ABSTRACT. Do we need defeasible generalizations in epistemology, generalizations that are genuinely explanatory yet ineliminably exception-laden? Do we need them to endow our epistemology with a substantial explanatory structure? Mark Lance and Margaret Little argue for the claim that we do. I will argue that we can just as well do without them – at least in epistemology. So in the paper, I am trying to very briefly sketch an alternative contextualist picture. More specifically, the claim will be that although an epistemic contextualist should commit himself to epistemic holism he can nevertheless appeal to epistemic principles other than defeasible generalizations in order to provide his epistemology with a structure.

1.

According to Brad Hooker, Moral Particularists “hold that the very same properties may count morally in favour in some circumstances and against in other circumstances” (Hooker, 2000, p. 6). Or in the words of John McDowell: “Occasion by occasion, one knows what to do, if one does, not by applying universal principles, but by being a certain kind of person: one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way” (McDowell, 1997, p. 162). Jonathan Dancy combines these points in his account of Moral Particularism (MP, for short). Dancy characterizes MP as “the claim that there are no defensible moral principles, and that moral thought does not consist in the application of moral principles to cases…” (Dancy, 2001, p. 1). And the core particularist doctrine, which Jonathan Dancy calls the Holism of Reasons (MH, for Moral Holism) is, “the doctrine that what is a reason in one case may not be a reason at all in another, or even a reason on the other side” (Dancy, 2001, 3, cf. also Dancy, 1993).

Dancy then goes on to distinguish two conceptions of moral principles: the absolute conception and the contributory conception.
According to the absolute conception, a moral principle is a universal claim to the effect that all actions of a certain type are overall wrong (or right). So there might, e.g., be a principle that says “be just.” But according to the contributory conception, “this does not mean that all just actions are in fact right; it only means that the justness of an action counts in its favour, or that an action is the better for being just” ([ibid.], p. 6). The Particularist denies the existence of absolute principles. But he also denies the existence of contributory principles because he does not think it possible to specify the regular contribution a contributory principle would have to make (— if it is to deserve its name).

As Lance and Little note, there are serious problems for MP. Most importantly, it “seems to imply that there is no structure to moral theory at all” (Lance and Little, 2004, p. 436). More specifically, one problem is to explain how we can learn from our moral experience if we did not thereby learn to extract principles which we can avail ourselves of in new cases. A related problem is how we could learn the moral concepts in the first place. Suppose you just learnt that a certain concept $C$ is applicable to cases $a$ and $b$. What enables you to apply $C$ to a new case, $c$, if not the following: you extracted the features which cases $a$ and $b$ had in common and you see that case $c$ has these features too. You see, e.g., that the actions in case $a$ and $b$ were wrong because a promise was broken in each case. And in case $c$ a promise was broken too. So you conclude that the action in case $c$ was wrong too. But how did you do that if not by basing your judgment on your prior knowledge of a moral principle, namely that it is wrong to break a promise? This connects up with a third problem, the problem of how to justify our moral judgements. The particularist is not denying that there are moral reasons. Nor is he denying that an action’s being a promise-breaking might, in a particular case, be a reason for judging it wrong. But the fact that it was a promise-breaking in itself does not give the particularist any reason for judging the action wrong. It is exactly not the case, given his doctrine, that an action is wrong just because it is a promise-breaking. To try to explain that an action is wrong merely on the basis of the fact that it is a promise-breaking is simply no option for the particularist.

2.

Lance and Little claim that there is an analogy between MP and contextualism in epistemology. Moreover, they seem to suggest that