Particularism and Moral Debate

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I. Introduction

Moral particularism is the view that moral judgment does not depend on moral principles. Moral principles can be weak or strong.\(^1\) Weak moral principles claim that a property always makes the same contribution to the overall evaluation of an action. Strong moral principles claim that a property is always, all things considered, right or wrong. An example of a weak moral principle is that pleasure is good. According to this principle, pleasure always counts in favor of performing an action. This principle is weak because it can be overridden by other principles, depending on the situation. Consider the principle that pain is bad. According to this principle, pain always counts against performing an action. If an action would produce more pain than pleasure, the principle that pain is bad will override the principle that pleasure is good in that circumstance. By contrast, the principle that torturing is always, all things considered, wrong, is a strong moral principle: it cannot be outweighed by other principles.

Particularism denies that moral judgment depends on either type of moral principle. Central to particularism is the claim that whether a property contributes positively or negatively to the overall moral evaluation of an action depends on the context in which the property is present. Particularism denies that there are any true moral principles we can use to answer moral questions, but does not deny that there are correct answers to questions about rightness and wrongness in particular situations.

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By contrast, moral generalism is the view that moral judgment depends on moral principles. Some forms of generalism accept strong moral principles, others accept weak moral principles.² According to moral generalism morally relevant properties always contribute either positively or negatively to the overall judgment of a situation. In addition, moral theories identify these properties and explain the contribution such properties make to an all things considered moral judgment. For example, classical utilitarianism holds that pleasure always counts positively in the overall moral evaluation of an action or state of affairs and holds that pain always counts negatively. As such, a moral principle such as that an action is right if and only if it maximizes pleasure over pain, both justifies moral judgments and may be used to guide action.

In this paper, I argue that particularism entails an implausible account of moral debate. I begin with a brief account of moral particularism and consider whether the particularist denies the supervenience thesis: the thesis that moral properties supervene on nonmoral properties. Next, I consider a problem for particularism first posed by Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit and Michael Smith (henceforth, “the Canberrans”), which I call “the concept problem.”³ Finally, I discuss a problem for particularism that arises from what I call “the standard model of moral debate.” The two problems are related and illuminate how particularism is a radical view. I argue that particularism entails that any progress achieved through standard practices of moral debate is serendipitous. Standard practices of moral debate appeal to morally relevant, nonmoral similarities across cases. If particularism is true, any success at identifying morally relevant, cross-contextual, nonmoral similarities would be purely serendipitous.⁴ If we cannot reliably

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⁴ In this paper, I use the word “nonmoral” rather than the word “natural” to avoid difficulties concerning attitudes, beliefs, and other mental states, which may or may not be considered natural. Further, I take it for granted that there is a distinction to be made between the moral and the nonmoral.
identify relevant similarities across situations, then our standard practices of moral debate are either hopelessly misguided or surprisingly lucky; both possibilities are implausible.

II. What is Particularism?

There are several versions of particularism but all are united in holding that moral principles do not play a fundamental role in moral judgment.\(^5\) Particularism denies that there are general principles that codify relations between moral and nonmoral properties. The primary proponents of particularism are Jonathan Dancy, Margaret Little, John McDowell, and David McNaughton.\(^6\) According to particularism, if we cannot codify the relations between moral and nonmoral properties, then the moral is *shapeless* with respect to the nonmoral: the moral contribution of any given nonmoral property depends wholly on the context in which it is situated.\(^7\) As such, the moral import of any nonmoral property cannot be codified in finite, nonmoral terms. No nonmoral property always carries a single, invariable moral import. Rather, moral import depends irreducibly on background context.\(^8\)

Particularism adopts holism about reasons: a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or a reason with a different valence, in another. Atomism about reasons is the view that a reason in one case remains a reason with the same valence in any another case, *ceteris paribus*.\(^9\) Particularists argue that holism supports particularism while atomism supports generalism. For example, Dancy and Little argue for moral holism in order to motivate particularism. Little


\(^8\) Little, 2000, p. 281.

argues that holism is true and a “unifying feature of the evaluative.” She argues that, as such, holism and particularism help us understand morality better than an atomist model of reasons.\(^\text{10}\)

In other words, Little argues indirectly against generalism and for particularism by arguing against atomism using examples from morals, aesthetics, practical reasons, and epistemology.\(^\text{11}\)

According to this approach, holism more accurately explains moral evaluation. Examples of holism about reasons are compelling, but it is not obvious that they accomplish the intended argumentative work. For example, Little uses a familiar lesson from Quine – that perceptual experiences do not carry their justificatory import atomistically – to support particularist moral holism. This argument assumes that moral generalism requires exceptionless moral principles. But moral generalism is compatible with defeasible, weak moral principles.

Particularists like Little and Dancy hold that the moral supervenes on the nonmoral. Broadly speaking, the supervenience thesis is that a set of properties A supervenes upon another set B only if no two things can differ with respect to their A-properties without also differing with respect to their B-properties. The thesis has several variations, but the one that concerns us here is *global* supervenience. A-properties *globally* supervene on B-properties only if for any two worlds \(w_1\) and \(w_2\), if \(w_1\) and \(w_2\) are B-property indiscernible, then \(w_1\) and \(w_2\) are A-property indiscernible.\(^\text{12}\) It follows from global supervenience (henceforth, “supervenience”) that there are necessary truths relating nonmoral properties to moral properties. Nevertheless, supervenience does not entail the sort of moral principles denied by the particularist. Little argues,

This [particularism] is not to deny that the moral supervenes on the nonmoral. Two situations, it’s agreed, cannot differ in some moral respect without differing in some

\(^{10}\) Little, 2000, p. 283.

\(^{11}\) Little, 2000, pp. 280-284.

nonmoral respect. But this can be so freely admitted because supervenience is so weak: nothing in the doctrine implies that a given moral difference (say, the difference between being just and unjust) need always be found in the same nonmoral difference. That is, while the doctrine of supervenience entails that the presence of a moral difference must be accompanied by a nonmoral difference, it does not entail that there are any interesting or helpful patterns to the ways in which the two sorts of differences line up. While the moral properties of actions, then, are in some sense determined by their natural features, there is no pattern discernible outside the evaluative practice to how those determinations add up.¹³

Supervenience alone does not entail the existence of moral principles because extensional equivalence across property sets that contain a potentially infinite disjunction does not imply a pattern in the moral that is projectable in the nonmoral. Little denies that there are any projectable patterns in the relations between the moral and the nonmoral beyond the minimum required to support supervenience.¹⁴ Generalism requires projectable patterns to formulate the principles that codify relations among the moral and nonmoral. Take, for example, classical utilitarianism. Classical utilitarianism holds that pleasure is always morally relevant and always contributes positively to the overall moral evaluation of any state-of-affairs. Thus, according to classical utilitarianism, an action is right if and only if it maximizes pleasure over pain. Particularism denies that such projectable patterns exist, and thus concludes that no principles codify the relations between the moral and the nonmoral. So, the disagreement between particularism and generalism is not over whether the moral supervenes on the nonmoral but whether there is a projectable set of relations between moral and nonmoral properties that support moral principles of the sort that particularism denies and generalism accepts.

Like many involved in the debate over particularism, Little uses the notions of projectability and patterns to describe the relations between the moral and the nonmoral, but does not explain either notion in detail. Precise definitions of both clarify the problem presented by

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¹³ Little, 2000, pp. 280-1.
¹⁴ Little, 2000, p. 281.
the Canberrans as well as the problem concerning the standard model of moral debate. Projectability is best understood using Nelson Goodman’s well-known grue predicate. The predicate ‘grue’ applies to an object $x$ only if $x$ is observed before the year 2010 and is green, or else it is not so observed and is blue. The predicate “grue” is not projectable because no present or past observation where the predicate “grue” is or was legitimately applied entails anything about unobserved, future observations. To deny projectable patterns among the relations between the moral and the nonmoral is to hold that no systematic difference at the level of the subvening, nonmoral base can make a predictable systematic difference at the level of the supervening moral properties. To affirm projectable patterns among the relations between the moral and the nonmoral is to hold that some systematic differences at the level of the subvening, nonmoral base can make a predictable and systematic difference at the level of supervening, moral properties. According to particularism moral predicates such a ‘rightness,’ are like the predicate ‘grue.’ A moral predicate such as ‘rightness’ is not projectable because no present or past observation where the predicate ‘rightness’ was legitimately applied entails anything about unobserved, future observations. In other words, the same nonmoral difference need not always make the same moral difference. Henceforth, I will use the word ‘pattern’ to refer to cases where nonmoral differences systematically make the same moral difference.

III. The Canberran Concept Problem for Particularism

Canberrans agree with particularists that supervenience is compatible with particularism, but argue that accepting the supervenience thesis raises serious problems for particularism concerning the acquisition and application of moral concepts. The Canberrans illustrate the concept problem using the following example.

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Suppose we construct a machine that flashes a light only when objects of certain shapes are placed in front of it. Suppose, further, that we program which shapes will, and which shapes will not, trigger the flash of light by using a table of random shapes and the following rule: a shape triggers a light flash iff its first appearance in the table is at an odd-numbered place. If, per impossible, every possible shape appears in the table, we will have two conditionals of the form

If a presented object has shape ... or ... or ..., the light will flash
If a presented object has shape ... or ... or ..., the light will not flash

whose antecedents between them cover every shape. It will then be true that identity in triggering light flashings supervenes on identity in shape. However, there will be no pattern in the connection between shapes and light flashings. Or, more precisely, there will be no pattern in the shapes themselves.\(^{16}\)

The Canberrans argue that the relation between shape and triggering light flashings is similar to the relation between the moral and the nonmoral posited by particularism.\(^{17}\) If one denies that there is a pattern in the connection between shapes and triggering light flashings then one denies that there is a property or set of properties common to all the shapes that trigger light flashings. This position is unproblematic in the case of shapes and light flashes, because the Canberrans stipulate that any relations between shape and triggering light flashings are random. By extension, if one denies that there is a pattern in the connection between the moral and the nonmoral, then one must hold that any relations between moral and nonmoral properties are random. There are no moral principles because there are no systematic relations between a moral property such as rightness and the nonmoral properties in virtue of which a right action is right.

The Canberrans argue that the relations between the moral and the nonmoral cannot be random in the way that the relations between shapes and light flashes in the example are random.\(^{18}\) If the relations between the moral and the nonmoral were random, it is unclear how we could ever grasp a moral concept. While the Canberrans are not committed to a particular theory of concepts, they are committed to a plausible claim about the abilities we gain by grasping a

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\(^{16}\) Canberrans, 2000, pp. 85-6.

\(^{17}\) Because the objection applies regardless, I grant the Canberrans that the pattern of first appearance in the table at an odd number is “extraneous.”

\(^{18}\) Canberrans, 2000, p. 87.
concept: to grasp a concept is to have the ability to apply the concept across an indefinite number of new cases in which the concept correctly applies.\textsuperscript{19} For example, if Sally grasps the concept OLDER THAN, then for any pair of ages she encounters Sally will be able to identify who is older than whom. There are contentious issues here, but the Canberrans hold that we can agree what it means to grasp a concept without committing ourselves to a particular theory of concepts.\textsuperscript{20}

If the moral supervenes on the nonmoral, it must do so in a way that is compatible with the formation of principles. Otherwise, we could not grasp moral concepts. According to the supervenience thesis, situations cannot differ at the level of the moral without also differing at the level of the nonmoral. Thus whether a moral predicate properly applies is determined by the nonmoral properties on which it supervenes. Particularists can maintain supervenience only by denying that we grasp moral concepts the way we grasp nonmoral concepts. We use terms like ‘table’ and ‘chair’ to refer to differences and similarities among items in the world. The sentence ‘\(x\) is a table’ is true just in case \(x\) has the property or set of properties for which the word ‘table’ stands. When we identify something as a table rather than a chair it is in virtue of our grasp of this common property properties in virtue of which the term properly applies. Similarly, the sentence “\(y\) is right” is true just in case \(y\) has the property or set of properties for which the word ‘right’ stands. When we identify some action as right, it is in virtue of our grasp of this common property in virtue of which the term properly applies. If the connection between the moral and the nonmoral were random, then explaining to Bobby that it is wrong to hit Jenny on the head with his new toy would not help him draw any predictive conclusions – not even ones with \textit{prima facie} plausibility – about the rightness or wrongness of hitting Peter on the head with his

\textsuperscript{19} This is often identified as “the generality constraint” from Evans’ \textit{The Varieties of Reference}, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
\textsuperscript{20} Canberrans, 2000, p. 82.
toy.\textsuperscript{21} No amount of information about the relevant nonmoral properties that make it wrong to hit Jenny entails anything about the relevance of those same properties when considering whether to hit Peter.

The particularist might deny supervenience and claim that moral properties are \textit{sui generis} and unanalyzable in terms of the nonmoral.\textsuperscript{22} They might argue that what unites all right actions is something that cannot be described in nonmoral terms. But surely we can and do have of the ability to grasp moral concepts in nonmoral terms: we do not place a serial killer in jail simply because the word ‘wrong’ properly applies to her actions. Rather, the word ‘wrong’ properly applies to her actions because of nonmoral facts about the crimes she has committed. We do not think Ted Bundy’s actions were wrong because of the mere presence of a \textit{sui generis} moral property that only happened to apply to each of his thirty-five murders. Both moral and nonmoral predicates have the potential to inform about the nature of the actions, situations, or persons they describe.

The Canberrans present particularism with a dilemma: defenders of the view must accept supervenience or not. If the particularist accepts supervenience, she cannot account for our ability to acquire and apply moral concepts; if she denies supervenience and adopts a kind of Moorean non-naturalism, she inherits the problems that attend that view.

\section*{IV. The Standard Model of Moral Debate}

Particularism faces a substantial problem accommodating a standard model of moral debate. Let us distinguish between moral disagreement and moral debate. A and B have a moral \textit{disagreement} when for some $x$, A believes $x$ has moral property $M$ and B believes that it is not


\textsuperscript{22} G E Moore, \textit{Principia Ethica}. (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1903).
the case that \( x \) has moral property \( M \). By contrast, A and B are engaged in a moral debate when, for some \( x \), either or both A or B are attempting to change or understand the other’s views, or explain her own views concerning the moral status of \( x \) relative to the views of other party or parties to the debate. Neither moral disagreement nor moral debate entail one another, though of course moral disagreement may arise in the course of moral debate.

It is perfectly sensible to say that many of us alive today have fundamental moral disagreements with Aristotle and other ancient Athenians. For example, we have good reason to think that Aristotle thought there were some cases in which slavery was morally justified.\(^{23}\) If one wishes to argue that Aristotle did not hold this position, we can imagine that some Athenian in the fourth century B.C.E. did. The Athenian (perhaps Aristotle) held that some actual cases of slavery are morally justified, whereas we hold that it is not the case that some cases of slavery are morally justified. Moral disagreement simply registers a difference of values or a difference of the application of values to particular cases. Moral disagreement, alone of itself, does not imply that the parties to the disagreement interact with one another. It is thus possible that people living in different time periods or in different locations disagree. In fact, this notion of moral disagreement is central to debates concerning the objectivity of morality.\(^{24}\)

By contrast, recall that A and B are engaged in a moral debate when, for some \( x \), either or both A or B are attempting to change or understand the other’s views, or explain her own views concerning the moral status of \( x \) relative to the views of other party or parties to the debate.

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\(^{23}\) See, for example, \textit{EN VII}, \textit{Politics} I.13.1260a12, and \textit{Politics} I.4-8, where slavery is defended at length. The wide practice of slavery suggests that this is true. Additionally, the view that there are, in fact, no cases of justified slavery, does not imply that there \textit{could not} be. See, for example, R.M. Hare “What is Wrong With Slavery?” Though I do not agree with his position, my characterization of what many of us think does not preclude one from holding a position like Hare’s.

Consider the following example: a student, Lisa, and her professor, Smith, plan to meet during office hours to work on a presentation. Smith is in his office. Having little time to eat lunch he is about to bite into a big juicy hamburger. Suppose Lisa is a vegetarian and Smith is not. Imagine that just as Smith bites into his burger, Lisa walks into his office, says, “Professor Smith! It’s wrong to eat meat!” to which Smith replies, “No, it’s not!” The two then proceed to engage in a moral debate.

Conveniently enough, Smith and Lisa have just read Peter Singer’s “All Animals Are Equal.” Lisa asks Smith, “don’t you think it is wrong to privilege the interests of a man over a woman simply because he is a man?” to which Smith responds, “Of course it is wrong! I’m not sexist.” Lisa then asks, “well, don’t you think it is wrong to privilege the interests of a white man over a black man simply because he is white?” to which Smith responds, “Lisa! Of course it is wrong! I’m no racist!” Finally, Lisa asks, “well then, professor Smith, can’t you see that in eating that cow you are privileging the interests of one species over another simply because it is a different species? You, are a speciesist!” to which Smith replies, “No I’m not!” If Smith replied this way, we would recognize that it would be reasonable, even expected, for Lisa to respond to Professors Smith with the following: “Well, then, Professor Smith, what’s the difference? If it is wrong of you to privilege the interests of one group over another in the other two cases, what makes it ok to privilege the interests of one species over another? What makes the difference between this case and the other cases?”

Notice in the imagined scenario, Lisa has identified a nonmoral property common to sexism, and racism, and extended it by hypothesis to speciesism. All three cases involve privileging the interests of one group over another. Lisa’s question is perfectly reasonable, whether or not we agree with her argument, because we recognize that the property she has

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identified is potentially morally relevant. As such, it is reasonable for her to ask Smith to explain why the same nonmoral property is wrong-making in two cases, but not wrong-making in the third. I contend that isolating and identifying morally relevant nonmoral properties *across cases* is a central feature of moral debate. If this thesis is too strong, consider the weaker thesis that it is reasonable and apt to isolate and identify relevant nonmoral properties across cases when engaged in moral debate. Call morally relevant nonmoral properties “normative features.” A normative feature is a factor that can help determine the moral status of an act, person or state of affairs.\(^{26}\) When we engage in moral debate, we consider the ways normative features interact so as to determine an overall moral assessment of an action, person or state of affairs.\(^{27}\) For example, in the case above, in defending his view that it is permissible to eat meat, Smith could respond to Lisa’s challenge by identifying normative features other than those to which she appealed. The view that moral debate often and reasonably involves isolating and identifying morally relevant nonmoral properties *across cases* explains a central mode by which we change or improve our moral views. Singer, for example, recognizes the value of this practice in a debate with Richard Posner over the moral status of animals. Singer argues,

> We are reasoning beings, capable of seeking broader justifications. There may be some who are ruthless enough to say that they care only for their own interests or for the interests of those of their own group…but many of us seek to justify our conduct in broader, more widely acceptable terms. That is how ethical argument gets going, and why it can examine, criticize, and in the long run, overturn, tenacious moral instincts. Think how far we have come, in a relatively short time, in regard to matters like racial integration, contraception, sex outside marriage, homosexuality, suicide, and many other areas in which moral instincts seemed very strong and very tenacious…Almost every time I go to a conference discussing issues about animals, someone tells me that Animal Liberation changed their life and led them to become a vegetarian, or an animal activist, or both. You may say that this is because the book gave them some new factual information about how we treat animals. I don't deny that this information contributes importantly to the book's impact, but my impression is that for many people the ethical

\(^{27}\) For an excellent discussion of this process, see, the introduction to Shelly Kagan’s *Normative Ethics* (Colorado, Westview Press, 1998.)
argument was also crucial. Many of the people who changed their lives as a result of reading the book were not animal lovers, or even particularly interested in animals, or sympathetic to their needs, before reading the book. Almost all of them enjoyed eating meat, and at least one that I recall owned a shop selling leather goods! So their interests were not leading them to become vegetarians, and while I cannot prove that it was the ethical argument that moved them, that is what many of them say, and it does seem the most obvious explanation for the book’s success.\(^{28}\)

The standard model of moral debate is one method by which we make moral progress. It is not the only method, neither is it infallible. Rather, the standard model of moral debate can, and sometimes does, cause us to change and improve on our moral views reasonably. In other words, that the standard model of moral debate can and does change and improve our moral views is a non-accidental property of the standard model of moral debate; that it can and does change our minds, reasonably, is not a matter of luck. As such, the standard model raises a serious problem for particularism.

In the standard model of moral debate, we identify shared normative features and consider the way those normative features interact in order to determine the moral status of an action. The conflict between the standard model of moral debate and particularism arises because 1) given moral holism and, 2) the absence of moral principles, we cannot be in an epistemic position to conclude that we have examined a large enough subset of the nonmoral properties in any given situation in order to determine whether a particular property is relevant or irrelevant in that situation. For any given situation, there are many nonmoral properties and in a sufficiently rich context, any nonmoral difference could make a moral difference, according to particularism.\(^{29}\) If particularism is true, then the standard procedure of isolating and identifying normative features is either hopelessly misguided or we are surprisingly lucky. Particularism

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29 Little, 2000, p. 291.
holds that when it comes to explaining why a particular action is wrong, a nonmoral feature such as the privileging of the interests of one group over another need not be more relevant to the moral status of an act than are shoelace color or fingernail length. The fact that we identify that normative feature as wrong-making in one case gives us no reason – again, not even a reason with *prima facie* plausibility – to think that the same feature would be wrong-making in another. If particularism were true, Lisa’s use of the notion of privileging the interests of one group over another, across cases, should exert no special pull on Smith or us.

Alternatively, when we appeal to certain normative features we expect to offer at least presumptive epistemic warrant for our judgments of rightness or wrongness. We often make claims that different acts of killing are wrong when we have only considered a small number of their common, nonmoral properties. We think some normative features presumptively justify judgments that a certain action is wrong, even though we recognize that other normative features in novel contexts may defeat our justification. That the justification is defeasible comes as no surprise to anyone with a basic fallibilist epistemology, and does not, alone of itself, motivate particularism. Rather, the challenge to particularism is in explaining how some nonmoral properties could ever be presumptively wrong-making.

V. A Possible Response?

Particularism implies that the standard model of moral debate is either hopelessly misguided or that we are surprisingly lucky. To avoid this problem, the particularist must provide an account of moral presumptions that can play an essential role in the standard conception of moral debate without depending on a projectable pattern. Little argues for this possible response:

If we start to wonder how someone could ever come to ‘catch on’ to a rule whose shape can’t be cashed out, we should remind ourselves that this question is generic as well.
How, Wittgenstein asks, can we ever come to catch on to a given rule from a finite set of examples, given that the examples we are shown could logically have been the products of an infinite number of rules? His answer, of course, is not to retreat into skepticism, it is to emphasize that we can, as members in a ‘whirl of organism’, outstrip the conditions of learning. Thus with morality, it is certainly true that we will come to understand a moral concept such as fidelity by reference to certain paradigmatic examples, such as intentionally told falsehoods. But this is just to say that we learned to become competent with the concept under circumstances in which the most easily accessible breaches of fidelity happened to be actual or mythic cases of intentionally told falsehoods. Once we have come to ‘catch on’ to the concept, though, we are able to discern the very different shape fidelity and its breaches take in different contexts. To think we cannot is to confuse the conditions of learning with the content of what is learned.30

Little argues that our ability to grasp a moral concept does not depend on projectable patterns in nonmoral properties. Rather, Little locates our ability to grasp a moral concept as arising within a shared “evaluative practice.” 31 This shared evaluative practice is the context in which we make moral judgments. We recognize nonmoral properties as relevant to rightness or wrongness by examining “paradigmatic examples” of rightness and wrongness. Over time, with enough examples, we develop the ability to recognize which normative features tend to be right-making and wrong-making from within the context of our shared evaluative practice.

Little holds that within a shared evaluative practice, we can and do make warranted moral presumptions. We can isolate and identify normative features and consider the ways that these normative features interact to determine the moral status of an action, person or state of affairs. But we can do so only from within the restricted context of a shared evaluative practice. Recall that given moral holism, the moral import of any nonmoral property depends irreducibly on the context in which it is situated. Hence, any projectable pattern will not be in the nonmoral properties themselves but rather in the context in which those nonmoral properties are situated.

The burden is on Little to provide an account of what an evaluative practice consists in, and how we may individuate them. As it stands, the appeal to evaluative practices looks like

30 Little, 2000, p. 283.
31 Little, 2000, p. 301.
relativism. In addition, even if Little were to provide restrictions that allowed for the individuation of evaluative practices, it is *prima facie* possible for an individual to be a member of more than one evaluative practice. But then the threat of moral relativism becomes a threat of moral incoherence. Consider a Catholic woman who is a feminist. Do her evaluative practices allow or forbid her from seeking an abortion? Furthermore, absent restrictions on what counts as being a member of an evaluative practice, it remains unclear clear whether two individuals may be in the same evaluative practice. If not, then moral debate is impossible and all cases of moral debate are cases of mere moral disagreement.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that particularism is incompatible with the standard model of moral debate. Particularism cannot account for either our ability to identify shared normative features across cases or for our ability to consider the way those normative features interact in order to determine an overall moral assessment of an action, person or state of affairs. The standard model is widely used and it is reasonable to think that it can, and sometimes does, cause us to change and improve our moral views reasonably.

The problem I have identified for particularism arises from holism coupled with the rejection of moral principles—two central tenets of the view. My argument against holism and the rejection of moral principles, then, is indirect. As such, there is much still to say about particularism. Particularism has the consequence that certain central features of moral practice, for example moral debate, are more mysterious than we think they are. However, the arguments that support particularism invite us—indeed, require us—to think carefully about what exactly such practices commit us to. Particularism also invites us to question our use of and
commitment to moral rules and principles. No doubt, considering the arguments in favor of particularism allow us to better understand our standard practices. Particularism may leave certain features of the moral world mysterious, but reflecting on the arguments that support it might allow us to unpack these features in a thorough and systematic way.
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