CHAPTER 27

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THE PARTICULARIST’S PROGRESS*

Many people seem willing to call themselves feminists with little idea of what they are committing themselves to. The same, in my experience, is true of particularism in the theory of moral reasons. There is a common suggestion that to be a particularist is, at the outset, only to admit that circumstances can make a difference. But if that were all that particularism amounted to, it would be uncontentious. In this chapter I lay out what I think one commits oneself to if one accepts the general claim that reasons are sensitive to context – a claim sometimes called holism in the theory of reasons, and of which moral particularism is merely one expression.

Of course holism here, as elsewhere, does come in degrees. The strongest form of context-sensitivity would be the claim that every reason is somehow altered with every change of context. The weakest form is the claim that some reasons are on occasions capable of being altered by a change in context. The form of holism that I recommend is pretty weak on this scale, so far as the modality goes, but strong on the extent of the domain. I maintain that all reasons are capable of being altered by changes in context – that there are none whose nature as reasons is necessarily immune to changes elsewhere.

When I talk of altering a reason, I mean to suggest not that the consideration which is a reason is altered, but that its nature as a reason changes. Instead of being a reason in favour of some course of action, it ceases to be a reason for action at all, or even becomes a reason against. One could express this by saying that the practical relevance of the consideration at issue is sensitive to changes in context, and the practical relevance of the consideration includes its polarity. A consideration reverses its polarity when, having been a reason in favour of action, it becomes a reason against, or vice versa. My holism holds that every consideration is capable of having its practical polarity reversed by changes in context.

It is hard to be sure quite how extreme a claim this is, partly because of the awkward modality in its characterization. But I shall not be discussing that matter

* I am grateful to Eve Garrard and David McNaughton for many discussions of the issues discussed in this paper; also to Roger Crisp, Brad Hooker, Derek Parfit and to all those audiences around the world that have let me try to persuade them of the merits of particularism. I owe special thanks to All Souls College, Oxford, where as a Visiting Fellow I wrote an early draft of this paper.

325

much here. Perhaps I will have to admit that not all reasons are sensitive to context in this way – that there are a privileged few, including probably the intentional inflicting of undeserved pain, which necessarily constitute the same sort of reason wherever they occur. If so, I will have lost a battle but won the war. For the main aim of my particularist position is to break the stranglehold of a certain conception of how moral reasons function – the generalist conception under which what is a moral reason in one situation is necessarily the same reason wherever it occurs. Generalism need not be false of every moral reason in order to be largely false, and hence false as a general account of moral reasons and the way they work. And if it is false as a general account of such reasons, rational constraints on moral thought and action – in particular, accounts of what consistency requires in these areas – must not themselves be based on generalist assumptions.

It may be that my train of thought here is vitiated by being overconcerned with one specific opposing account of how reasons function – Ross’s theory of prima facie reasons. But I might as well admit that I do have this theory constantly in mind, since it seems to capture so well the outlines of the position I am trying to dislodge. Omitting Ross’s epistemology for the moment, the theory of prima facie reasons holds:

1. What is a reason in one case is the same reason in all.1
2. Judgement is the attempt to determine the balance of reasons, so conceived.

1. HOLISM IN THE THEORY OF REASONS

In this section I argue in favour of particularism in ethics. In the past I tended to argue largely from example.2 This persuades some people but not others. Here my argument will be more theoretically grounded – though there will still be considerable use of examples as well.

As I said in the preamble, I see ethical particularism as merely one expression of an overall holism in the theory of normative reasons – that is, in the theory that discusses the reasons that favour one thing (action, belief) over another. Such an overall holism can be expressed as follows:

1. What a reason in one situation may alter or lose its polarity in another.
2. The way in which the reasons here present combine with each other is not necessarily determinable in any simply additive way.

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1 This is not fair to Ross: see D. McNaughton’s ‘An Unconnected Heap of Duties?’ Philosophical Quarterly, 46 (1996), 433-47.