papers have been presented in academic settings—one at a conference—offering preliminary findings that the proposed research will build upon. The additional papers outlined in this proposal are at more exploratory stages and will be developed as part of the research agenda.

* 1. *The non-explanatory role of moral principles*

In this paper, I plan to defend the view that moral principles – if there are any – do not explain (or ground) their instances, against two conspicuous challenges: that accepting it would require rejecting common practices in moral discourse and would leave patterns in the moral landscape unexplained (I have already presented a very early version of this argument). I argue that these arguments go wrong by disregarding viable alternatives for what does explain moral instances and moral patterns. I argue that once these are considered, it is clear that our common practice in moral discourse is exactly as we would expect it to be if moral principles do not explain their instances, and that patterns can be explained without recourse to moral principles. I conclude by considering the wider implications of my discussion for the explanatory role of another types of principles, namely laws of nature.

* 1. *The Grounding Content and Grounding Role of Moral Principles*

In another paper (in progress), I tackle the topic of the explanatory role of moral principles by examining their content. It is common among contemporary philosophers to hold that moral principles should be expressed as grounding claims. I argue that this claim is false; moral principles are best formulated as specifying necessary contributory reasons***,*** and as such they cannot be reduced to grounding claims. Based on this insight I criticize Selim Berker's influential argument according to which moral principles cannot explain (or ground) their instances, and explore whether and to what extent some aspects of Berker's arguments still have merit. I conclude by considering the upshot of the distinction between contributory reasons and grounds for grounding theory more generally.

Interestingly, even though the influential argument against the explanatory role of moral principles fails, the way in which it fails suggests that if moral principles do explain their instances, it is not in virtue of their generality, but in virtue of pointing to some contributory reason relation, i.e., by pointing to the fact that this aspect of the situation is a reason for that moral judgment. This gives rise to a few intriguing lines of inquiry.

* + 1. *Moral Particularism: New Arguments*

The first possibility I want to examine is whether my criticism can be the basis for constructing a new and better argument for moral particularism. Particularists typically take two strategies to support their position. The first involves counterexamples to purported moral principles, while the second involves general considerations from the theory of reasons, namely relying on holism in the theory of reasons (the view that the import of reasons can change depending on the context in which they appear). The kind of argument I have in mind builds on those typical strategies but adopts a new overall strategy that would go along these lines: Exceptionless moral principles – whether of contributory reasons or of other kinds – are notoriously hard to come by (as exemplified by the disagreement among ethicist regarding the correct moral principles as well as by various counterexamples to purported moral principles). So, at face value, it appears that there are no exceptionless, general moral principles. And yet much of moral philosophy has been occupied by an attempt to identify the correct exceptionless moral principles, presumably because of the assumption that the lack of such general principles would put all particular moral truths on too shaky grounds. If, however, generality doesn't do any of the heavy lifting in grounding particular moral facts (if, for instance, reasons are perfectly capable of doing the work on their own, regardless of whether they hold generally), why not accept things at face value and admit that there are no general moral principles (neither absolute nor contributory)?

* + 1. *Moral Particularism: New Formulations*

There is another possibility which my research on the explanatory role of moral principles induces. My ongoing research on the topic is mostly negative; it purports to show that the arguments both for and against moral principles playing some grounding role, are unsuccessful. It should be noted that this is compatible with the possibility that moral principles do play a significant explanatory (or grounding) role. That we have no compelling argument for holding either that P or for holding that not-P doesn't necessarily imply that P is not the case. And yet, I believe that this research does have a particularist flavor to it. This is because it captures, at least partly, one of the underlying intuitions which motivate particularism, namely that generality doesn't itself do any metaphysical or explanatory heavy lifting. This prompts me to reexamine and reconsider my particularists commitments. Or, put differently, what adopting the best particularist position commits one to.

According to Jonathan Dancy (the most prominent recent defender of moral particularism) particularism is the view that makes the following two related claims. The first claim is that principles do not play an indispensable role (either metaphysically or epistemically) in determining what is right and wrong (or good and bad). The second claim is that morality cannot be codified. Particularism is opposed to generalism, the view according to which “the very possibility of moral thought and judgement depends on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles” (Dancy, 2004).

If the moral landscape is codifiable and moral principles do sometimes play an indispensable role, it appears that particularism as characterized by Dancy is false. However, consider a view according to which moral principles may exist, but if they do, they are non-fundamental and their explanatory power is not due to their generality but to the underlying reason relations. Such a view satisfies the first tenet of Dancy's particularism but not the second, and seems to be significantly at odds with generalism as well. I think that such a view is best classified as a form of particularism - one we might call "fundamentality-particularism" – one that potentially bypasses the difficulties faced by the version of particularism advanced by Dancy while simultaneously securing the main underlying motivations for it. Interestingly, such a view is Humean in its attitude toward principles, i.e., principles may exist but are non-fundamental. However, it is anti-Humean with relation to the forces underlying such principles since it takes the reason relation as fundamental, and the right and wrong making features as carrying genuine normative force pushing in opposite direction. This raises many additional questions as to whether and how such a view can be applied to the theory of causation and scientific explanation.

* 1. *Moral Principles and the Supervenience Challenge for Moral Non-Naturalism*

Another argument for the claim that moral principles play a significant role in grounding (i.e., explaining) their instances, stems from the supervenience challenge to moral non-naturalism. It seems that the moral supervenes on the non-moral, i.e., there cannot be a difference in a particular moral fact without there being some difference in the underlying non-moral facts. This necessary connection requires explanation, especially for those who believe that these are distinct facts (non-naturalists). It seems that if moral principles play a significant role in grounding their instances, then this also provides a solution to this challenge. Conversely, particularist non-naturalists presumably cannot help themselves to this solution and so are at a theoretical disadvantage relative to their generalist non-naturalist counterparts.

In this paper, I will start by examining the generalist response to the supervenience challenge. I will pinpoint precisely how the supposed underlying moral principles are supposed to solve the challenge. I suspect that once the precise way in which the solution works is spelled out, it can equally be applied to a view according to which it is not moral principles that play this grounding role but rather something about reasons. If so, their ability to solve the supervenience challenge does not point to any advantage that generalism has over my proposed version of particularism. In addition, based on some ideas I raised in the past (2024), I will suggest that there is a simpler way of solving the puzzle that does not require relying on the existence of moral principles but that is based on considerations stemming from fairness or from rationality. If either of these suggestions are correct, generalism is not better suited to solve the supervenience challenge than particularism.

* + 1. *Particularism and Moral Non-Naturalism*

Since this part of the project takes on board the self-identification of moral particularists as moral non-naturalists, it should also explain how non-naturalism is consistent with the particularist's contention that particular moral facts do not only supervene on non-moral (natural) facts but are also fully grounded in (a subset of these) non-moral (natural) facts. This appears strange given that it is common to identify moral naturalism as the view according to which moral facts are fully grounded in non-moral (natural) facts. I believe that the solution to this tension lies in first clarifying the scope of the particularist's claim that particular moral facts are fully grounded by non-moral facts, thereby allowing that there are other types of moral facts that are not and cannot be so grounded. This is best explained using an example. The particularist is committed to the claim that a particular action is wrong in virtue of some of its non-moral features (e.g., that it is the telling of a lie). However, the particularist also believes that in this context, the telling of a lie carries negative moral valence, it is a reason against performing the action. I contend that this reason-fact is itself a moral fact, and that the particularist is not committed to the claim that this reason-fact is itself grounded in some non-moral fact. On the contrary, she is a non-naturalist precisely because she holds that some reasons facts are either themselves ungrounded, or they are grounded in some other moral fact (perhaps an essence-fact). On the solution I have in mind, then, although moral particularists hold that some moral facts are fully grounded in non-moral facts, they are still non-naturalists since they maintain that ***not all*** moral facts are so grounded. Some moral facts are not grounded in non-moral (natural) facts.

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