

## **Principles that moral reasoning do need (in defence of minimalist generalism).**

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### **1. Particularism and holism of reasons.**

The most important theory nowadays against principled-guided ethics is moral particularism, whose crucial claim is that moral thought does not need any sort of moral principles to be established or even considered. At least, this is the way that Jonathan Dancy understands it and has recently characterized this moral particularist thesis. This thesis has two sources. One comes from recognizing the uncountable problems of moral principles, which seem not to be capable of depicting a consistent and meaningful picture of our moral intuitions. The other has to do with a general theory about reasons: holism. Actually, it could be said that moral particularism is, as Dancy takes it, a consequence of holism about reasons, connexion that he characterizes as follows:

"The core of particularism is its insistence on variability. (...) A feature can make one moral difference in one case, and a different difference in another. Features have, as we might put it, variable relevance. (...) This claim emerges as the consequence of the core particularist doctrine, which we can call the holism of reasons. This is the doctrine that what is a reason in one case may be no reason at all in another, or even a reason on the other side. In ethics, a feature that makes one action better can make another one worse, and make no difference at all to a third."<sup>1</sup>

In epistemic contexts, holism seems plainly true: reasons are non-monotonic. And, insofar as ethics involves considering features and reasoning, there's no reason to

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<sup>1</sup> DANCY, "Moral particularism" Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

suppose that moral reasons will perform differently . So, we have that, according the particularist view, moral reasons as well as epistemic and all kind of reasons, behave in a non-monotonic way: its contribution to a piece of reasoning is variable, it depends on the context where it appears<sup>2</sup>. Notice that, in the text above, Dancy slides from talking about reasons to talking about features when explaining variability. In fact, this variability applies both to the epistemic and the ontologic level. The presence of a certain feature in a situation can be taken to be a reason to act in a certain way, so both features and reasons are context-dependent in the same way: strictly speaking, the former contributes to the rightness or wrongness of an action, the latter contributes to reach a conclusion to act in a way or another, but, in any case, the particularist's point is that neither of them has necessarily to make the same contribution any time or in any context they appear<sup>3</sup>. As we will see, Dancy is apparently able to explain how a feature in a moral situation can change its polarity, namely, the contribution it makes to the rightness of an action, using mainly the distinction between two kinds of contribution a reason can make. The presence of a feature, he claims, can sometimes switch the contribution of another feature. And this has a clear consequence on the cogency of principle-guided ethics: insofar as principles are reasons that count in favour of doing or avoiding some actions, if they are in this way sensitive to other reasons and can be defeated by the presence of some further features, then it is difficult to see what good they could do to moral reasoning. The consequence would be that we don't need to provide a set of principles to explain moral rationality and, what is more, that we can dispense with them.

I'll try to support two claims throughout the paper. First, that the lack or presence of a feature can lead us to a different conclusion in different moral cases but not change the polarity or sense of another feature, something that goes against an overall application of the holism of reasons in moral reasoning. And second, that even though it were true that moral contributory principles aren't necessary for moral reasoning, if we mean to produce a genuinely piece of moral reasoning we do need a special kind of absolute

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to point out that the way Dancy understands holism implies that not only the conclusion can be different because of the presence of a relevant feature, but also the contribution itself of that feature. The polarity of a moral feature can be negative in some contexts and positive in others. Non-monotonism is applied to the contribution of reasons itself, not only to the piece of reasoning as a whole.

<sup>3</sup> At this point, this two levels, ontologic and epistemologic, seem to be parallel, and Dancy himself does not seem to be too concerned for distinguishing them, so for the sake of simplicity I'll explain my ideas talking from either level

principles, which I'll call metaethical principles, as a necessary constraint to be respected.

## **2. Favouring and enabling.**

As I said before, as a result of Dancy's overall application of the holism of reasons we have that, when producing a piece of moral reasoning, there is a variability about reasons just as much as it happens in epistemic contexts. The role that a relevant consideration plays in a moral case depends on what other features are relevant there, in a way that it could be said that reasons are sensitive to each other. According Dancy's account, at least two sorts of relevant considerations can be made in moral reasoning: he distinguishes between favourers, that are the reasons that favour a particular action or decision, and enablers or enabling conditions, which are those aspects of the situation that allow us, in different ways, to reach the conclusion favoured. The distinction between favouring and enabling seems to be one of Dancy's crucial reasons in support of moral particularism, since it shows the mechanism by means of which "a reason in one case may be no reason at all in another, or even a reason on the other side".CITA

Let's consider Dancy's example, used in his (forthcoming) book as a tool to train us up in distinguishing favouring from other types of relevance:

1. I promised to do it.
2. My promise was not given under duress.
3. I am able to do it.
4. There is no greater reason not to do it.
5. So: I do it. (Or: so I ought to do it.)

As Dancy explains, premise 1 is what favours the action reported in 5, and premises 2, 3 and 4 play another important role: they are enabling conditions. So, to be a favourer for something consists in being a reason in favour of doing something, to count in favour of doing something –in this case, what you promised. The idea of favouring manages to hold the normativity in a piece of moral reasoning, that is, a favourer embodies a reason, sometimes a motivating reason, for the action it favours. He would

say: “Moral properties are as much dependent on the enablers as on the favourers, but none the less the favourers play the central role.” CITA And it is essential to particularism to be allowed to conceive these favourers in a non-monotonic way, that is, as reasons sensitive to others that are also present and relevant in each case. The feature with opposite normative polarity of a favourer is a disfavourer. But what is it to be an enabler? Or, let me put it this way, what does an enabler enable?

According Dancy’s interpretation of the example above, each of the three enablers of that piece of reasoning is different. Premise 2 enables 1 to be a favourer for 5, and he discusses whether it can be just added to premise 1 to reach the conclusion that the favourer for 5 is actually 1 + 2, i.e. a free promise. This is the version I would support, since in my opinion, a promise given under duress is not a promise. Moreover, it is broadly considered that any word said under duress can be taken as null, particularly when those forced words have consequences: an offer to someone who is bullying you, a crime confession under threat, a forced “yes, I do” in a marriage service, etc. But let’s focus our attention on premise 3 and 4. Concerning premise 3, Dancy says that “one cannot have a reason to do an action that one is incapable of doing”, therefore, “in the absence of 3 (...) 1 would give me no reason to act” CITA. Premise 3 then, is a feature that enables 1 to favour 5, or we may say, premise 3 enables the reason conveyed in 1 to count in favour of the action in 5. I will call this type of enabler “favourer’s enabler”. Premise 4, though, seems to be quite different, because even if 4 was not true, my having promised something would still give me a reason to do it. What premise 4 enables is the move from 1 to 5, from the favourer to the conclusion, so I will call this second type of enabler “moving enabler”: it enables a moral argument to reach to the conclusion (ought to act).

### **3. Enabling and regret**

Therefore, we apparently have at least two ways of being an enabler, one of which would imply the possibility that a favourer could switch into a disfavourer or a non-favourer. However, I think that this is quite arguable. My not being able to do something does not possibly disable a favourer to be a favourer. In fact, I can imagine thousands of situations in which I’m not able to do what I have a reason, sometimes a very strong reason, to do; and still the reason remains. Notice that this is slightly

different from claiming that I'm still moved to do it: I'm not saying that when you are not able to do something you are anyway motivated to do it, but that you still have the reason to do it. In the example above, my not being able to do the thing I promised is not sufficient to say that my promising is not a reason to do it anymore. In fact, when someone promise to do something and realizes that we cannot do it, they don't feel that they *don't have to* do it, but that they *cannot* do it (despite the fact that they have to do it, we could add.) The reason why they wouldn't do what they promised is that they cannot do it, not that they don't have to anymore.

It would be different if I made that promise knowing that I was not able to keep it; in this case it would make sense to say that my not being able to do what I promised to do could possibly disabler my promise to be a favourer for doing it, but this is a sort of perversion of the example. If I happened to promise something I knew I could not do, the question would be: if you knew you were not capable of doing it, why did you promise it? On the contrary, we have to assume that when we talk about the favouring nature of a promise we are allowed to suppose that it was a honest promise, and therefore that you thought you were able to do it, or at least that you didn't know you were not going to be able to do it.

I think that the previous argument could be enough to prove that the lack of 3 cannot possibly change the contribution of 1, but, yet, let's focus on the possibility of a promise made by an agent who is aware of their incapacity to keep it. I think I can even contemplate the possibility of making a valid and well-intended promise to do something you perfectly know you won't be able to do, without necessarily being forced to admit that the promise is no longer a favourer –for instance, when you try to console somebody you love by making them think of an auspicious future or by pretending that you will manage to solve a bad situation. Things so, it is clear to me that if you act this way, and despite your awareness of your incapacity, if your promise was honestly made, then you will feel regret for not being able to keep it. Let me put it this way: we distinguish a honest promise from a dishonest one, under these unlikely conditions, using as a criterion the fact that you feel regret for not being able to do what you promised –having promised it. And this means that your promise, when it is honestly made, is binding upon you<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, regret is frequently a very complex emotion, and when it appears, it can have many objects: in this case probably the salient one is not the unkept promise itself. The most likely expression of this emotion in situations of this sort would be that you regret not being able to do that thing that you

Anyway, there's another point of view to be considered here: may be honest or may be not, may you be able to do it or may be not, that you made that promise is still a favourer to do it, since the person whom you promised to do something can intelligibly demand your keeping it, or complain about your having defrauded them. So, in my opinion, the reason that a favourer gives me to do something always remains even if I'm not able to do it: at least in this sort of cases, being capable of doing it is an enabler of the second type, a "moving enabler".

I think that these considerations are relevant because they threaten a central point in the defence of particularism. Dancy says that (I quote) "the crucial point for further reference is just that there is a difference between favouring and enabling, even though there are different sorts of enabler." CITA Despite its importance, he himself admits that no clear criterion for this distinction has been found. But this is not what bothers me. What I'm interested in is to know whether a feature in moral reasoning can be no longer a favourer for an action in the absence of an enabler. A favourer, I agree, can be blocked by another relevant consideration, but this does not prevent it from still being a favourer, as I tried to show above. And if I'm right, the crucial point would be not just the difference between favouring and enabling, but the difference between favouring and favourer's enabling, because if particularism fails to establish it, it won't be able to claim that a feature can be a reason to act in a particular way in one situation and quite the opposite in another. If we are lacking in a type of features whose role is to enable or disable a favourer to be a favourer, then it does not depend on the context that any reason could be or not a favourer for acting. Reasons would remain monotonic, would make its contribution independently from the context or the other reasons present. And as I see it, and I hope I have meditated this matter enough, there's no such thing as a favourer's enabler: features can just be favourers or moving enablers.

Let's consider another example. Although it does not strictly pose a moral situation, it seems appropriate to me to reinforce the idea that the possibility of regret is a symptom that a favourer remains a favourer in spite of the presence of other features.<sup>5</sup> If today

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conveyed, with your promising, you would have liked to be able to do (JOSEPE). But this still makes room to the regret for not having done what you promised, and concerning the promise as a moral fact, my idea is that we do require/claim this feeling to take the promise as a honest one.

<sup>5</sup> This example was in a previous draft of Dancy's (forthcoming) book. The explanation of the example I say a particularist would give is the one Dancy gave.

was a fine sunny day, this would give me a reason to get out, but only if I do not have delicate skin. For the particularist, my not having delicate skin is such a feature the absence of it would make that the fact that it is a fine sunny day would have been a reason to stay indoors, as many people with delicate skin are *forced* to do. “It is not that they have some reason to go out. It’s being a fine sunny day is not both a reason for them to go out and also part of a reason for them not to go out. For them it is no reason to go out at all” (the particularist could say). That is, from a particularist point of view, not having delicate skin would be a favourer’s enabler, so the absence of this feature, namely, having delicate skin, disablers that fact to be a favourer to go out. But I’m afraid I cannot agree with this version of the facts. I do think I would have a reason to go out (together with my desire of enjoying a sunny day, of course), and this is shown by the very possibility of feeling pity about not being able to. I cannot change my skin condition, but if I do have the desire of getting out, is it irrational to feel pity because I cannot satisfy my desire without being hurt? That I don’t have delicate skin is an enabler of the second type, a moving enabler, since I could say, as an expression of regret: ‘Oh, what a pity, if I hadn’t delicate skin I would get out and enjoy this fine sunny day!’

So in my opinion, Dancy fails to show that it is not true that what gives you a reason to act will give you a reason in each and every context this feature appear (which is different from claiming that this feature will be *the* reason for your acting in every situation it appear.)

I would like to make a more general consideration, which will become important in the following. The very possibility of drawing the distinction between a favourer and an enabler conveys how relevant the description of the features is. Remember when we said that a favourer plus an enabler could be a complex favourer? Dancy does not seem to be keen on the idea of complex favourers, so, given what he says, it seems that we cannot sift our descriptions as far as we can crumble the favourers to ‘smaller’ pieces. The problem with this is that favourers, if they have to be put into the same words every time they appear, cannot be affected by the presence of enablers. The same happens to the moral properties of the events. In the following, I’ll try to explain it investigating a paramount matter in morality: moral predicaments or dilemmas. As a result, I’ll be showing that metaethical principles are necessary to explain the invariability of the

moral polarity of events, which is a necessary condition for the dilemmas to be intelligible.

## 5. Regret again

Remember the analogy Dancy draws between epistemic reasoning and moral reasoning, and holism of reasons applying to both fields? Well, if I may, I would like to remind you that in epistemical contexts, principles are needed, particularly those that tell us what not to believe, or how a conclusion cannot be drawn. For instance, that there can be an effect without a previous cause, that magic works, that the matter can be entered or that one single explanation is not better than two. When dealing with a moral case, you can reason the way you want: being principled-guided, after a particularist, arguing attending the reasons of prudence, tossing a coin... But as I see it, if we mean to produce a genuinely moral argument, there will be some unavoidable constraints about what conclusions cannot be drawn, no matter how our reasoning has been developed. These constraints have the form of metaethical principles: they don't tell us what to do but how we can't deliberate when morally reasoning<sup>6</sup> I'll consider two of them and try to pose two likely examples to prove the necessity of metaethical principles in explaining our morality. The first is a very well known one: "the end doesn't ever justify the means".

Imagine you run into a terrible fight between two men and you notice that one of them is about to kill the other. If you have the possibility to act to avoid it, your reasoning could be as follows:

1. Breaking someone's arm on purpose is wrong.
2. This man is about to kill the other one.

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<sup>6</sup> I'm perfectly aware that I owe an explanation of why I call these principles "metaethical principles".) For the moment I'll say that the sense in which I think they must be called "metaethical" is that they don't apply to actions only, but to ethical principles as well. The role of metaethical principles is to lead a correct piece of moral reasoning, which can involve "operating" with moral features and ethical principles.



3. If I hit him I will avoid the murder.
4. I cannot avoid it by doing a different thing.
5. So I hit him and break his arm.

In this case, the favouring reasons for 5 are conveyed in premise 2 and 3, and 4 seems to be an enabler of that second type I mentioned, a moving enabler. I take 3 to be a favourer because its contribution to the argument does not consist in allowing 2 to be a favourer for 5 or to help the move from 2 to 5 —I would say, it *is* the reason why you hit the man. And 4 is an enabler in that second sense because if it were false 2 and 3 would still be favourers for 5. Again an enabler does not affect the nature of a favourer: it does not enable the favourer to be a favourer, it enables the move from 2 to 5.

The point here is whether a set of features (particularly those posed in the example) can change the polarity of 1, i.e., make it a false or a wrong claim. Maybe, if I understood it right, particularism would say it can. This case seems to be a perfect example for the justification of particularism, insofar as the conclusion seems to be a consequence of the application of the holism of reasons: it is generally wrong to hit someone, but there's a feature in this situation that manages to switch the polarity of hitting someone. However, is it possible to understand under this picture the fact that many people would feel moral regret because of their action? Furthermore, is it rational to consider this case as a moral dilemma or predicament after having accepted that premises 2 to 4 change the polarity of 1?

My idea is that this case, as (almost) all moral cases involving ends, to say the least, is one in which the metaethical principle of the unjustifiability of the means by the end applies. Let's consider another way of putting this moral reasoning:

- 1\*. Avoiding a murder is right (and breaking someone's arm on purpose is wrong).
2. This man is about to kill the other one.
3. If I hit him I will avoid the murder.
4. I cannot avoid it by doing a different thing.
- 5\*. So I avoid the murder (I hit him and break his arm).

This is another way of describing the events. As it can be seen in the example before, we can consider that reality is just one way, one set of ontological features, but we can describe it in such different ways depending on what feature we focus our attention on, or how we determine our scale of relevant things. This is why we can describe the very same event in two different ways with, *prima facie*, opposite moral verdict: ‘you break someone’s arm on purpose’ (which seems to be wrong) or ‘you avoid the murder’ (which seems to be right). The amazing thing about it is that we can have both of them in mind when mulling our action over, the time when we can regret what we did.

What do principles have to do with this? Although I agree with the idea that it would be senseless to establish a principle saying: “breaking someone’s arm when trying to prevent him from killing a man is right”, I wouldn’t say that the best picture of it is to claim that avoiding a crime is a feature that changes the polarity of breaking someone’s arm on purpose, because this would make unintelligible or irrational this feeling of regret. If you deny that the polarity of 1 has not changed, then particularism has one of the same problems initially blamed on principled-guided ethics: not being able to explain moral dilemmas and the consequent moral regret. Unlike it is commonly said, regret is understandable if you bear in mind that this metaethical principle is what has been relevant for this piece of reasoning, as a general constraint for your acting. If you are forced to do something wrong in order to obtain a right goal, the most likely expression of your conscience would be: “yes, I did something right doing something wrong”. So it seems clear that you can feel morally sound about your action and at the same time have what you have done on your conscience. And this is indeed because the goal you obtained did not justify your action (as a means). Or, let me put it this way, avoiding a crime does not change the polarity of breaking someone’s arm<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that the action by means you avoid a crime is wrong or morally unjustified: a right goal does not turn a wrong means into a good one, but in this case the urgent need of achieving the right goal together with the fact that this means is reasonably one of the less bad means among the possible ones, make of this action (characterized this way, as a whole) a moral one. I know that the particularist could still pose an objection: “yes, but, *this* breaking someone’s arm is not right?” My answer to this is that in “*this* breaking someone’s arm” we are capturing the rest of the relevant features in the situation, thus including them tacitly. We are not then judging merely a feature but a whole action, and the accurate expression of what we feel is that the means is not justified but the action that involves that means do is justified.

This negative metaethical principle makes room for moral regret in the case of moral predicaments, and on the other side, a moral dilemma does not make this principle false or wrong. Moreover, this metaethical principle is what gives the sort of proportion needed to determine when it is worth to do something right by doing something wrong: taking it as a normative constraint of your actions is what enables you to distinguish between breaking someone's arm to prevent him from killing a man, and killing someone to prevent him from breaking another man's arm. The sense of this metaethical principle is to prevent a moral person from doing something they will regret without feeling it was worth doing it. Or more simply: to prevent you to do more harm than good in acting.

I'm not saying that because this metaethical principle is a necessary condition of moral reasoning (transcendental to moral reasoning) you have to feel regret for having broken his arm, nor even that every moral person will feel so. What I'm saying is that it is perfectly rational to think that your acting is good and at the same time feel regret due to the harm you made, and that this is only understandable (or can only be explained) by assuming that the metaethical principle is working here, that it is constitutive of moral reasoning. And also that a set of features does not change the polarity of a moral property, since it is perfectly possible to be in a situation in which the right acting involves doing something wrong.<sup>8</sup>

## **6. Another predicament**

There's another metaethical principle that is, in my opinion, necessary and very relevant when practically reasoning. Like the former one, it is extraordinary useful to identify and avoid wrong actions, rather than to encourage right ones. Consider the following example:

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<sup>8</sup> I know that the example I've posed is not the best token of moral predicaments, and I know there may be lots of caveats to see the point in saying that breaking someone's arm to avoid a murder is not justified: but imagine, then, a situation in which the only thing that you can do to avoid a murder is to kill the one who is going to commit the crime. The tougher is the dilemma, the clearer is the fact that the metaethical principle is necessary to explain our moral intuitions. And indeed, this metaethical principle gives us an explanation of why some predicaments are tougher than others: if the mean is as much bad as good is the goal, the needed proportion is less evident, i.e., it is more difficult to judge whether it is worth doing it or not.

Imagine a city placed in an area affected by a drought. The council, after long arguments, reach an agreement in order to ease the situation: only for drinking, cooking and washing will water be used. When told, several inhabitants would reason as follows:

1. There's a drought, and saving water can ease this situation.
2. Everyone else will save water (because they have committed themselves to do it or because they will obey what the mayor told the population to do).
3. If 2 is true, then it won't be useless if I save water too.
4. Therefore, I ought to save water.

It happens, though, that one of the inhabitants argues this way:

1. There's a drought, and saving water can ease this situation.
2. Everyone else will save water (because they have committed themselves to do it or because they will obey what the mayor told the population to do).
- 3\*. If 2 is true, then there will be no problem if I water my garden.
- 3\*\*. Furthermore, if 2 is false, then my not watering my garden will be useless to ease the situation.
- 4\*. Therefore, I can water my garden without being bothered. (Or: I don't have to save water.)

(For the sake of the argument, let's take 1-4\* to be true. 3\*\* is not a needed premise, but I wanted to make his position stronger.) This could be an example of how a reason (2) can be a contributory reason, a favourer, for acting in a certain way and for the opposite as well. Holism of reasons allows this apparently paradoxical situation, just by accepting the variability of reasons for action. According to particularism, this would be a case of variability of a reason. Both pieces of reasoning are correct and sound, and if I understood it right, particularism would accept both as possible and perfectly consistent, so we will need further reasoning and more features to be considered in order to choose acting one way or the opposite. Particularly, we will need to discuss whether 3\* and 3\*\* in the second piece of argument are appropriate premises or not, still considering that they can be perfectly relevant.

My idea is that, although the two ways to reason are possible in this situation, anyone would intuitively see that the second inhabitant is not acting right. And if we mean to depict a complete and meaningful picture of our moral intuitions, then we have to be able to explain why we do feel that this second neighbour should have taken 1 to be a reason to save water, and consequently reach the conclusion that he should not water his garden. (Note that the favouring nature of 1 remains even if 3\* and 3\*\* are true, as it is shown in the piece of reasoning of the first inhabitant. This leads me to think that we are not actually dealing with an example of variability of the reasons.)

So, if 1 is still a favourer for not watering the garden, 3\* and 3\*\* are enablers in that second sense I explained above, they are moving enablers. What those enablers are relevant for is to reach the conclusion 4\*, but we everybody feel that a moral person should not take 3\* and 3\*\* as relevant features of the situation and that any picture of morality has to allow an explanation for it. But, without appealing to this principle, how is particularism going to tell us which features have to be taken into account when morally reasoning in order to distinguish between a moral conclusion and an immoral one? This moral difference between the two pieces of reasoning can only be explained by appealing to a metaethical principle which is infringed in this case: not to act in such a way that we wouldn't accept that everyone act in the same way. So this metaethical principle is necessary as a constraint for our moral reasoning, and connected to this, as a paramount skill to train our moral sensibility (in this case, to be able to see that 3\* and 3\*\* are not the relevant features to be considered if we want to do the moral action).

I don't think that a principle like "it is wrong to seize the chance (take advantage of the fact) that everybody is saving water to water one's garden" was necessary to explain the wrongness of the second inhabitant's action. But, is particularism committed to deny the necessity of the metaethical principle too? If so, if this principle is not necessary either for moral reasoning, how could we explain the wrongness of the second argument? Maybe the answer is that it is not wrong to water one's garden when there's a drought and everyone else is saving water. But I would not like to have to defend particularism if it is going to accept that we cannot explain why this one is not a right action!

In this argument I have combined two ideas: again, that an enabler does not change the condition of the favourer, because it is just a moving enabler, and that we need this

metaethical principle to explain the intuitive moral difference between one piece of reasoning and the other.

## **7. Conclusions**

I'd like to finish explaining how the arguments I've presented are connected with holism of reasons. Dancy takes his moral particularism as a consequence of holism, and I've been arguing against two of the main particularists ideas: first, that moral features may change their contribution when are in presence of some other features; and second, that there is no need of principles because any reason can be defeated in some contexts. If I succeeded in showing that these two ideas are not true, do we have to reject that holism is a true thesis concerning moral reasons?

My answer is that we do have to reject that holism applies to moral reasoning only if Dancy's is the only possible way of understanding holism. It seems that, in his opinion, holism of reason would entail the idea that a favourer for a particular action can no longer be a favourer due to the presence of another feature in the situation. But, as I showed with the the first and third examples, that cannot happen. Does this necessarily mean that holism of reasons is not true? Well, in my opinion, holism can be conceived in such a way that it imply the possibility that favourers can be just blocked by the presence of another feature. Insofar as it is essential to moral particularism that a feature may change its contribution depending on which the context is, then moral particularism cannot be a necessary consequence of holism of reasons.

But there's another way to argue that the connection Dancy believe it exists between holism of reasons and moral particularism is not real, that is, that the former does not entail the latter. Holism of reasons implies that a reason can be a favourer for an action in some contexts or under some purpose and a favourer for a different action in a different context, but there's no need to suppose that holism implies the idea that reasons have to be able to make a different contribution also when they appear in pieces of reasoning guided by the same purpose. For instance, it is clear that something can be a reason that favours an action from an economical point of view and no reason at all for that action from an enviromental point of view. I mean that, when reasoning, the

purpose we have will choose the features we take to be relevant and how we will consider them, and these things will make a difference about the conclusion we will obtain. The example of the drought shows that in spite of fact that a feature can be a reason for an action and for the opposite as well, it does not possibly contribute in opposed directions in two pieces of reasoning whose purpose is to find out which is the morally right action: it can favour an action in a moral piece of reasoning and the opposite in a non-moral piece of reasoning. Insofar as it is a claim of moral particularism that each moral reason can make different contributions in different pieces of reasoning, being all moral, it follows that moral particularism cannot be necessarily entailed by holism.<sup>9</sup>

The other consideration about the logical relation between holism and moral particularism comes from the possibility that there exist some undefeatable reasons. As we have seen, holism of reasons can make us claim that any reason can be defeated by the presence of some features, but, bearing in mind that moral particularism is concerned to one reasoning game, moral reasoning, we have to accept that some reasons demarcate the game by their being undefeatable. Or, let me put it this way, if a piece of reasoning does not respect some reasons, namely, these metaethical principles, we are not dealing with a piece of moral reasoning. So, in my opinion, even if you accept holism of reasons, you cannot avoid the necessity of these metaethical principles. Moreover, I think it is perfectly compatible with metaethical principles, because these are not reasons to act, nor contributory reasons in this particularist descriptive sense: they are horizons of normativity, negative boundaries of our moral reasoning not permeable to factual features. To a certain extent, these considerations I've presented deal with a general conception of what moral reasoning is: if you are not constrained by, at least, these metaethical principles, you are not reasoning as a moral person, but as a strategist, or even as a politician, something not very pleasant to be said of a person in the light of what it is unfortunately happening these days.

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<sup>9</sup> The idea that holism does not entail moral particularism because of the variety of ways of reasoning was suggested to me by my thesis supervisor, Josep E. Corbí.