Defending Moral Particularism

Shiu-Hwa Tsu

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University

SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY
RESEARCH SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
CANBERRA ACT 0200

September 2010
Except where otherwise acknowledged in the text, this thesis represents the original research of the author.

Shiu-Hwa Tsu

September 2010
Abstract

This thesis is a defense of extreme moral particularism, the view that morality cannot be codified in principle into necessarily true natural-moral moral principles, be they of the absolute kind or the pro tanto kind. My defense of it is negative rather than positive in the sense that instead of producing any positive evidence for my claim, I argue that two prominent arguments, the supervenience argument and the argument from the atomism of reason, that have been proposed by its opponents, the absolute principlists and the pro tanto principlists, are toothless against extreme moral particularism. If I am right about the failures of these arguments, I think we can be more confident about the claim of extreme moral particularism.

Here is the plan of the thesis. The introduction introduces the general background of the debate between principlism and particularism. Chapter 1 lays out a conceptual taxonomy of various types of principlism and particularism. Here, I make it clear that my thesis is devoted to defending a particular kind of moral particularism—or what I call ‘extreme particularism’, the view that there are no necessarily true natural-moral moral principles, be they of the absolute kind or the pro tanto kind. Chapter 2 deals with some businesses arising from the taxonomy. I try to head off some worries about the taxonomy and forestall some preliminary objections to the view of extreme particularism. Chapters 3 to 5 consist of an examination of the supervenience argument that is advanced collaboratively by Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith on behalf of the absolute principlists to establish the existence of absolute moral principles of the relevant kind. Chapter 3 is devoted to the reconstruction and elucidation of the argument whereas in chapters 4 and 5 I argue that Jackson et al. have not provided us compelling reasons to accept its premises. Chapters 6 and 7 examine an argument proposed by the pro tanto principlists to establish the existence of pro tanto moral principles of the relevant kind. It is the argument from the atomism of reason. I argue that it fails chiefly for the following reasons: (1) There is no reason for us to believe that the atomism of reason is true. (2) The atomism of reason faces a problem of individuation of features such that it does not really tell us how a feature qua reason behaves. (3) The argument begs the question against extreme particularism.
Acknowledgements

For the completion of my doctoral thesis, I am most grateful to both my principal supervisors at different stages of my Ph.D., Jeanette Kennett and Daniel Stoljar. Jeanette supervised my thesis at the Center for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics (CAPPE) until she took a job offer from Macquarie University in the beginning of 2009. Daniel kindly took over Jeanette’s supervisory role after I transferred to the then Philosophy Program (now the School of Philosophy) in the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSS) and supervised my thesis until I finished. Both of them are very generous with their time and very dedicated to nourishing the minds of postgraduates. When I look back, I now feel somewhat embarrassed by how often I bombarded them with half-baked ideas and inchoate thoughts. Yet, they had always been very patient and constantly encouraging. Both of them read the earlier drafts of this thesis several times and provided numerous helpful comments. I could never have completed my thesis without their help. I feel very fortunate to have them both on my supervisory panel. To both of them, my appreciation is beyond words.

I would also like to thank all the other members of my supervisory panel at one time or another. They include Daniel Star, Michael Selgelid, Keith Horton, and Christian Barry. Daniel Star read the drafts of several chapters and had been immensely helpful in stimulating discussions about various relevant topics. Michael, Keith and Christian never fail to show their care about my progress and are always willing to lend a sympathetic ear.

Thanks also to the following people for enlightening philosophical conversations over the years at various occasions ranging from formal and semi-formal ones such as seminars, conferences, workshops to informal ones such as chance encounters on the corridor, pubs and parties: Ruth Chang, Thomas Pogge, Bernard Gert, Neil Levy, John Kleinig, Tom Campell, Seumas Miller, Dean Cocking, Steve Mathews, Steve Clarke, Richard Fulmerton, David Chalmers, Richard Arneson, Alan Hájek, Hatry Field, Yujin Nagasawa, Yen-Chang Chen, Diane Lan, Masa, Chen-Hung Tsai, Chen-Hung Lin, Wih-Wah Chen, Chin-Mu Yang, Terrence Hua Tai, Sher-Ming Hsieh, Han Hsu, Tsong-I Lin, Ruey-Yuan Wu, Po-Wen Kuo, Eric Peng, Chih-Cheng Chao, Ching-Hui Su, Akira Inoue, David Mollica, Nic Southwood, and Ben Blumson.

I thank all my good friends for their constant encouragement. They include Rie Takeda, Diana Chunyan Zhang, Crystal Ching-Ying Tien, Shang-Po Hsieh, Hsing-Miao Chi, Cheng-Ming Chong. And I would like to thank Di Crosse for her constant help with administration affairs. If there is an ideal of administrator, she exemplifies it. I also thank the following institutes for their financial support at different stages of my Ph.D.: Australia’s Ministry of Education and Taiwan’s Ministry
of Education. Finally, I thank my parents and families for their financial and mental support.

Some of the material in my thesis has appeared in the following:


# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ............................................................................................................. 1

**Chapter 1 Clarifying the Debate:  
A Taxonomy of Principlism and Particularism** ......................................................... 6  
1.1 Examples of Apparent Moral Principles ............................................................. 6  
1.2 Schema .................................................................................................................... 7  
1.3 Contingent vs Necessary ....................................................................................... 8  
1.4 Natural-Moral vs Moral-Moral ............................................................................ 9  
1.5 Absolute vs Non-Absolute ................................................................................... 11  
1.6 Various Kinds of Principlism and Particularism .................................................. 14  
1.7 Extreme Particularism ......................................................................................... 19  
1.8 Caveat .................................................................................................................... 21  

**Chapter 2 Businesses Arising from Taxonomy** ....................................................... 23  
2.1 Epistemology vs Metaphysical ........................................................................... 23  
2.2 Varieties of Non-Absolute Principlism ............................................................... 27  
2.3 Non-Cognitivism against Principlism ................................................................. 33  
2.4 Error Theory against Principlism ...................................................................... 34  
2.5 Extreme Particularism and Normative Ethics ..................................................... 35  
2.6 Virtue Theory: Friend or Foe? ............................................................................ 36  
2.7 A Simple Argument against Extreme Particularism ........................................ 38  

**Chapter 3 The Supervenience Argument** .............................................................. 42  
3.1 Structure ................................................................................................................. 43  
3.2 First Stage .............................................................................................................. 45  
3.3 Second Stage ......................................................................................................... 48  
3.4 Third Stage ............................................................................................................ 57  

**Chapter 4 A Critique of the Supervenience Argument I:  
Supervenience and Conceptual Competence** ......................................................... 59  
4.1 First Stage ............................................................................................................. 59  
4.2 Second Stage ....................................................................................................... 69  
4.3 Is P (4.a) True? ................................................................................................... 70  
4.4 Is P (5.a) True? ................................................................................................... 81  

Introduction

“The ideal of normative ethical theory is a false one, that vanquishing the specter of non-cognitivism is not sufficient for legitimizing it, and that the popular new justifications for the enterprise fail in mischievous ways.”—Cheryl Noble (1989, p. 49)

“We cannot take the fact that moral philosophy is dominated by principled approaches as evidence that morality really is principled.”—McKeever and Ridge (2006, p. 1)

A common metaphysical picture of morality has it that morality is made up of a true and coherent set of moral principles.¹ It follows from this picture that if one negates the existence of moral principles, one negates morality altogether. For without moral principles, it seems that there would be no morality.

In pursuance with this common metaphysical picture of morality, one chief concern of normative ethics has been to formulate basic moral principles that govern the moral terrain. It is generally believed that in basic moral principles lies the ultimate source of moral truths. Principlists, though arguing over what the correct basic moral principles are and over the number of them, all tacitly agree that a major part of normative ethics is built upon the articulation of the basic moral principles and their application to practical moral issues.

While the debate about the correct formulation and application of the basic moral principle(s) continues, the common metaphysical picture underlying it has not received proper attention—not until the appearance of the contemporary particularists.

Contrary to the principlists, the particularists argue that morality does not depend upon the existence of a true and coherent set of moral principles. On this view, general principles fail to capture the complexity and uniqueness of particular circumstances (Nussbaum 1990, p. 69). Exceptions to principles are common and exceptions to exceptions are not unusual (Davis 2004, p. 1). According to this view, there are no principles of the sort which the principlists have in mind. The particularists believe that the moral status of an action is not determined by moral

¹ Non-cognitivists do not have to deny this as it is common for them to argue that it is okay for them to speak of ethical truths. In saying that a moral principle is true, one need not beg the question against non-cognitivists. Dancy (2004, p. 140) quite correctly points out in Ethics Without Principles, that “[t]he realist language which I have been using should not really be a stumbling block, since it is characteristic of non-cognitivists to maintain that they can perfectly well talk of ethical truths, facts and properties without signing up to the sort of realism that is involved in taking such talk, as they see it, too seriously.”
principles; instead it always relies on the particular configuration of its contextual features.

In my thesis, part of my aim will be to examine the debate between the principlists and the particularists with special focus on the question of whether there is any true and coherent set of moral principles that codifies the moral landscape metaphysically speaking.

If there is not, as the particularists suggest, then there is a need to revise our common principled conception of morality and change our current practice in normative ethics and applied ethics. Instead of trying to formulate basic moral principles to distinguish between right and wrong in general, normative ethics should then concern itself with how the particular configuration of the action’s contextual features come to determine its moral status. Similarly, if particularism is true, then the landscape of applied ethics will also need major reconstruction. Instead of trying to subsume practical issues under the governance of the relevant moral principles, we will need to be aware of their limitations, especially of their defeasibility.

If, on the other hand, we find our traditional principled conception of morality more plausible at the end of the day, our investigation will still not have been wasted. For we will by then have come to have a better understanding of the nature of morality and have helped to fend off particularists’ attacks on our principled conception of morality. The current practice in normative ethics and applied ethics can thus proceed on firmer grounds.

But having said this, I do not believe that our principled conception of morality can remain untouched at the end of the day. In fact, the other part of my aim in this thesis is to defend a metaphysical version of particularism which claims that there is no true and coherent set of moral principles that codifies morality. There is at some prima facie case that can be made for this claim at this stage. For after all, the whole history of moral philosophy has witnessed brilliant moral philosophers searching for true moral principles that codify the moral landscape, yet no principles have generated wide agreement. One explanation for this is that there are no true moral principles to be had in the first place. Parallel situations like this are common in many corners of philosophy. Many brilliant philosophers have spent their whole life’s time analyzing concepts of probability, truth or knowledge, trying to supply non-trivial, non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions for them. As is generally acknowledged today, it is extremely difficult, if not entirely impossible, to come up with a widely accepted analysis. One plausible explanation is that no analysis of the kind is to be had in the first place. I am not saying that there cannot be alternative explanations. But until they are produced, I think that there is at least a prima facie case that can be made for doubting whether there are any true moral principles just as there is a prima facie case
that can be made for doubting whether conceptual analysis can produce non-trivial, non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions for the meanings of many philosophically interesting terms.

My position is among the extreme sorts of particularism. Yet it is significantly different from the positions of other extremists like McDowell, Dancy and Little. McDowell defends particularism mostly on epistemological grounds. He (2002, p. 73) writes:

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. (emphasis added)

For McDowell, reaching the correct moral verdict does not depend so much on the grasp of the right universal principles as on the cultivation of virtuous character. While this might be true, the claim is quite compatible with the claim that there are true universal moral principles at the metaphysical level, which could correctly capture the moral status of various types of actions. It might well be the case that the universal moral principles are extremely complicated such that any mechanical application of them will inevitably “strike one as wrong”, as McDowell (2002, p. 58) puts it. But complexity does not negate their existence.

Dancy, although defending particularism mostly on metaphysical grounds, admits that there might be a few privileged true moral principles established by the existence of moral reason whose moral valence (rightness or wrongness) remains invariant. Here is what he (2000, p. 131) says:

Perhaps I will have to admit that not all reasons are [context-sensitive]—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.

I regard this move as unnecessarily reconciliatory and threatening to make Dancy’s position incoherent since Dancy’s original intention was to prove “the non-existence of [true] moral principles” as to make plausible a thorough particularist view that “our ethical decisions are made case by case, without the comforting support or awkward demands of moral principles.” (1983, p. 530). If there were true moral principles established by the existence of invariant reasons, as his concession implies, then it would be difficult to see how Dancy could support the thorough-going particularist view. This is not to say that Dancy could not come up with other arguments to support
the thorough-going particularist view. He may indeed, for instance, argue that moral principles, even if they are true, are useless in guiding our ethical decisions. But this would reveal that whether the thorough particularist view he favors is plausible or not has nothing to do with the existence or non-existence of true moral principles.

Finally, although Little shares my view in denying the existence of true moral principles, I do not think she comes to it through the right route. Little (2000, p. 286) argues against the existence of moral principles by arguing that they are not “explanatory generalities”. I think she is quite right in pointing out that if there were some sort of generalities established by moral supervenience, they would be quite useless in explaining the moral status of an action (Little 2000, p. 285). But the fact that moral generalities do not explain does not mean they do not exist. The point is worth emphasizing that the principlists at the metaphysical level are only committed to the existence of true moral principles, they need not commit themselves to the epistemological view that those principles play a useful role in moral explanation. I will elaborate on this point in chapter 2.

My position being extreme, the goal I wish to achieve in my thesis is quite moderate. I do not aim to prove positively that the version of particularism I favor is true. Rather, I want to argue negatively that no arguments that have been advanced by principlists against it are compelling. It might well be argued that I have not considered all the possible strategies available to the principlists and perhaps new challenges to particularism might come up in the future. These are reasonable doubts. But if my thesis succeeds in showing that none of the major arguments that have been advanced so far by the principlists are successful, then the burden of proof is on the principlists to show how the existence of true moral principles can be established. Until more compelling reasons for principlism are produced, I think that moral particularism deserves at least a more sympathetic hearing from us than it sometimes gets.

Here is the plan of the thesis: Chapter 1 aims to clarify the debate between principlism and particularism. I provide a taxonomy of various types of principlism and particularism one can hold in the debate. The sort of particularism I am going to defend in my thesis is what I call *extreme particularism*—the view that metaphysically speaking, there are no necessarily true natural-moral moral principles, be they absolute or pro tanto. In chapter 2, I deal with some businesses arising from the taxonomy. My main purpose in this chapter is to head off some worries about the taxonomy and forestall some objections to the view of extreme particularism.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 focus on an argument developed collaboratively by Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith to refute extreme particularism. I call the argument by the name of *the supervenience argument* since Jackson, Pettit and
Smith think that considerations that start from the thesis of supervenience can cause serious problems for extreme particularism. In fact, they contend that the supervenience argument can establish the existence of necessarily true natural-moral absolute moral principles. If so, extreme particularism will be falsified. In chapters 3, 4 and 5, I argue that the supervenience argument fails.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the argument from the atomism of reason, which is invoked to support pro tanto principlism, the view that there are necessarily true pro tanto natural-moral moral principles. If the argument is sound, then pro tanto principlism will be proved to be true. Extreme particularism, the view that there are no relevant moral principles of the absolute and the pro tanto kinds, will thus be falsified. However, I will argue that the argument from the atomism of reason is not a persuasive argument, chiefly for the following three reasons: (1) The atomism of reason is poorly motivated. (2) The claim of the atomism of reason is not very informative about how a feature qua reason behaves. (3) The argument begs the question against extreme particularism. In chapter 6, I will try to lay out and explain the argument from the atomism of reason. In chapter 7, I focus on the objections to it.
Chapter 1 Clarifying the Debate:  
A Taxonomy of Principlism and Particularism

The principlism/particularism debate is one of the most lively ones in the scene of contemporary moral philosophy. Although it has aroused many discussions, many participants in it have complained of a lack of a proper contrast between particularism and principlism. Dancy (2000, p. 130) points out that many people hold particularism without knowing what they are really committed to. In addition, Väyrynen (2002, p. 2) argues that what makes the principlism/particularism debate occasionally frustrating is that it involves different views of what the debate is fundamentally about. In this chapter, I try to offer a clarification of the claims of principlism and particularism. The purpose of doing so is to identify the sort of particularism I am going to defend in this thesis—extreme particularism, the view that there are no necessarily true natural-moral moral principles, be they of the absolute kind or the pro tanto kind.

1.1 Examples of Apparent Moral Principles

To a first approximation, principlism is the view that there are true moral principles. Particularism is the opposite view that there is none. To understand these views better, we need a better grasp of what kind of creature a moral principle is. Although it is difficult to give necessary and sufficient conditions for a moral principle, I think the following examples will help:

(1) Lying is absolutely wrong.
(2) Lying is pro tanto wrong.
(3) Lying is prima facie wrong.
(4) Ceteris paribus, lying is wrong.
(5) Lying has a dispositional tendency to be wrong.
(6) Lying is wrong by default.
(7) Other things being equal, not lying is a better course of action than lying.
(8) If an action is a lie and that’s it, then it is wrong.
(9) A dishonest action is pro tanto wrong.
(10) A just action is right.

The list above provides some apparent examples of moral principles. What we mean
by ‘moral principle’ refers to creatures like those. Both principlism and particularism agree on this. Their difference is the following. When priniciplism claims that there are true moral principles, it claims in effect that there are some moral principles that are like the ones mentioned above and that they are true. Particularism, although agreeing with principlism on the claim that there are moral principles that are like the ones mentioned above, argues instead that none of those moral principles is true.

1.2 Schema

The way I characterized principlism and particularism in section 1.1 is only a first approximation. In the first place, particularism as I characterized is rather extreme. As far as I know, no one really holds such an extreme position. Jonathan Dancy, a card-carrying particularist, does not deny that there are true moral principles that are like (6) for instance. (Never mind what ‘default’ means now. I will explain the notion later in chapter 2, section § 2.2). If we characterize particularism in the way I did, then no one is a particularist. Not that such an extreme position is not logically open. It is. However, when real-world particularists claim that there are no true moral principles, what they mean, I take it, is the following: there are no true moral principles of certain kinds.

Corresponding to each kind of moral principle, there is a type of particularism which claims that moral principles of that kind are not true, on the one hand, and also a type of principlism which claims that moral principles of that kind are true, on the other. In what follows, I will use a schema to represent the claim of principlism. It can generate various types of principlism, depending on the kind of moral principle it claims to be true. Once the various types of principlism are in place, we can go on to define various types of particularism as their negations.

Now, let ‘F’ stand for the kind moral principles belong to. Principlism can then be represented by the following schema:

\[ F\text{-Principlism: There are true F moral principles.} \]

With the schema in place, we can fill in F with the kind a moral principle belongs to. However, a crucial question here is: what is a kind? Apparently, it depends on our criterion of categorization. Moral principles can be divided into the following two kinds if we will: those that are first advanced by a philosopher whose last name starts with letter ‘k’ and those that aren’t. However, for the purpose of mapping the principlism/particularism debate, three sets of distinctions that divide moral principles into kinds are especially useful. They are as follows: contingent/necessary,
1.3 **Contingent vs Necessary**

The first useful distinction to be made between moral principles is the distinction between contingent moral principles and necessary ones. Is the truth of moral principles contingent upon empirical facts of the world or is it necessary? (The same question can be asked about the falsehood of moral principles; however, for the ease of exposition, I will just focus on their truth.) Kant (2002, p. 24) famously argues that all true moral principles are necessary in that they are not derived from generalizations about empirical facts of the world. As Kant sees it, the empirical facts are too fickle to provide morality a solid ground. Mill, on the other hand, argues that morality cannot be detached from empirical facts. The principle of utility can only be "proved" based upon the empirical fact that "human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing, which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness (1991, p. 172)."

Both Kant and Mill seem to capture some important aspects of morality. Mill is right to the extent that the principle of utility, if true, does seem to depend contingently upon human nature. Were human nature differently constituted such that happiness is not something we desire, then the principle of utility may well come out false. On the other hand, some moral principles, if true, seem to transcend empirical facts. Judith Jarvis Thomson contends that the moral principle ‘it is wrong to torture babies to death for fun’ is not only true, but necessarily true (1990, p. 19). Whether this is indeed so can be further disputed on particularist grounds. I do not mean to settle the issue here. More on this later in chapter 2, section § 2.7. However, in terms of categorization, I think we can usefully divide moral principles further into the following two categories:

- **Contingent Moral Principles**
- **Necessary Moral Principles**

As it can be a matter of great controversy which categories the ten examples fall under, I do not give any examples of the above two categories. However, it is fair to say that Mill and Kant provide us with at least some prima facie reasons to believe that there are at least some examples in each category. Even if we discover after some philosophical reflection that all moral principles turn out to be necessary or all of them turn out to be contingent, we can still hold on to a conceptual distinction between these two kinds of principles.
Now, with the contingent/necessary distinction in place, now we can fill in the schema. Taxonomically, we can get principlism of the following two kinds:

**Necessary Principlism:** There are necessarily true moral principles.

**Contingent Principlism:** There are contingently true moral principles.

Given that Kant thinks that all moral principles are necessarily true, it should come as no surprise that he can be regarded as a champion of necessary principlism. On the other hand, philosophers of the Millian tradition tend to support contingent principlism. Peter Singer (2009, pp. 161-162), for instance, contends that given the contingent fact that there are people who are dying because of hunger, it would be wrong of us not to contribute as much as we can to relieve their suffering. Were we to live in a world abound with ‘milk and honey’ and no one starves, it may not be wrong of us not to contribute as much. Hence, the moral principle that demands contribution is merely contingently true.

In this thesis, I will be concerned solely with necessary principlism.

### 1.4 Natural-Moral vs Moral-Moral

In addition to the contingent and necessary kinds moral principles can fall under, moral principles can also be divided into the following two kinds:

- **Natural-Moral Moral Principles:** (1)-(8)
- **Moral-Moral Moral Principles:** (9)-(10)

Let me clarify the difference between these two kinds of moral principles. To begin with, a natural-moral moral principle is a moral principle that links a natural property with a moral property. Examples are provided by (1)-(8) in section § 1.1. To a first approximation, a natural property is typically taken to be a property that is studied by natural sciences and is thus distinguished from a moral property. Michael Ridge (2008, introduction) rightly complains, however, that this account of natural properties is not very illuminating in that natural sciences are typically taken to be the sciences that study natural properties. So there is a problem of circular definition here and the account of natural properties is thus not very illuminating. Although I agree with Ridge that this account of natural properties is not very illuminating, I think it will suffice for our current purposes. For moral properties are certainly not a subject that is studied by our *current* natural sciences and hence are distinguishable from natural
properties. Should moral properties one day become the subject matter of natural sciences, they are still very different from the other natural properties we currently study, for they are typically taken to be ‘objectively prescriptive’ in nature, to use John Mackie’s words. Hence, a conceptual distinction can still be made between these two kinds of properties, whatever they are called eventually.²

On the other hand, a moral-moral moral principle is a moral principle that links a moral property with another moral property. Examples are provided by (9)-(10) in section 1.1. The kind of moral-moral moral principle that is most often discussed is the one that links a thick moral property with a thin moral property of it.³ Roughly speaking, if we take a McDowellian view of the distinction between the thick and thin moral properties, a thick moral property, such as dishonesty, justice or piety, is a moral property that is thick with cultural implications such that an outsider lacking an understanding of the relevant cultural implications cannot have a full grasp of its meaning. For instance, a westerner who knows nothing about traditional Chinese culture might have difficulty understanding how an aged adult, dressed up in colorful costumes, dancing in front of his aged parents like a clown, is performing an action of filial piety. By contrast, a thin moral property, such as badness or wrongness, is thin with cultural implications such that any moral creatures, including the outsiders external to the culture, can in principle grasp the meaning of the property. To put it more concretely, westerners and Chinese alike, they both know what it means to say something is wrong even though they don’t know anything about each other’s culture. For to say X is wrong is for both of them, inter alia, to say that X is the thing not to be done.

Now, with the natural-moral/moral-moral distinction in place, we can now proceed to fill in the schema. Taxonomically, we can get the following two kinds of principlism:

\[\text{Natural-Moral Principlism: There are true natural-moral moral principles.}\]
\[\text{Moral-Moral Principlism: There are true moral-moral moral principles.}\]

Let me explain what each kind of principlism means in more detail. Let’s start with

² David Chalmers makes similar comments in his The Conscious Mind (1997, pp. 162-163). The contrast there, though, is not between moral properties and natural properties, but rather between phenomenal properties and physical properties. Chalmers contends that even if all phenomenal properties can be reduced to physical properties in the future, those physical properties must still be very different from our current physical properties.

³ There might well be other kinds of moral-moral moral principles, such as ones that connect thick moral properties with thick ones or ones that connect thin moral properties with thin ones or ones that connect thin moral properties with thick ones. However, I will use ‘moral-moral moral principles’ to refer to ones that connect thick moral properties with thin ones, except otherwise indicated or where the contexts suggest otherwise.
natural-moral principlism.

**Natural-Moral Principlism:** There are true natural-moral moral principles.

Kant and the utilitarians, although they disagree with each other over what the fundamental principles of morality are, and about whether those principles are necessary or contingent, nevertheless agree on the claim that there are true natural-moral moral principles. For Kant, it is true that lying is wrong, whereas for act-utilitarians, it is true that promoting happiness is right. They both acknowledge that there are true moral principles connecting a natural property with a moral property.

**Moral-Moral Principlism:** There are true moral-moral moral principles.

Commonsense morality abounds with moral principles that connect a moral property with another moral property, especially a thick one with a thin one. For instance, a just action is right, whereas an unjust one is wrong. A kind action is pro tanto right while ceteris paribus, a dishonest conduct is wrong. In philosophy, Ross can be interpreted as a classic example of one who contends that there are true moral-moral moral principles. In his book *The Right and The Good* (2002), he contends that there are seven pro tanto duties: duties of reparation, gratitude, fidelity, justice, self-improvement, beneficence, and non-maleficence. These duties are duties for actions. Namely, the actions fulfilling these duties are pro tanto right.

With the above two kinds of principlism in place, it has to be pointed out that my focus in this thesis is natural-moral prinicplism.

### 1.5 Absolute vs Non-Absolute

In addition to the contingent/necessary and the natural-moral/moral-moral distinctions, a third distinction that is relevant for our purpose is the distinction between absolute and non-absolute. The moral principles in the ten examples can be categorized into the following two kinds:

---

4 It is generally agreed that although Ross himself talks of ‘prima facie’ duties instead of ‘pro tanto’ ones, what he really has in mind is the latter rather than the former. For those duties are not just duties at first glance; they are in fact our duties when there are no other relevant duties in play. See Dancy (2004), p. 5, footnote 2
Absolute Moral Principles: (1) (10)  
Non-Absolute Moral Principles: (2)-(9)

The distinction between these two kinds of moral principles is not easy to capture. However, intuitively, everyone can agree that there is a distinction between moral principles that are classified as absolute moral principles, such as (1) and (10), and those that are classified as non-absolute moral principles, such as (2)-(9). Here, I will not attempt to clarify the distinction. I shall just rely on readers’ intuition that there is indeed a distinction and call that distinction the absolute/non-absolute distinction.

What is especially important for our purpose in this thesis is the distinction between absolute moral principles and one kind of non-absolute moral principles, the pro tanto moral principles. Some examples can be given to illustrate what they are respectively:

Absolute Moral Principles: (1) (10)  
Pro Tanto Moral Principles: (2)

The distinction between the above two kinds of moral principles is, again, hard to capture with any precision. But again, everyone agrees that there must be some distinction between moral principles such as (1) and (10) and those such as (2). I will call it the absolute/pro tanto distinction. According to Dancy (2009), the distinction is roughly the following: the absolute moral principles are moral principles that are about the overall moral status of an action whereas the pro tanto ones are not. Rather, the pro tanto moral principles are about the moral status of the features of an action. Dancy’s idea of an absolute moral principle is probably quite straightforward. Take (1) for instance. It is an absolute moral principle against lying. It says in effect that the action of lying has the overall moral status of wrongness. By contrast, the idea of a pro tanto moral principle needs more clarification. Why is a pro tanto moral principle about the moral status of a feature of an action? What is a feature?

To begin with, the word ‘feature’, in the mouth of Dancy (1993, p. 117), means a property. Take the action of killing to illustrate. It has many features. In addition to the feature of killing, an action of killing might well have other features, such as the feature of putting an end to suffering, as it is in the case of ‘mercy killing’. The moral status of an action is determined jointly by all the morally relevant features it has. Some of them are right-making and some of them are wrong-making. Or to put it differently, some of them tend to make an action that has them right whereas the others tend to make an action that has them wrong. For instance, the feature of killing is typically wrong-making because it tends to make an action that has it wrong,
whereas the feature of putting an end to suffering is typically right-making because it tends to make an action that has it right. It has to be noted here that an action that has wrong-making features, such as that of killing, may turn out to be overall right, due to the other right-making features it has, such as that of putting an end to suffering.

According to Dancy’s understanding of pro tanto moral principles, they are in the business of specifying these right-making or wrong-making features (Dancy 2004, p. 76). For instance, a pro tanto moral principle which claims that killing is pro tanto wrong is actually claiming that the feature of killing is wrong-making (such that an action that has it is pro tanto wrong). On such a construal, a pro tanto moral principle is in fact about the moral status of a feature (the wrong-makingness of the feature of killing). This is different from the claim of an absolute moral principle against killing, which is about the overall moral status (or wrongness) of killing.

Strictly speaking, however, the distinction Dancy has made between absolute and pro tanto moral principles is not a sharp one. For pro tanto moral principles, in one sense, can certainly be about the overall status of an action too. For instance, if ‘lying is pro tanto wrong’ is understood as the claim that the action of lying has the property of being pro tanto right, then it is a moral principle that is about the overall moral status of an action. Nevertheless, it seems to be clearly a pro tanto moral principle instead of an absolute one. For our purpose, however, I shall ignore this complication. I think we can work with Dancy’s way of drawing the distinction with the caveat in mind that the distinction may not be sharp.

Now, with the absolute/pro tanto distinction in place, we can go on to fill in the schema. Taxonomically, we can get the following two kinds of principlism:

*Absolute Principlism: There are true absolute moral principles.*

*Pro Tanto Principlism: There are true pro tanto moral principles.*

Let me clarify the above two kinds of principlism in more detail.

*Absolute Principlism: There are true absolute moral principles.*

Kant and Mill are famous defenders of absolute principlism. In “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motive”, Kant (1994) (in)famously claims that lying is wrong in all kinds of circumstances. Lying is morally forbidden even in circumstances where the Nazi police are asking you about the whereabouts of a Jewish girl who is hiding in your house. On the other hand, Mill regards the principle of utility as being true and absolute in that it holds without exceptions in all moral circumstances.
In Jonathan Dancy (2004, pp. 5-6)\(^5\) and Robert Audi’s (2004, pp. 70-71) interpretation, W. D. Ross can be regarded as a defender of this type of principlism. Ross argues that there are seven pro tanto principles that are true in the sense that the valence of those features specified in the pro tanto principles is invariant. Here, the term ‘valence’ needs some explanation. Dancy and Audi take the valence of a feature to be either negative, positive or neutral, depending on whether the feature is wrong-making, right-making or morally irrelevant. Thus understood, a feature that is wrong-making has a negative valence, right-making a positive valence, morally irrelevant a neutral valence. Take ‘breaking a promise is pro tanto wrong’ for instance. Ross endorses a principle like this as being true. That is, Ross thinks that one essential characteristic of the feature of promise-breaking is that it is always wrong-making.

1.6 Various Kinds of Principlism and Particularism

Now, since all the three major distinctions we need are in place, we can proceed to make some headway towards providing a taxonomy of the principlism/particularism debate. To begin with, I want to draw the readers’ attention to the fact that the three major distinctions actually crisscross each other. So there can be necessary natural-moral absolute moral principles or there can be contingent natural-moral pro tanto moral principles. For the purpose of mapping out the debate and understanding the various sorts of positions one can hold in the debate, the natural-moral/moral-moral and the absolute/pro tanto distinctions are especially important. I will keep the contingent/necessary distinction latent in the background at the moment and come back to it in section § 1.8.

Now, since the natural-moral/moral-moral distinction crisscrosses the absolute/pro tanto distinction. There can be four kinds of moral principles: natural-moral absolute moral principles (such as ‘lying is wrong’ as endorsed by Kant), natural-moral pro tanto moral principles (such as ‘breaking a promise is pro tanto wrong’ as endorsed by Ross), moral-moral absolute moral principles (such as ‘a just action is right’ as endorsed by commonsense morality), and moral-moral pro tanto moral principles (such as ‘an action of beneficence is pro tanto right’ as again endorsed by Ross). Correspondingly, using our schema of principlism—there are true

\(^5\) It has to be noted though W. D. Ross himself calls the principles by the name of ‘the principles of prima facie duty’. See Dancy (2004, pp. 5-6)
F moral principles, we can get the following four positions:

(A) Natural-Moral Absolute Principlism: There are true natural-moral absolute moral principles.

(B) Natural-Moral Pro Tanto Principlism: There are true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.

(C) Moral-Moral Absolute Principlism: There are true moral-moral absolute moral principles.

(D) Moral-Moral Non-Absolute Principlism: There are true moral-moral non-absolute moral principles.

Equipped with the above taxonomy of principlism, we can now proceed to define four corresponding kinds of particularism respectively as their negations.

(-A) Natural-Moral Absolute Particularism: There are no natural-moral absolute moral principles.

(-B) Natural-Moral Pro Tanto Particularism: There are no natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.

(-C) Moral-Moral Absolute Particularism: There are no moral-moral absolute moral principles.

(-D) Moral-Moral Pro Tanto Particularism: There are no moral-moral pro tanto moral principles.

In the light of these distinctions, it should be clear that there are numerous positions one can take in the principlism/particularism debate. Dancy, for instance, holds true (-A), pro tanto version of (-B), and (-C) while confessing that a pro tanto version of (D) might well come out to be true, with the qualification that no serious damage will be made to the kind of particularism he favors. Dancy rejects (A) and (C) chiefly for the reason that they cannot accommodate the phenomenon of moral conflicts (2004, p. 4). For true absolute moral principles cannot conflict. However, moral conflicts are a real phenomenon in our everyday moral life. For instance, I made a promise to meet my friend, and yet on my way to see him, I come across a car accident whose victims
need my help. There is a moral conflict between my duty to keep the promise and my duty to help those in need of urgent assistance. (A) and (C) fail to take the phenomenon seriously. Of course, the supporters of (A) and (C) may well contend that there is only one true absolute principle around such that no real moral conflict is possible. The moral conflict is merely apparent. What is wrong with this? Dancy contends that the problem with this view is that it leaves no room for regret. (The sort of regret here is “the regret we feel when, though what we did was the right thing to do, still there were strong reasons to do something else.” (2004, p. 4)) If views like (A) or (C) were right, Dancy contends:

there [would be] no reason to do the other thing at all, since only one principle applied to the case, and it was decisive, and the only reasons around were those which depend for their existence on that principle. If I suppose that I did the right thing [according to the principle], then, I should suppose that there was no reason to take the alternative course, and so I should not have anything to regret. (2004, p. 4)

So much for Dancy’s reasons for rejecting both (A) and (C) (or accepting (-A) and (-C)). With regard to (-B), Dancy argues for holism of reason to support it. Holism of reason is roughly, the view that reasons can change their valence. I will explain what exactly this means in chapters 6 and 7. For our purpose now, it suffices to note that for Dancy, reasons are features specified in the pro tanto moral principles. For instance, to say that ‘lying is pro tanto wrong’ is to say that ‘the fact that an action has the feature of lying serves as a reason that counts against an action.’ Or, to put it somewhat differently, the feature of lying, as a reason, carries a negative valence. If the feature of lying, as a reason, can (and do) change its valence from negative to positive (or from wrong-making to right-making), as holism of reason contends, then pro tanto moral principles will be thus falsified. Dancy argues that holism of reason is not only true of a few features but is a widespread phenomenon. The feature of lying is usually wrong-making but no so when it is embedded in a context of playing a game of Diplomat. The feature of causing pain is usually bad-making but not so when you have to give someone a shot to inoculate him. The best explanation for these phenomena is that there are no true pro tanto natural-moral principles. Should there turn out to be some, it would be a sort of “cosmic accident”, to use Dancy’s metaphor (2004, p. 82).

With regard to (D), Dancy (2009) also contends that holism of reason holds. That an action involves the feature of consideration is usually good, but not so when you considerately wipe the sweat from the brows of a torturer who is hard bent on his job.
That an action involves cruelty is usually bad, but no so when a cruel response is exactly what is called for in the circumstances. Judging from these phenomena, it also seems reasonable to infer that there are no true pro tanto moral-moral principles. However, there seems to be one exception, as Dancy readily admits: “I am admitting pro tem that justice is an invariant reason [specified by a true pro tanto moral principle] (2004, p. 120).” However, Dancy contends that the feature of justice is rather exceptional, and there are not too many thick features like it (2004, p. 121). Hence, the fact that justice is an invariant reason is, he contends, “no real damage to the particularist’ assault on the standard principle-based conception of morality (2004, p. 82).”

Little (2000), although seeing eye to eye largely with Dancy on (-A), (-B), and (-C), disagrees with Dancy over (-D) and explicitly rejects it. She comments: “I part company with Jonathan Dancy, who urges that even thick moral concepts have variable valence. (p. 289, fn. 21)” In fact, Little believes that there are morally thick features, when functioning as reasons for or against actions, are “guaranteed of carrying a given valence of moral significance (p. 289)”. It is reasonable to infer that she believes that there are true moral-moral pro tanto moral principles that specify features that have invariant valence.

Rossians, unlike Dancy and Little, deny both (-B) and (-D) (or accepts both (B) and (D) indeed.) They nevertheless agree with both Dancy and Little that (A) and (C) are both false. By and large, they contend that when there is a moral conflict between pro tanto moral principles, there is no absolute moral principle one can invoke to settle it. Rather, the solution lies in ‘perception’ (Ross, 2002, p. 41).

To make things clearer, it is useful to have the following graph (N: denial of the existence of the kind of moral principle at issue; Y: endorsement of the kind of moral principle at issue)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dancy</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N (with qualification)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

6 Whether ‘perception’ should be taken literally or figuratively is open for debate. I do not take a particular stand on this issue.
The positions of Dancy, Little and the Rossians do not by far exhaust all the possible positions one can take. One may for instance subscribe to (-A) and (-C) while negating both (-B) and (-D). Or one may accept (-A) and deny all of (-B), (-C) and (-D). We can of course list all the possible positions and give each of them a label if we want to. But doing so, I fear, will only muddle rather than clarify the debate, as it is quite cognitively demanding to remember all the labels.

I think a more useful way to proceed is this: whenever we come across someone who claims herself to be a particularist or a principlist, we can ask her which among (A), (B), (C), and (D) are the positions she accepts, rejects or wishes to remain neutral about. Of course, a person committed to unadulterated principlism will deny all of them while a person committed to unadulterated particularism will accept them all. But there are a lot of adulterated positions in between.

The positions I am interested in exploring in this thesis are (A), (-A), (B) and (-B). I should mention that I intend to remain neutral about (C), (D), (-C) and (-D) for reasons of limited space in this thesis. Unless otherwise indicated by the context, I will henceforth use the label ‘principlism’ to refer to a position that upholds the truth of (A) and (B), and the label ‘particularism’ to refer to a position that upholds the truth of (-A) and (-B).

In what follows, when I say ‘principlism’ and ‘particularism’, they are used as abbreviations for the following two views:

**Principlism:** There are true natural-moral moral principles.

(A) **Natural-Moral Absolute Principlism:** There are true natural-moral absolute moral principles.

(B) **Natural-Moral Pro Tanto Principlism:** There are true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.

**Particularism:** There are no true natural-moral moral principles, be they absolute or pro tanto.

(-A) **Natural-Moral Absolute Particularism:** There are no true natural-moral absolute moral principles.

(-B) **Natural-Moral Pro Tanto Particularism:** There are no true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.
I will henceforth leave the 'natural-moral' qualifier latent in the background, since it is not an issue of contention between principlism and particularism. Both agree that a natural-moral moral principle is one that links a natural property with a moral property. The real issue is whether any natural-moral principle, be it of the absolute kind or of the pro tanto kind, is true or not.

To take stock, we now have the following views in place:

**Principlism: There are true natural-moral moral principles.**

(A) Absolute Principlism: There are true natural-moral absolute moral principles.

(B) Pro Tanto Principlism: There are true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.

**Particularism: There are no true natural-moral moral principles, be they absolute or pro tanto.**

(-A) Absolute Particularism: There are no true natural-moral absolute moral principles.

(-B) Pro Tanto Particularism: There are no true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.

1.7 Extreme Particularism

In the last section, we have demonstrated the various positions one can hold. It is now time to clarify the sort of position I will hold in this thesis. Before I do so, however, it is important to notice the following four new possibilities that are generated out of a combination of (A), (B), (-A) and (-B) we mentioned in the last section.

(1) Extreme Principlism: (A) + (B)
(2) Modest Principlism Version 1 : (A) + (-B)
(3) Modest Principlism Version 2: (-A) + (B)
(4) Extreme Particularism: (-A) + (-B)
In the following discussion, I will explain the above four positions in more detail. In doing so, I shall keep the ‘natural-moral’ qualifier latent in the background, since all the moral principles we will be talking about are natural-moral ones.

(1) Extreme Principlism contends that there are both true absolute and pro tanto moral principles. Richard Brandt’s version of rule-utilitarianism provides an example of this view. Brandt (1968) contends that while the principle of utility is absolutely true and provides an ultimate criterion of rightness, there are many true pro tanto moral principles, such as ‘lying is pro tanto wrong’ or ‘killing is pro tanto wrong’, that we have to take seriously. A moral agent needs to have some commitment to these pro tanto moral principles so as to facilitate the promotion of utility.

(2) Modest Principlism Version 1 contends that while there are true absolute moral principles, there are no true pro tanto ones. It is a modest view because compared to extreme principlism, it admits the non-existence of true pro tanto moral principles. At the risk of some simplification, natural law theorists may well be regarded as supporters of this view. They typically think that morality can be reduced to a coherent set of true moral principles endorsed by our rational nature. ‘Lying is wrong’ is a paradigmatic example. How many more moral principles are in the set can be a matter for further dispute. What goes without dispute for all natural law theorists is that they are all absolute.

(3) Modest Principlism Version 2 contends that while there are true pro tanto principles, there are no true absolute moral principles. It is a modest view because compared to extreme principlism, it admits the non-existence of true absolute moral principles. The most prominent defender of this view is W. D. Ross. He (2002, p. 41) famously contends that “for the estimation of the comparative stringency of these [pro tanto] obligations, no general rules can, as far as I can see, be laid down.” In other words, should there be a conflict between pro tanto principles, there are no absolute principles we can invoke to settle it. The decision about what is the right thing to do, Ross (2002, p. 41) quotes Aristotle approvingly,

7 Admittedly, it is not entirely clear whether modest principlism version 1 is a coherent position for anyone to hold. For typically, the existence of true absolute moral principles entails the existence of true pro tanto moral principles (although they are different creatures about the moral status of different things, as I have illustrated in section § 1.5). For instance, if killing is wrong absolutely, it seems that it must be pro tanto wrong too. However, it might well be contended that if an action is absolutely wrong, it cannot be pro tanto wrong. Because for an action to be pro tanto wrong means that there might be some occasions in which it turns out to be not wrong whereas if it is absolutely wrong, then there are no occasions in which it is not wrong. I do not mean to settle the issue here. All I need here is that modest principlism version 1 at least has some prima facie plausibility to it; whether it is indeed so can be a matter of further dispute.
(4) Extreme Particularism contends that there are no true moral principles, be they absolute or pro tanto. Margaret Little defends this view in her 2000 paper, “Moral Generalities Revisited”. She (p. 277) argues that particularism grounds a radical metaphysical claim: “we have reason to believe there are no codifiable law-like moral generalities whatsoever, even those tempered [by pro tanto clause] to seemingly innocuous forms.”

Laying out the four positions above enables us to see clearly what the defense of each position requires. Take the defense of extreme particularism for instance. It not only faces challenges from extreme principlism, but challenges from modest principlism version 1, and modest principlism version 2 as well. To give extreme particularism a forceful defense, one at least has to argue that none of extreme principlism, and two forms of modest principlism have compelling reasons for them. In other words, extreme particularism at least has to argue that there are no compelling reasons for believing in the existence of true absolute moral principle or pro tanto ones. Extreme particularism will be falsified if the three kinds of principlism mentioned above can prove the existence of either true absolute moral principles or true pro tanto ones.

For the record, I will defend extreme particularism in my thesis. My strategy is to argue that there have not been any compelling arguments to believe in the three kinds of principlism; that is, I argue that there have not been any compelling arguments to believe in the existence of absolute moral principles or pro tanto moral principles, i.e. there have not been any compelling arguments to believe absolute principlism or pro tanto principlism. Although this does not prove extreme particularism to be true, however, if I am right about this, it will at least lend some indirect support for extreme particularism.

1.8 Caveat

Having clarified the view of extreme particularism as the view that there are no true natural-moral principles, be they of the absolute kind or the pro tanto kind, there is an important caveat to be noted here. That is, the moral principles here are the necessary ones. Or so I take them to be. For as I pointed out in section § 1.3, necessary moral principles are the sort of moral principles we are concerned with in this thesis. So, to be more precise, the view of extreme of particularism can be represented as follows:

*Extreme Particularism: There are no necessarily true natural-moral moral*
principles, be they absolute or pro tanto.

Similarly, the views that oppose extreme particularism can also be represented with more precision as follows:

**Absolute Principlism:** There are necessarily true natural-moral absolute moral principles.

**Pro Tanto Principlism:** There are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.

Remember that in this thesis, extreme particularism is the position we are going to defend. It is attacked by both absolute principlism and pro tanto principlism. If we succeed in showing that the major arguments that have been advanced to support the above two doctrines are no good, then we will be providing a good defense of extreme particularism. This is what we will do in chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. Before we do so, however, we need to deal with some businesses arising from the taxonomy we provided in this chapter. This is what we will do in chapter 2, the next chapter.
Chapter 2 Businesses Arising from Taxonomy

In chapter 1, we have provided a taxonomy of various kinds of principlism and particularism and identified extreme particularism and two kinds of principlism as the chief concerns of this thesis. Remember that our goal is to defend extreme particularism from the attacks from absolute principlism and pro tanto principlism. In chapters 3, 4 and 5, we will look at an argument, the supervenience argument, that is meant to support absolute principlism. In chapters 6 and 7, we will look at another argument, the argument from the atomism of reason, that is meant to support pro tanto principlism. In these chapters, we will argue that neither of these two arguments works. If we are right, then we will be providing a forceful defense of extreme particularism against these two kinds of principlism. Before we do so, however, there are some businesses arising from the taxonomy we provided in chapter 1 we have to deal with. The purpose of taking care of these businesses is to head off some worries readers might have about the taxonomy and to forestall some objections to the view of extreme particularism.

2.1 Epistemology vs Metaphysical

As we indicated in the taxonomy in chapter 1, the issue that divides principlism and particularism is the issue of whether there are any true moral principles of particular kinds. It is very different from another issue that is also hotly debated in the terms of principlism/particularism debate—that is, the issue of whether moral principles are useful for explaining the moral status of actions or guiding actions.

To make things clear, I think it is worthwhile to distinguish between the following two debates:

(M) Metaphysical Debate: Are there true moral principles?

(E) Epistemological Debate: Do moral principles play a useful role in explaining the moral status of actions or guiding actions?

(M) and (E) are very different questions. (M) is concerned with the truth of moral principles whereas (E) is concerned with their usefulness. Some might conflate these two questions and operate on the following two assumptions: (1) A ‘yes’ to (M) automatically obligates us to say ‘yes’ to (E), as true moral principles must be useful. (2) A ‘yes’ to (E) automatically obligates us to say ‘yes’, as useful moral principles
must be true.

In my view, neither of these assumptions is correct. On the one hand, a moral principle can be true while being epistemologically useless. It is not hard to imagine that a true moral principle can be so complicated that we can never comprehend it. Hence, it is not useful for explaining the moral status of actions or guiding actions. It has to be noted here, however, that this is not to deny that true moral principles can be implicitly operating at an unconscious level.

On the other hand, a moral principle may well be false, yet can still be extremely useful in most cases. Take ‘always tell the truth’ or equivalently ‘telling the truth is right’ for instance. It might not hold when Nazi Police is asking you the where-about of a Jewish girl, who you know is hiding in your attic. Nevertheless, it is still a very useful rule of thumb in most cases. There is no a priori conceptual connection between the truth of a moral principle and its usefulness.

Distinguishing between (M) and (E) can allow us to distinguish metaphysical principlism from epistemological principlism, and metaphysical particularism from epistemological particularism:

**Metaphysical Principlism**: Yes to (M)

**Metaphysical Particularism**: No to (M)

**Epistemological Principlism**: Yes to (E)

**Epistemological Particularism**: No to (E)

More importantly, distinguishing between (M) and (E) has the further advantage of allowing us to define two hybrid views:

**Hybrid A**: Metaphysical Particularism + Epistemological Principlism

**Hybrid B**: Metaphysical Principlism + Epistemological Particularism:

Hybrid A suggests that one can coherently argue that although there are no true moral principles, nevertheless moral principles are still useful for action-guiding and explanation of the moral status of an action. In fact, Little endorses this view in her 2000 article ‘Moral Generalities Revisited’. There she argues that although the existence of true moral principles is chimerical, moral principles nevertheless hold in normal conditions and are indispensable for moral explanation. She contends that we
are perfectly justified in appealing to moral principles for moral clarification as long as we know we are not in a post-apocalyptic scenario where everything is out of its normal order.

On the other hand, Hybrid B suggests that although there are true moral principles, they might be useless for action guiding or explaining the moral status of actions. Although Dancy is generally regarded as taking a particularist position with regard to both (M) and (E), his moral metaphysical views sometimes give the impression of leaning towards Metaphysical Principlism. He acknowledges (I think, somewhat inconsistently with his other views) that there might be a few privileged exceptionless moral principles; however, he claims that they are too indiscriminate to serve any explanatory purpose (Dancy, 2000, p. 131, p. 136).

Having distinguished two hybrid views, two other straightforward views as follows should also be laid on the table:

Straightforward Principlism: Metaphysical Principlism + Epistemological Principlism

Straightforward Particularism: Metaphysical Particularism + Epistemological Particularism

Supporters of Straightforward Principlism include philosophers such as Kant and Mill. Kant famously contends that all true moral principles are categorical imperatives. Their truth is necessary a priori, holding independently of human desires or inclinations. The moral principle, ‘don’t lie’, as an action guide, is not only useful but has to be obeyed in all relevant circumstances. Mill, on the other hand, reckons the principle of utility to be true in all cases. Although he does not recommend using it as an action guide for reasons of self-serving bias or miscalculations, he thinks that there are moral principles which can serve as useful rules of thumb insofar as following them promotes happiness in general.

With regard to Straightforward Particularism, its most prominent champion is probably Jonathan Dancy. In his 1983 paper, “Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties”, Dancy advocates particularism as the view that there are no true moral principles such that ‘our ethical decisions are made case by case, without the comforting support or awkward demands of moral principles.’ In his 2004 book, Ethics Without Principles, he defends particularism as the view that ‘the possibility of moral thought and judgment does not depend upon the provision of any moral principle at all.’ Namely, the moral principle does not have any use when we are engaged in moral thinking and judgment. Combining Dancy’s two views of
particularism at different periods, we can derive a hybrid view which is not a million miles away from Straightforward Particularism.

The two hybrid views and the two straightforward views outlined above reveal four options available to a participant in the principlism/particularism debate. The hybrid views are particularly interesting in that they illustrate the possibility that the metaphysical debate and epistemological debate can proceed somewhat independently. But having said so, I am not suggesting that investigation concerning either one of these debates can or should be brought to a conclusion without any regard at all for our views about the other debate. For our views about metaphysics and epistemology must cohere. There is no particular reason to think that any view about moral metaphysics can be combined with any view about moral epistemology. And I do not deny that a certain position in moral epistemology may well be best supported by a certain position in moral metaphysics and vice versa. What I am suggesting is merely that apart from external support, each position in either the metaphysical debate or the epistemological debate can be assessed in its own intrinsic merits.

Most discussion in the past has focused on the Epistemological Debate while the Metaphysical Debate is largely ignored. Indeed, many of epistemological particularists’ insights have by now been absorbed by epistemological principlists. It is now widely accepted that no mechanical application of universal principles will issue the correct moral verdict in all cases. Judgment, sensitivity and interpretation play an essential role in moral reasoning. In the words of Little and Lance (2005a, p. 567):

If they underscored points too often forgotten or mislaid in the history of moral theory, they are claims no one, when reminded, will object to. Everyone should agree: crude theory is bad theory, and no theory deploys itself.

By ‘theory’, I take Little and Lance to mean ‘overarching principle’ such as the principle of utility or the Kantian principle of respecting autonomy. The nub of the passage is that even overarching principlists such as utilitarians or Kantians cannot apply their principles mechanically and afford to ignore the importance of judgment, sensitivity and interpretation.

On the other hand, epistemological particularists have also absorbed many insights of epistemological principlists. For instance, Dancy (1993, p. 67) comes to recognize that moral principles are certainly very useful as indicators of what is

---

8 A reviewer points out that the bioethicists, such as Tom Beauchamp and James Childress, tend to speak of “the principle of respect for autonomy” whereas Onora O’Neill (2003) distinguishes Kant’s Formula of Autonomy from this one. Readers who are interested in the differences are advised to consult O’Neill (2003). I am grateful to the reviewer for helpful comments.
generally morally salient.\(^9\) Indeed, it seems an impossibility to distinguish the salient features of the situation from the non-salient ones without the aid of moral principles. Without some knowledge of moral principles, there is not a chance one can identify morally salient features when one engages in practical moral reasoning. But this is not to say that one must be conscious of those moral principles when one applies them. For they might be so deeply ingrained in our dispositions that we could apply them almost intuitively when the relevant circumstances arise.

So now there seems to be great convergence between the claims of particularists and those of principlists about the Epistemological Debate. However, I think that the divide between them about the Metaphysical Debate still remains wide. The battleground between principlists and particularists should thus be shifted to the Metaphysical Debate. In any case, this will be the debate I deal with in my thesis.

### 2.2 Varieties of Non-Absolute Principlism

In section § 1.5 of chapter 1, we pointed out that there is a distinction between absolute and non-absolute moral principles. However, we have only discussed one sort of non-absolute moral principles, i.e. the pro tanto ones. In fact, there are many other kinds of non-absolute moral principles, such as (3)-(9) we mentioned in section § 1.1 of chapter 1. Corresponding to each kind of non-absolute moral principle, there can be a kind of principlism. For the record, they are as follows:

*Prima Facie Non-Absolute Principlism: There are true prima facie non-absolute moral principles*

Commonsense morality endorses the claim that there are true prima facie non-absolute moral principles. ‘Prima facie’ means ‘at first glance’. For commonsense morality, it is true that lying is always prima facie wrong in the sense that lying always appears to be wrong at first glance. However, this does not exclude the possibility that it may turn out to be right in fact.

*Ceteris Paribus Non-Absolute Principlism: There are true ceteris paribus non-absolute moral principles.*

---

\(^9\) Dancy (1993, p. 67) comments that “[t]he suggestion I want to make here is that a moral principle amounts to a reminder of the sort of importance that a property can have in suitable circumstances. It seems to me that this suggestion makes good sense of a number of puzzles in moral philosophy, in a way that is perfectly compatible with the spirit of particularist arguments against generalism in the theory of practical reasoning.”
Margaret Little, although claiming herself to be a particularist in her 2000 paper “Moral Generalities Revisited”, expresses support for this type of principilism in her 2008 co-authored paper “From Particularism to Defeasibility in Ethics”. In her 2008 co-authored paper, she and Mark Lance argue that ceteris paribus statements in general are not empty. Rather, they reveal something about the nature of things. To say that ‘ceteris paribus, lying is wrong’ is to say that ‘it is in the nature of lying that it is wrong-making’. Little and Lance contend that any adequate morality should recognize the truth of ceteris paribus moral principles like this one.

*Dispositional Non-Absolute Principilism: There are true dispositional non-absolute moral principles.*

Luke Robinson can be regarded as a supporter of this type of principlism. He advances a view called *moral dispositionalism* in his 2006 paper “Moral Holism, Moral Generalism and Moral Dispositionalism”. According to moral dispositionalism, moral principles express moral dispositions of actions. Robinson contends that ‘lying is wrong’ should be construed as ‘lying is dispositionally wrong’ rather than as ‘lying is occurrently wrong.’ The difference between the two statements lies in the following. When lying is dispositionally wrong, it may not manifest an occurrent property of wrongness; namely, the property of wrongness is latent in the action of lying. Only when certain background conditions obtain, such as, let’s say, the conditions that it is done out of a malicious motive or it is done to a person who deserves to know the truth, etc., will the property of wrongness be manifested. On the other hand, if lying is occurently wrong, this means that the property of wrongness is manifested without further ado.

Luke Robinson contends that only when a moral principle is construed as expressing moral dispositions rather than occurrent moral properties of a kind of action can we explain the explanatory roles it plays in our moral thought, theory and practice.

According to Robinson, moral principles when construed as statements about the occurrent moral properties of a kind of action do not explain. To illustrate with an example he gave, even if ‘all promise keepings are obligatory’ were true, it would not explain why any particular promise-keeping is obligatory just as ‘All men are mortal’ is incapable of explaining why Socrates is mortal. According to Robinson’s diagnosis of the problem, these statements are universal statements and the truth of a universal statement—although it entails the truth of
its instances—is "utterly irrelevant to why its instances are true." (p. 351)

By contrast, when moral principles are construed as statements about moral dispositions of a kind of action, they can serve explanatory purposes. The fact that promise-keeping is obligatory can explain why my keeping my promise to John is obligatory because, according to Robinson, for promise keeping to be obligatory is to for it to be dispositionally obligatory and for a particular promise keeping to be (occurently) obligatory is for it to manifest a disposition to be obligatory (p. 352). For the above reasons, moral principles ought to be construed as statements about moral dispositions rather than about occurrent moral properties of a kind of action.

Default Non-Absolute Principlism: There are true default non-absolute moral principles.

According to some self-styled particularists, such as Jonathan Dancy (2004), and principlists, such as Michael Ridge and Sean McKeever (2006), true default non-absolute moral principles are something that everyone in the debate ought to accept; it is argued that denying the existence of such principles will lead to absurd consequences—'the flattening of the moral landscape', as Ridge and McKeever (2007, p. 55) put it. 'The flattening of the moral landscape' is a metaphorical way of putting things. What it really means is this: some features that we typically regard as morally significant are in fact no more morally significant than others we typically regard as morally insignificant. Thus, the 'flattening' metaphor—those features that typically occupy a moral high ground are relegated to ground zero, as it were. To illustrate the 'flattening' phenomenon with Little's vivid examples (2000), the feature of killing is no more morally significant than the color of one's shoelace. Of course, this seems plainly absurd. Why? The explanation for this is the following: killing is wrong by default whereas the color of one's shoelace is not.

However, it is not entirely clear what the notion of a default comes down to. Dancy illustrates it in a somewhat metaphorical way: "some considerations arrive switched on, though they may be switched off if the circumstances so conspire." By contrast, non-default features "arrive switched off but are switched on by appropriate contexts." (2004, pp. 112-113)

Ridge and McKeever, in their 2008 paper, "Turning on Default Reasons" unpacks the metaphor along the following lines: to say that a feature is right or wrong by default is to say that that feature needs no 'enablers' to be morally

---

10 For a dissenting view, see Alan Thomas (2007).
significant in the way it is. For instance, for the feature of killing to be morally significant in the way it is (namely, carrying a negative moral import by default), it needs no other features to ‘switch it on’ or, putting it somewhat differently, it needs no ‘enablers’ to enable it to be morally significant in the way it is. By contrast, the color of one’s shoelace, if it is to have any moral significance in some particular contexts, need some ‘enablers’ to enable it to do so, or need some further features to ‘switch on’ its moral significance. The enablers can be various and many. To give a rough idea, if the color of one’s shoelace figures into the content of a promise, then it will come to have some moral significance. The feature of promising functions as an enabler to enable the color of one’s shoelace to assume some moral significance.

It seems clear that there is a contrast between the feature of killing and the color of one’s shoelace. To capture the contrast, it is argued that we need to maintain the existence of a true default moral principle that specifies a feature that has moral significance by default. Otherwise, we run the risk of causing the ‘flattening of the moral landscape’.

Other-Things-Being-Equal Non-Absolute Principlism: There are true other-things-being-equal non-absolute moral principles.

Other-things-being-equal non-absolute moral principles are widely accepted because of their intuitive plausibility: other things being equal, lying is morally worse than not lying, not harming is better than harming. What can be more obvious? However, I suspect there is unjustified optimism involved here. It is not entirely clear what it means to hold other things equal. Can other things really be equalized? Take the feature of lying for instance. Can there be a feature of not lying that resembles it in all other aspects? What are these other aspects? Do they include the consequences? If they include the consequences, the consequentialists might well argue that when the consequences of lying and not lying are the same, lying is not morally worse than not lying; rather, they are morally on the same par.

On the other hand, there are some things that can never be equalized. A feature of lying always involves at least the following: a liar, his motive for lying, and a person being lied to whereas a feature of not lying involves none of these. How can these things be equalized? If we rid the feature of lying of these essential features, it is no longer a feature of lying. On the other hand, if we supplement these features to the feature of not lying, the feature of not lying will no longer be a feature of not lying. It is unclear, when we do hold these other
things equal, whether ‘other things being equal, lying is morally worse than not lying’ makes any sense.

*That’s-It Non-Absolute Principilism: There are true that’s-it non-absolute moral principles.*

This type of principilism is defended by Richard Holton in his 2002 paper ‘Principles and Particularisms’. In that paper, Holton argues that the gist of particularism, as he construes it, is entirely compatible with the existence of true that’s-it non-absolute moral principles. He takes the gist of particularism to be the following:

given any action whose features are described in non-moral terms, and a principle that says that an action having those features will be good, we can always think of some further feature which is such that, were the action to have that feature too, it would become a bad action. So the principle is inadequate as it stands. It must be modified, or a further principle must be given outlining the exception. But once we have done that, an exception to the amended principle(s) will be found, and we will be forced to amend again. And so on. (Holton 2002, pp. 196-197)

Let us follow Holton in calling the above view *Supersession* as there is always the possibility that an amended principle outlining the exception has to be superseded by another further amended principle, and so on. Holton takes *Supersession* to be compatible with the following view he thinks is plausible: moral principles play a justificatory role in showing why certain actions are right (or wrong). (p. 196) Let us call this view *Justification.* The view that accommodates both *Supersession* and *Justification,* Holton calls by the name of Principled Particularism. Roughly, it is the following view:

Principled Particularism: a justified true moral verdict about the moral status of an action is always entailed by true that’s-it non-absolute moral principles together with non-moral facts and a ‘that’s it’ clause.

---

11 It has to be noted though, Holton thinks that Supersession leaves open the possibility that the possibility of encountering exceptions might never be actualized. He contends, “If there were these other features, they would make the action not right. But there aren’t. We are concerned with the features that actually do obtain, and they, together with the principles, make the action right.” (2002, p. 198)
For Holton, the that’s-it non-absolute moral principles take the following form:

\[(x) \text{ (if } x \text{ is a killing and that’s it, then } x \text{ is forbidden).}\]

The ‘that’s it’ clause means the following: there are no further relevant moral principles and non-moral facts in the particular case. To see how a moral verdict about the moral status of an action can be derived from true that’s-it non-absolute moral principles, we can construct an argument as follows:

P1. This is a killing

P2. \[(x) \text{ (if } x \text{ is a killing & that’s it)→it is morally forbidden}\]

P3. That’s it

C. This is morally forbidden.

According to Holton, the that’s-it moral principle, P2 in this case, only has a truth value in the context of an argument because of the indexical character of ‘that’s it’—there are no other relevant moral principles or non-moral facts bearing on this particular case. Apparently, the above argument is valid. Justification stands in this case in that the moral status of this particular action is justified partly by appealing to the that’s-it moral principle in the premise. Now the question is: Can Justification still stand while Supersession takes place? Holton’s answer is yes.

Let us suppose with Supersession that there are further relevant moral principles and non-moral facts bearing on the case. Let’s say, the killing is done out of self-defense. Then, given the indexical character of ‘that’s it’, namely the fact that there are no other relevant moral principles or non-moral facts bearing on this particular case, the above argument will have to be superseded by the following:

P4. This is a killing

P5. This is done in self-defense

P6. \[(x) \text{ (x is a killing & } x \text{ is done out of self defense & that’s it)→it is not morally forbidden}\]

P7. That’s it

C1. This is not morally forbidden

As we can see, the above argument is still valid. Justification still stands in this case in that the moral status of this particular action is justified partly by appeal
to a that’s-it moral principle in the premise, namely, P6. Suppose that Supersession takes place again, we can still construct another argument in which Justification stands, and so on. Hence, Holton thinks that Principled Particularism is a plausible view to hold. A true moral verdict about the moral status of an action is always entailed and therefore justified by true that’s-it non-absolute moral principles together with non-moral facts and a ‘that’s it’ clause. To boot, Principled Particularism is apparently committed to what we call That’s It Non-Absolute Principlism, the view that there are true that’s-it non-absolute moral principles.

Summary

All the above kinds of non-absolute principlism are interesting positions to explore in their own right. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I will set them aside except where relevant. They are not the major sorts of non-absolute principlism that concern us in this thesis. The only sort of non-absolute principlism that concerns us in this thesis, as a reminder, is pro tanto principlism.

2.3 Non-Cognitivism against Principlism

Another issue to be settled before we move to the examination of the arguments for principlism (or the indirect arguments against extreme particularism) is the issue of non-cognitivism. Some might contend that if non-cognitivism, the claim that moral claims are not truth-apt, is true, then principlism will be automatically falsified. For principlism is the view that there are true moral principles.

I think that it is indeed the case that if non-cognitivism is true, then principlism, as I construe it, will be falsified. However, I also think that appealing to non-cognitivism to refute principlism misses the point. First of all, non-cognitivism is controversial and not a position all philosophers accept. If the refutation of principlism rests on the plausibility of non-cognitivism, it is not a firm ground it rests on. I don’t think this is a promising route for those who want to refute principlism to take. Second, more importantly, even if non-cognitivism provides a firm ground for refuting principlism, it will refute particularism as well. For particularism, as I construe it, is the claim that there are no true moral principles. However, it does not deny, and in fact endorses, the claim that a moral claim about the moral status of a particular action can be true or false. If non-cognitivism is true (i.e. no moral claims are truth-apt), then moral particularism will be falsified as well.

So I think the issue of non-cognitivism is not an issue that divides principlism.
and particularism. Both doctrines endorse the claim that there are true moral claims. If non-cognitivism stands, both doctrines will fall together. Neither side has an edge over the other on this issue. Non-cognitivism is a threat common to both principlism and particularism.

Having said this, it has to be noted that the threat only arises due to the cognitivist presuppositions of both principlism and particularism. However, these presuppositions need not be made in the first place, as Dancy (2004, p. 140) correctly points out. The debate between principlism and particularism can be conducted entirely in terms of non-cognitivist language. If one holds to a non-cognitivist view about moral claims, the issue still remains whether the moral claims of moral principles are correct or not. Principlism argues that there are at least some moral principles that are correct whereas particularism argues that there is none. Nothing will be lost if the debate between principlism and particularism is reformulated in terms of non-cognitivist language. I have no objection to readers with non-cognitivist sympathies thus reformulating the debate.

2.4 Error Theory against Principlism

In the last section, we have argued that appealing to non-cognitivism to refute principlism misses the point. There is another similar issue that needs to be addressed before we move on to examine the arguments for absolute principlism and pro tanto principlism. It is an issue that arises out of error theory. Error theory, according to Mackie (1990), subscribes to the cognitivist view that moral claims are truth-apt. It claims in effect that moral claims purport to represent a world having moral properties in it. However, adopting a naturalistic view of the world, Mackie thinks that moral properties, being objectively prescriptive in their nature, are ‘queer’ and the world contains no such properties. Hence, all moral claims attributing moral properties to actions are false (or in error). If error theory can stand, principlism will of course be falsified.

Again, however, error theory, if true, will not only falsify principlism but particularism as well. For particularism merely denies that there are true moral principles; it does not deny, actually endorses for that matter, that there can be true moral claims about the moral status of particular actions. Hence, error theory, if true,

---

12 Dancy (2004, p. 140) contends that “[t]he realist language which I have been using should not really be a stumbling block, since it is characteristic of non-cognitivists to maintain that they can perfectly well talk of ethical truths, facts and properties without signing up to the sort of realism that is involved in taking such talk, as they see it, too seriously.”

13 As is well known, Blackburn (1998, p. 318) even thinks that non-cognitivists (or quasi-realists) can retain their truth talk without commitment to any metaphysically repugnant truth entity by adopting a deflationary theory of truth.
is a problem both principlism and particularism have to face. Neither side has an edge with regard to the issue of error theory. Although an investigation of the plausibility of error theory is a worthwhile research project in itself, it is somewhat tangential to the debate between principlism and particularism. To win the debate, neither side can appeal to error theory since doing so would entail self-defeat. Hence, I think that we can examine the debate between principlism and particularism independently of the issue of error theory.

2.5 Extreme Particularism and Normative Ethics

Some might have the worry that extreme particularism is extensionally equivalent to consequentialism (Olson & Svensson 2003; McKeever & Ridge 2006, pp. 31-32). For extreme particularism, like consequentialism, does not rule out a priori the moral permissibility of some actions typically forbidden by deontology, such as killing, lying, torturing, etc. On the other hand, even if extreme particularism can be distinguished from consequentialism, there is the further concern about how different it is from deontology. So my task here is to clarify that extreme particularism provides a genuine alternative to consequentialism without collapsing into deontology.

In my diagnosis, an extreme particularist can tap on the resources of consequentialism without buying its defects. Extreme particularism is a much more flexible position than consequentialism in that it does not hold that promoting the good is always the only thing that matters in the determination of the moral status of an action. Extreme particularism may well accommodate agent-relative options not to promote the good or agent-relative constraints against lying, killing, stealing or torturing even if so doing promotes the good.

But certainly, with regard to agent-relative constraints, an extreme particularist does not hold that they are absolute such that no amount of goodness is sufficient to give the agent a warrant to violate them. Nor does she hold that agent-relative constraints have a fixed threshold such that in all cases the agent can only violate a constraint when a certain amount of good at stake is above the threshold. Endorsing either absolute constraint or constraint with a fixed threshold is to endorse one sort of deontological principle. Instead, an extreme particularist holds that how to balance the promotion of the good against the violations of constraints is dependent upon the circumstances and determined case by case; there is no principled way to settle the conflict.

The situation is similar with respect to agent-relative options. Extreme particularism distinguishes itself from deontology in that it is not committed to absolute agent-relative options. It can allow for situations in which agent-relative
options are undermined or outweighed when the cost to the moral agent is relatively small compared to the gain in overall good. On the other hand, neither does extreme particularism commit itself to a fixed threshold of agent-relative options such that when a fixed amount of good is at stake, agent-relative options are automatically undermined. Commitment to either absolute agent-relative options or agent-relative options with a threshold means commitment to a deontological principle. Without this commitment, extreme particularism holds the view that whether there is an agent-relative option depends on the particular configuration of the contextual features of an action. In some contexts, there is indeed such an agent-relative option. In others, there is not. This distinguishes the view of extreme particularism from consequentialism in that consequentialism allows no agent-relative options whatsoever.\textsuperscript{14} It also distinguishes the view of extreme particularism from deontology, for even those deontologists who hold the threshold view of agent-relative options think that agent-relative options exist in principle in all contexts (although they might well admit that the amount of good that is required to meet the threshold is very high such that the pre-conditions for agent-relative options to become effective are rarely satisfied in real world contexts.)

Summing up, admittedly, what I said above does not by far do enough justice to the huge amount of current literature on whether all normative ethical theories can be reduced to consequentialism (Smith 2009). However, given what I said, I think that there is at least some good reason to think that extreme particularism provides a genuine alternative to both consequentialism and deontology as typically conceived in any introduction-to-ethics textbook.

\section*{2.6 Virtue Theory: Friend or Foe?}

Although extreme particularism may be distinguished from both consequentialism and deontology, crucial questions remain: is it a kind of a virtue theory? Is virtue theorist a friend or a foe of particularism? To answer these questions, it is necessary to distinguish between different conceptions of virtue. I distinguish four models of virtue below and argue that on first two models of virtue, virtue ethicist is a foe. On the latter two models, however, she is a friend.

\begin{quote}
\textit{Four Models of Virtue}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} I am fully aware of the recent trend to reduce all moral theories to consequentialism; see for instance Smith (2009). However, the reduction, I suspect, cannot be done without some sophisticated account of the agent-relativity. Personally, I do not believe that the reduction can be successfully carried out; however, I don't have space to argue for my own view here. I shall just ignore this complication and stick to the good old way of understanding consequentialism.
(1) Absolute Virtue: A virtuous person is a person of absolute principle. The requirements of virtue can be reduced to the requirements of a single absolute principle or a set of absolute principles, depending on whether one takes a monistic or a pluralistic view of absolute principlism. On this conception of virtue, virtue is rule-following.\(^{15}\)

(2) Pro Tanto Virtue: A virtuous person is a person who has a commitment to pro tanto moral principles and feels compunction about breaking them. She follows the dictates of pro tanto moral principles when no conflicts between them arise. Should a conflict arise, she knows how to adjudicate between them without recourse to further moral principles. Unlike the conception of virtue mentioned in (1), it is not merely rule-following. It has a substantive adjudicating role to play in our moral reasoning processes.

(3) Prima Facie Virtue: A virtuous person is a person who subscribes to some prima facie moral principles. She treats principles as quick and easy rules of thumb and follows them most of the time. Unlike a pro tanto virtuous person, she feels no compunction about breaking a rule when she sees that doing so is what the requirements of virtue dictate. Rules have no intrinsic values. Rather, they are useful tools to the extent that they help a virtuous person to perform what virtue dictates. When they cannot do their job, they should be put aside without tears. Virtue thus plays the role of discerning the occasions in which moral principles ought to be rightfully infringed to carry out the right action.

(4) Principle-less Virtue: A virtuous person is a person who simply 'sees' the right thing to do. Principles, be they absolute or pro tanto, are simply useless at their best or even harmful at their worst to her (McNaughton, 1988, p. 190). Morality is not about equipping one with the right set of principles but about the sharpening of one's moral vision (Davis, 2004, p. 1). In short, virtue consists in an ability to 'see' the right thing to do on each occasion.\(^{16}\)

Virtue ethicists who adopt the first two models will find extreme particularism uncongenial (and vice versa), as extreme particularism entails that there are neither true absolute moral principles nor true pro tanto moral principles. On the view of extreme particularism, it is wrong-headed to think that virtue consists in

---

\(^{15}\) I use 'rule' and 'principle' interchangeably in this thesis.

\(^{16}\) These four models are taken from my paper. See Tsu (2010b, p. 152).
rule-following or in an ability to adjudicate between conflicting pro tanto moral 
principles. However, extreme particularism will find virtue ethicists friendly if they 
adopt the latter two models of virtue. With regard to model (3), although other types 
of particularism might find the existence of true prima facie principles repugnant, 
extreme particularism, as I define it, takes no particular stand on whether there are 
true prima facie moral principles. Hence, extreme particularism may well accept the 
view that virtue consists in an ability to discern the occasions in which prima facie 
moral principles are to be rightfully infringed, if this turns out to be the most plausible 
view of virtue. With regard to (4), extreme particularism can embrace it with open 
arms, as (4) clearly implies the non-existence of true absolute moral principles and 
pro tanto ones.

2.7 A Simple Argument against Extreme Particularism

With the position of extreme particularism further clarified in sections §§ 2.5 and 2.6, 
there is one final worry we have to deal with before we can move on to examine the 
arguments against extreme particularism in the following chapters. The worry is this. 
If the view of extreme particularism is the view that there are neither absolute nor pro 
tanto true moral principles, as we construe it to be, it will only take a very simple 
argument to refute it. Extreme particularism, as we construe it, cannot even get off the 
ground. We are holding a position that is trivially false. In this section, I will argue 
that the simple argument is not a good one against extreme particularism.

The simple argument the objectors have in mind goes as follows.

Simple Argument:

P1: There is obviously a true moral principle, e.g.: (T): Torturing an innocent is wrong.
P2: Extreme particularism entails the view that there are no true moral principles.
C: Hence, extreme particularism is false.

Notice that the structure of the argument is reminiscent of Moore’s argument against 
idealism. Moore thinks that he can prove idealism to be false by brandishing his hands 
in the air.

Moore’s Argument:

P1’: There are obviously objects of the external world. (Here is one hand. Here is
In taking the above argument to be a knockdown argument against idealism, Moore seems to be unduly optimistic. After all, one philosopher’s Modus Ponens can be another’s Modus Tollens. Idealists might well reply to Moore’s Argument by denying P1 or by denying that Moore has a non-question-begging way of vindicating it. Similarly, principlists seem to be unduly optimistic too if they take the Simple Argument to be a knockdown argument against extreme particularism. For extreme particularism can reply to Simple Argument by denying P1.

At first glance, (T) is apparently true. Upon critical reflection, however, its truth might not be as obvious as the principlists like to think. Imagine the following scenario.

**Thought Experiment 1:** If you torture an innocent person, Mr. A, the other ten thousand innocent persons will not be tortured. If you don’t do it, then someone else will take your place and torture not just Mr. A but also the other ten thousand innocent persons, and only in a more cruel way.

Given a case like this, if you decide to take upon yourself the task of torturing Mr. A, it is at least arguable to say that your doing so is not *obviously* wrong, since it is inevitable that Mr. A will be tortured and your torturing Mr. A is the only way to prevent the other ten thousand innocent persons from being tortured. Here, I am fully aware of the fact that there are philosophers out there, who argue that even in a case like this, torturing is wrong, the reasons being that one of the following claims stand: (1) there are agent-relative constraints against harming (Nagel, 1972): the moral agent should not torture even if doing so would minimize the overall amount of harm. (2) a distinction between doing harm and allowing it is morally significant (Quinn, 1989): doing harm is always worse than allowing harm. (3) numbers do not matter (Taurek, 1977): in a conflict case, it is not morally required, other things being equal, that we ought to prevent the group of a larger size from suffering. However, none of the above-mentioned claims are not without controversy. It is not clear that they can refute my claims conclusively. Remember that here I only wish to argue that torturing as described by Thought Experiment 1 is not *obviously* wrong. I do not claim that torturing in this case is absolutely permissible. To the extent that it is debatable amongst sagacious philosophers whether torturing is morally wrong in this case, this would serve my purpose to show that (T) does not constitute a knock-down case...
To find a clear knockdown case, some principlists turn to the following principle instead:

(T1) Torturing an innocent merely for fun is wrong

Because of the ‘merely for fun’ qualifier, (T1) is immune from the counterexample to (T) in Thought Experiment 1. However, its truth is again not so obvious. Torturing an innocent merely for fun may not be wrong at all (not even pro tanto wrong) in a context of consensual sexual intercourse where the innocent being tortured has masochist dispositions and enjoys the whole process of being tortured.

Suppose you are still not convinced, and suppose for the sake of the argument that it is indeed wrong to torture an innocent merely for fun, does it thus refute extreme particularism? Not obviously. There is at least the following reply extreme particularism can make: The term ‘innocent’ is apparently morally loaded (Timmons, 2002, p. 259). If so, ‘torturing an innocent merely for fun is wrong’ is what we have previously defined as a moral-moral principle. However, extreme particularism is an abbreviation for the view that there are no true natural-moral principles. Hence, the truth of (T1) does not threaten the truth of extreme particularism. This sort of reply still applies even if the principlists concede that (T1) is not an absolute but a pro tanto moral principle, for the same reasons I have just given.

To conclude, extreme particularism cannot be refuted by the Simple Argument advanced by the principlists. The principlists, of course, can strive to come up with a different moral principle that is more specific or more natural-moral looking. However, it will be no wonder the extreme particularists will strive to come up with more stories to tell. This to-and-fro dialectic can go on and on. However, as Margaret Little (2000, p. 279) nicely quips:

There’s something not a little farcical about measuring dialectic success in terms of who can outlast whom—those who want to refine the principles or those who want to find exceptions.

In order to refute extreme particularism, the principlists need to provide more sophisticated arguments. I will evaluate whether they are successful or not in the

---

17 Some might contend that if the sexual intercourse is consensual, then the case we produced is not a case of torture. However, it seems wrong not to describe what the masochist experiences as torturing just because he consents to it. This is because if what a masochist experiences is not torturing, there is no explanation for why he, as a masochist, enjoys it. But in any case, my argument against the simple argument does not rely particularly on this point.
chapters to follow.
Chapter 3 The Supervenience Argument

My goal is to defend extreme particularism against the attack from absolute principlism and pro tanto principlism. The way I do it is to argue that there are no compelling arguments for these two kinds of principlism. In this chapter, my aim is to lay out and elucidate an argument that has been advanced to support absolute principlism (or to defeat extreme particularism)—the supervenience argument.

The supervenience argument is commonly used as a weapon to beat particularism. It comes in various versions. Its chief contenders include Hare (1981)\(^{18}\), Bennett (1995, p. 19), Sinnott-Armstrong (1995, pp. 5-6). In this chapter, I will focus on a specific version of the supervenience argument that is advanced by Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, in their 2000 co-authored paper, “Ethical Particularism and Patterns”. In that paper, they (p. 86) argue that “considerations that take off from the fact of supervenience raise serious problems for particularism.”

Three questions immediately arise. (1) What are those considerations? (2) What are the serious problems? (3) And what is the sort of particularism they attack? These initial questions need some clarification. Henceforth, I shall follow Jonathan Dancy (2004, p. 109) in calling these three authors of the paper the Canberrans, as they all worked in Canberra in Australia when they wrote the paper.

First, what is the sort of particularism the Canberrans have in mind? They (Jackson et al., 2000, p. 80) follow Margaret Little in characterizing particularism as the view that “[denies] the existence of any codifiable generalities linking the moral and non-moral properties.” The codifiable generalities linking the moral and non-moral properties, I take it, are what we call the necessarily true natural-moral absolute moral principles in Chapter 1. So particularism can be construed as a view that denies the existence of necessarily true natural-moral absolute moral principles.

Next, what are the serious problems for this type of particularism? According to the Canberrans, they argue that there must be some necessarily true natural-moral moral principles linking the natural properties of an action to its moral properties. That is, the Canberrans try to vindicate what we call absolute principlism in Chapter 1—the view that there are necessarily true absolute natural-moral moral principles.\(^{19}\) If absolute principlism is true, then particularism is of course in serious trouble. How do the Canberrans prove the truth of principlism? They appeal to “considerations that

---

\(^{18}\) Although in *Moral Thinking*, Hare (1981) uses the term ‘universalizability’ to mean what most people mean by ‘supervenience’, as Dancy (1993) correctly notes in his *Moral Reason*, Appendix II.

\(^{19}\) Moral principles linking the natural properties of an *action* to its moral properties are absolute because they are about the moral status of actions. With regard to the difference between an absolute moral principle and a pro tanto one, we have already illustrated it in section § 1.5 in chapter 1.
take off from the fact of supervenience." This relates to our next question.

What are the considerations that take off from the fact of supervenience? It is not easy to state the answer in a few words. In section § 3.1, I will firstly provide a thumbnail sketch of the major considerations. The purpose of doing so is to tease out the structure of the argument based on these considerations. Once the overall structure of the argument has come out, I will explain in detail what its consisting premises mean respectively in the following sections. The purpose of this chapter is, as I have mentioned, to reconstruct and elucidate the Canberrans’ argument from supervenience. In the following chapters, i.e. chapters 4 and 5, I will argue that there is no good reason for us to believe that it is sound.

3.1 Structure

According to the Canberrans, the fact of supervenience can establish a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form \((x) (Nx \rightarrow Mx)^\circ\) (domain: action; N: natural property; M: moral property). They argue that such a conditional must be ‘shaped’ (Never mind what ‘shaped’ means now. It is a somewhat obscure notion. I will explain the term in more detail later.) For if the conditional were not shaped, then this would lead to at least three absurd consequences: (a) we cannot think or talk about morality; (b) there are no correct application conditions of a moral term; (c) we risk violating the requirements of rationality. (I will explain more about these consequences later.) By reductio, the conditional must be shaped. If so, the Canberrans contend that it establishes a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle. Particularism is thus falsified. I shall henceforth call the argument that takes off from the fact of supervenience ‘The Supervenience Argument’. To see the structure of the argument more clearly, we can divide it into three stages:

The Supervenience Argument:

First Stage:

P1: The thesis of moral supervenience is true.

P2: If moral supervenience is true, there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘\((x) (Nx \rightarrow Mx)\)’.

---

20 I use arrow for material conditional. \(P \rightarrow Q\) is true iff (P is true and Q is true), or (P is false and Q is true), or (P is false and Q is false).
C1: There is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’. (P1, P2 Modus Ponens)

Second Stage:

P3: Either the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is shaped or (exclusive or) it is not shaped (or shapeless).

P4: If the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is not shaped, then there will be Absurd Consequences: (a) we cannot think or talk about morality; (b) a moral term does not have a correct criterion of meaning; (c) we cannot use a moral term consistently and violate the requirements of rationality).

P5: But Absurd Consequences are false (i.e. we do think and talk about morality; a moral term has a correct criterion of meaning; we can and do in fact use a moral term consistently and obey the requirements of rationality).

P6: It is not the case that the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is not shaped. (P4, P5 Modus Tollens)

C2: The necessarily true natural-moral conditional is shaped. (P3, P6 Disjunctive Syllogism)

Third Stage:

P7: There is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’. (C1)

P8: If there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’, it must be shaped. (C2)

P9: If a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’ is shaped, it is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle

P10: If there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’, it is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle. (P8, P9 Hypothetical Syllogism)
C3: There is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle. (P7, P10 Modus Ponens); absolute principlism is true; (extreme) particularism is thus falsified.

A brief commentary is in place here. There is a nice division of labor amongst the three stages in the Supervenience Argument. The first stage is concerned with whether the fact of supervenience can establish a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’. The second stage is concerned with whether the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is shaped or not. In the third stage, the positive conclusions of the first two stages are shown to be essential as premises for deriving the conclusion that there is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle. The three stages collaborate jointly, as it were, in getting the conclusion.

What I have said so far is mainly concerned with the structure of the Supervenience Argument. In the rest of this chapter, I will flesh out the details of each stage.

3.2 First Stage

This section is devoted to the elucidation of the first stage of the supervenience argument.

(3.2.1) P1: The thesis of moral supervenience is true

The thesis of moral supervenience says the following: moral properties supervene on natural properties. What does this mean? In particular, what does it mean to say that one set of properties supervenes on another?

To illustrate the general idea of supervenience, David Lewis (1986, p. 14) gave an illuminating example:

A dot-matrix picture has global properties—it is symmetrical, it is cluttered, and whatnot—and yet all there is to the picture is dots and non-dots at each point of the matrix. The global properties are nothing but patterns in the dots. They supervene: no two pictures could differ in their global properties without differing, somewhere, in whether there is or there isn’t a dot.

To elaborate a little bit, let’s call the dots in the picture the local properties and follow Lewis in calling the “patterns in the dots” the global properties. In the example Lewis gave, the global properties supervene on the local ones. This means that there cannot be a difference in the global properties without a difference in the local ones. If there
is a change in the global properties—say, the dot-matrix picture is no longer symmetrical, then this means that there must be a change in the local properties (in the arrangement of dots in Lewis’s example).

Armed with a better understanding of the general idea of supervenience, we can now proceed to clarify the thesis of moral supervenience. The thesis of moral supervenience is the general idea of supervenience applied to the realm of ethics. Roughly, it can be stated as the following view:

**The Thesis of Moral Supervenience:** moral properties supervene on natural properties; i.e. there cannot be a difference in moral properties without a difference in natural properties. Hence, things with the same natural properties are morally identical, i.e. have the same moral properties.

The Canberrans take the above thesis to be tantamount to the view that “descriptively identical situations, actions, characters and so on are [morally] identical.” (Jackson et al., 2000, p. 84) One clarification about terminology has to be noted here. The descriptively identical situations, actions, characters and so on are things with the same natural properties. Things with the same natural properties are descriptively identical in that they are picked out by the same descriptions. For instance, two actions with the same natural properties of killing are descriptively identical in that they are exactly the same in their descriptions—how the action is performed, by whom it is performed, to whom it is performed, etc. Hence, to say that “descriptively identical situations, actions, characters and so on are morally identical” is to say that “things with the same natural properties are morally identical”, which is exactly what the thesis of moral supervenience asserts.

The Canberrans (Jackson et al., 2000, p. 84) contend that the thesis of moral supervenience can be further divided into the following two versions:

**Inter-world Global Supervenience:** Descriptively identical worlds are morally identical.

**Intra-world Supervenience:** Descriptively identical acts, states, etc. within a world are morally identical.

Both versions have their own supporters. Richard Hare, the first prominent philosopher who advanced the idea of supervenience, endorses the intra-world version. He holds the following view: “That moral properties supervene on non-moral properties means simply that acts, etc., have the moral properties *because* they have
the non-moral properties (2000, pp. 21-22, emphasis added).” To elaborate a bit, descriptively identical acts (within a world), since they have the same non-moral properties, must have the same moral properties. By contrast, the Canberrans endorse the inter-world global version rather than the intra-world version in their 2000 co-authored paper. The Canberrans do not state their justifications for preferring the global version; however, a reasonable speculation is that the intra-world supervenience is too weak to capture the modal connection between the descriptive and the moral. It is widely accepted in moral philosophy that there cannot be a moral difference without a descriptive difference.21 However, intra-world supervenience allows for the following: there can be a moral difference without a descriptive difference if the descriptively identical acts or states occur in different possible worlds. Hence, intra-world supervenience is too weak to capture the modal connection. The Canberrans have a good reason not to adopt it.

(3.2.2) P2: If the thesis of moral supervenience is true, there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form (x) (Nx → Mx)

The Canberrans argue that from the global version, “it follows that there are necessary truths that take us from the descriptive way things are to the moral way they are.” (p.84) When the Canberrans talk about the descriptive way or moral way things are, what they have in mind are the natural properties and the moral properties picked out respectively by descriptive terms and moral terms. For our purpose, we can construe the Canberrans’ view in the following way. It follows from global supervenience that the natural properties of a world necessarily determines its moral properties.

A natural question arises. Does it follow? The Canberrans contend that it does for the following reason: if the moral properties of a world cannot vary independently of its natural properties (as global supervenience implies), the natural properties of the world fix its moral properties. Such being the case, the Canberrans go on to argue, a complete specification of the natural properties of a possible world—a specification that is true of that possible world and of all possible worlds that are naturally identical to that world—necessarily determines whether or not, say, X is (morally) right in that world. Therefore, the Canberrans contend, there will be a raft of necessarily true conditionals whose antecedents are complete specifications of the natural properties of a world and whose consequents say that X is right. The conditionals will look like the following:

21 Michael Smith (1994, pp. 21-22), in his book, The Moral Problem, goes even further and contends that the inter-world global version of supervenience is so plausible that no one denies it.
If N1, then X is right.
If N2, then X is right.

We can combine all these necessarily true conditionals into a single necessarily true conditional of the following form:

If N₁ or N₂ or..., then X is right.

For our purpose, we can formalize the above necessarily true conditional as follows:

(x) (Nx→Mx) (domain: action; Let N stand for N₁ or N₂ or...; M for moral rightness)

From the above necessarily true conditional, we get our conclusion of the first stage:
(C₁) There is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’.

3.3 Second Stage

The aim of this stage is to prove the truth of (C₂): the necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’ must be shaped.

(3.3.1) P₃: Either the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is shaped or it is not shaped (or shapeless).

P₃ is a tautology. Its truth is guaranteed by its logical form (p v ¬p). We don’t even have to know the meaning of ‘shaped’ contained in the sentence to see the truth of P₃.

(3.3.2) P₄: If the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is not shaped, then there will be Absurd Consequences

P₄ is significantly different from P₃ in the following respect: we need to know what it means for a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’ to be ‘not shaped’ or ‘shapeless’ before we can determine whether some absurd consequences will follow from this. For the ease of exposition, let us use the label ‘NM’ in short for a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’.

The Canberrans do not provide a straightforward answer to the question of what
it means for NM to be shapeless. However, we can discern some clues in their view of what it means for morality to be shapeless:

Shapelessness Thesis: “There is not even a highly disjunctive commonality or pattern that unites the right acts when described in descriptive terms.” (p. 83, emphasis added)

To understand the above thesis, we need to be clear about what ‘disjunctive commonality or pattern’ means. The Canberrans adopt a somewhat unorthodox interpretation of Wittgenstein’s example of a family resemblance term ‘game’ to illustrate these notions. In what follows, my task is twofold. First, I will clarify how this unorthodox interpretation can enhance our understanding of terms such as ‘disjunctive commonality or pattern’. Second, I will explain how the shapelessness thesis can illuminate an account of what it means for NM to be shaped.

(3.3.2.1) Unorthodox Interpretation of Family Resemblance

In the orthodox interpretation, Wittgenstein’s idea of a family resemblance term ‘game’ is as follows. All the instances that fall under the extension of the term ‘game’ have no common property; rather, they are connected via an overlapping network of similarities. To further illustrate, suppose that G1, G2, G3, and G4 are all instances of games. According to Wittgenstein, G1 and G2 are similar (or resemble each other) in that they might have a common property P1, so are G2 and G3 because they have another common property P2, and so are G3 and G4 because they have still another common property P3. However, G1, G2, G3, G4 have no property that is common to them all.

By contrast, in the unorthodox interpretation the Canberrans adopt, there is still a property that all of them have in common, that is, a disjunctive property of being P1 or P2 or P3. Namely, there is still ‘a disjunctive commonality or pattern’ that unites all the instances of a game; if X is a game, then it has the following disjunctive property: the property of being P1 or P2 or P3. Here, I do not mean to settle the issue of which interpretation of Wittgenstein’s view is closer to his own. Rather, my purpose is to clarify what the ‘disjunctive commonality or pattern’ is the Canberrans have in mind.

(3.3.2.2) Clarification of Shapelessness Thesis

Armed with an understanding of the ‘disjunctive commonality or pattern’ the Canberrans have in mind, we can now proceed to clarify the thesis of shapelessness. As a reminder here, the thesis of shapelessness says that there is not even a highly ‘disjunctive commonality or pattern’ that unites ‘the right acts when described in descriptive terms’. Let us suppose that N1, N2, N3, and N4 are all descriptive terms that describe the right acts and that the right acts they describe are all the right acts there are. The shapelessness thesis says that it is not only the case that the right acts picked out by these descriptive terms do not have any common property in the orthodox Wittgensteinian understanding of common property, but it is also the case that they do not have any common disjunctive property of the unorthodox sort indicated by the Canberrans that unites them all. Hence, the shapeless thesis implies that the term ‘right’ is not even a family resemblance term, for to be a family resemblance term, there is at least a common disjunctive property of the unorthodox sort indicated by the Canberrans that unites all the items the term refers to.

There is a caveat to be noted here, however. That is, there is still a much weaker sort of common disjunctive property that unites the right actions picked out by N1, N2, N3 and N4, that is, the disjunctive property of being an action picked out by N1 or N2 or N3 or N4; X is right iff X has the disjunctive property of being an action picked out by N1 or N2 or N3 or N4. The Canberrans (Jackson et al., 2000, p. 87) think that the shapeless thesis does not deny that there is a disjunctive commonality or pattern like this. Namely, when the shapeless thesis claims that “there is not even a highly disjunctive commonality or pattern that unites the right acts when described in descriptive terms”, it can allow for there being a very weak disjunctive commonality of the sort I just indicated. This shows that there must be some principled differences between the sort of disjunctive commonality the Canberrans have in mind and the sort in case here. Whether this is indeed the case need not concern us here. It is an issue I will deal with in Chapter 4. For now, all we have to remember is that the shapeless thesis implies that there is no disjunctive commonality or pattern of the unorthodox sort the Canberrans have in mind (henceforth C-commonality or C-pattern in short).

(3.3.2.3) From Shapelessness of Morality to Shapeless Natural-Moral Conditional

Armed with the above understanding of the shapelessness thesis, we are now in a position to clarify what it means to say that a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form, (x) (Nx→Mx), is shapeless. Remember that in the formulation of the necessarily true natural-moral conditional (x) (Nx→Mx), N stands for a disjunction of various properties specified by various descriptions such as N1 or N2 or N3, or…. And let us suppose that M stands for moral rightness here. As we
have seen in section § 3.3.2.2, the shapeless thesis entails that the right acts picked out by N1, N2, N3 and so on do not even have a C-commonality or C-pattern. So, to say that a natural-moral conditional of the form, (x) (Nx → Mx), is shapeless is to say that N1, N2, N3 and so on do not even have C-commonality or C-pattern.

(3.3.2.4) From Shapeless Natural-Moral Conditionals to Absurd Consequences

So far we have seen what shapelessness is; in this section, I will elucidate why the Canberrans think that shapeless natural-moral conditionals lead to absurd consequences. To begin with, we have seen by now what sort of creature a shapeless natural-moral conditional is like. As I have explained in section § 3.3.2.3, to say that a natural-moral conditional of the form, (x) (Nx → Mx), is shapeless is to say that N1, N2, N3 and so on do not even have C-commonality or C-pattern. What sort of absurd consequences does the shapelessness of the natural-moral conditional lead to? There are at least three: (a) we cannot think or talk about morality; (b) a moral term does not have a correct criterion of meaning; (c) we cannot use a moral term consistently and violate the requirements of rationality.

(3.3.2.4.1) Absurd Consequence A: We cannot think or talk about morality.

The Canberrans argue that if NM is shapeless in the sense that there is not even a C-commonality or C-pattern amongst N1, N2, N3 and so on, there is not a chance we can become competent with moral concepts, let alone think or talk about morality. This is because for us to become competent with moral concepts, the Canberrans argue, there must be some sort of pattern that we latch unto. The pattern can be unifying in the sense that all the items a moral concept refers to have a common property in the orthodox sense of ‘common’. However, it need not be. If moral concepts turn out to be family resemblance concepts, the Canberrans argue that the pattern can be disjunctive. Namely, the commonality can be a C-commonality. Without any pattern or commonality at all, the Canberrans think that our conceptual competence with the moral concepts become totally inexplicable.

Take the moral term ‘right’ for instance. There is an infinite number of right actions. In order for us to become competent with the concept ‘right’, there must be some sort of commonality, either of the common orthodox sort or of the unorthodox C-sort, that unites the class of right actions. For if there is not, we finite creatures could not have grasped through a finite learning process (the only sort there is, according to the Canberrans) the concept ‘right’. In other words, it is empirically impossible for us to acquaint ourselves with the infinite occasions where the concept
(3.3.2.4.2) Absurd Consequence B: A moral term can not have a norm of meaning.

The Canberrans argue that if NM is shapeless in the sense that there is not even a C-commonality or C-pattern amongst N1, N2, N3 and so on, then a moral term can not have a norm of meaning that governs its employment. Here, let me first of all explain what it means to say that a term has (or does not have) a norm of meaning that governs its employment.

According to the Canberrans, a term must have a norm of meaning that governs its employment, a norm that marks the correct uses of a term in accordance with its meaning from the incorrect ones. Take the term ‘dog’ for instance. The term ‘dog’ means dog. Given what the term means, it is correct to apply it to a dog, incorrect to a horse. In other words, our use of the term ‘dog’ is governed by a norm in accordance with what the term means. Likewise, given what the moral term ‘right’ means, our use of it is also governed by a norm in accordance with what the term means. If we apply the term ‘right’ to a thing that is apparently wrong, then we violate the norm of meaning that governs our employment of the term and can be rightly accused of misusing the term.

With the notion of ‘the norm of meaning’ in place, the Canberrans argue that such a norm is a given. Denying its existence would lead to “meaning skepticism”, which is a high price for the particularists to pay, according to the Canberrans. Here, two clarifications are needed. First, the Canberrans’ construal of “meaning skepticism” is, I take it, inherited from Quine. From a Quinean perspective (Quine, 1953, pp. 20-46), meaning skepticism is typically taken to be the view that meaning is not an entity that can be had by a term; i.e. the view that a term does not have a particular meaning. Indeed, Quine argues that a term can just mean anything if we are open to drastic enough revisions to our language. Take the term ‘dog’ again for instance. It can be taken to mean horse so long as we are willing to grant all the true sentences about horses in the original language to be now cashed out in terms of ‘dog’ in the revised language and meanwhile use a different term in the revised language, let’s say ‘horse’, to mean dog to avoid confusions. In the revised language, ‘a dog eats grass’ is held true whereas ‘a horse eats grass’ is held false. The revised language is still a workable language if we accept the revisions. Hence, the Canberrans contend that a meaning skeptic wouldn’t accept the existence of a norm of meaning such that a term has to mean one thing rather than another. Second, why is it too high a price for the particularists to embrace meaning skepticism? The Canberrans do not say in their 2000 article, but the reasons can be many. One may argue that meaning skepticism is
strongly counterintuitive. To argue for a counterintuitive claim requires especially compelling arguments. This imposes some dialectic burden on the shoulders of the particularists. Or in a more theoretical vein, one may adopt a Kripke-Wittgensteinian (1982) view of language and argue that a term has a particular meaning by convention. Or one may argue, pace Grice and Strawson (1956), that using the term ‘dog’ to mean horse involves a conceptual change. The fact that the revised term ‘dog’ now means horse doesn’t change the fact that the original unrevised term ‘dog’ has to mean dog. So a norm of meaning is still in operation. Due to the above-mentioned considerations, the Canberrans may well contend that particularism does not only have to pay a high intuitive cost if it embraces meaning skepticism but it will also invite theoretically-minded criticisms of some formidable opponents in the likes of Kripke, Grice and Strawson. Hence, meaning skepticism does not seem to be a worthwhile philosophical investment for particularism to make.

Now, we have seen that a denial of the existence of a norm of meaning involves meaning skepticism; however, we haven’t demonstrated why the shapelessness of NM involves a denial of the existence of a norm. Let me illustrate with an example. Take the term ‘wrongness’ for instance. It can apply to the following things: betraying your friend, lusting for your neighbor’s wife, breaking your promise to take your daughter to a movie on her birthday, stealing a candy bar from a convenient store and lying to your parents about your school grades, and so on. Equivalently, the employment of the term ‘wrongness’ is governed by a norm like the following:

\[
\text{X is wrong iff X is betraying your friend, lusting for your neighbor's wife, breaking your promise to take your daughter to a movie on her birthday, stealing a candy bar from a convenient store and lying to your parents about your school grades, or...}
\]

The norm entails the following:

\[
\text{If X is betraying your friend, lusting for your neighbor’s wife, breaking your promise to take your daughter to a movie on her birthday, stealing a candy bar from a convenient store and lying to your parents about your school grades, or..., then X is wrong.}
\]

So the norm must entail a NM conditional (Let N1 be an action of betraying your friend, N2 be one of lusting for your neighbor’s wife, N3 be one of breaking your

---

promise to take your daughter to a movie on her birthday, N4 be one of stealing a candy bar from a convenient store, N5 be one of lying to your parents about your school grades, and so on.) If the NM conditional were shapeless in the sense that there is no commonality, either unifying or disjunctive, amongst Ns, it follows that the right hand side of the norm would be shapeless too. However, the Canberrans contend that the right hand side of the norm cannot be shapeless. It is constitutive of the right hand side of a norm that it must have a shape; i.e. a norm with a shapeless right hand side, strictly speaking, is not a norm. Why? For without a shape, or a pattern or a commonality, either of a unifying sort or of a disjunctive sort, in the various Ns, then there is nothing the class of wrong actions has in common that separates it from the class of right actions or the class of morally irrelevant actions. If so, a norm that tells you to apply the moral concept ‘wrongness’ only to those actions that are wrong will break down, for there is no way we can tell the class of wrong actions from the class of right ones or from the class of morally irrelevant ones. If a norm breaks down, it follows from this that any semantic decision with regard to how to use a term is as good as another (2000, p. 88). If so, this shows that no norm is in operation. In brief, the argument can be reconstructed as follows:

A1: If NM is shapeless, then the right hand of the norm of meaning is shapeless.
A2: Strictly speaking, a norm of meaning with a shapeless right hand side cannot be a norm.
C: Hence, If NM is shapeless, then there is no norm.

(3.3.2.4.3) Absurd Consequence C: We can not use a moral term consistently and thus violate the requirement of rationality.

Although the Canberrans do not make this observation, it is easily imaginable that someone could do so on their behalf. For simplicity, I shall henceforth talk as if the Canberrans do make this observation. For who makes the observation is no matter. The point is rather that it is an interesting observation worth exploring in itself anyway. The Canberrans might reason as follow: if NM is shapeless in the sense that there is not even a C-commonality or C-pattern amongst N1, N2, N3 and so on, we do not use a moral term consistently and violate the requirements of rationality. How so?

If NM is shapeless in the sense that there is not even a C-commonality or C-pattern amongst N1, N2, N3 and so on, this just means, according to the Canberrans, that there is no norm of meaning that governs our uses of a moral term. This we have seen in section § 3.3.2.4.2. If there is no norm of meaning, this means further that we can just apply a moral term in any way we like. When I say we can just apply a moral
term in any way we like, what I have in mind here is not just that we can apply a
moral term such as ‘wrong’ to an act that is apparently right. For one can consistently
apply the moral term ‘wrong’ to acts that are apparently right. Rather, a point that is
more relevant to our discussion here is that when I say here that we can apply a moral
term in any way we like, this means that we can call an action wrong but another
action that is similar to it in all morally relevant descriptive aspects not wrong. It is
certainly inconsistent to use a moral term in such a way. How so?

To get clear on this, it will be useful to investigate Hare’s theory of the meaning
of a moral term (Hare, 2000, chapters 2 & 3). Hare argues that the meaning of a moral
term consists of two components—the prescriptive and the descriptive. Roughly
speaking, the prescriptive component is to prescribe actions whereas the descriptive
component is to convey information. Take the term ‘wrong’ for instance. When we
call an action of setting fire to a kitten wrong, we are not only prescribing sanctions
against it, but we are also conveying some information—it causes suffering, it
conduces to sadistic dispositions, and so on. Due to the descriptive component of a
moral term, Hare contends that its application is governed by the same sort of rule that
governs the application of a purely descriptive term.

So what is the rule that governs the application of a purely descriptive term?
According to Hare, it is the rule of universalizability. What does this mean? Take a
purely descriptive term ‘chair’ for instance. If we apply a descriptive term ‘chair’ to a
particular object because it has four legs and is made for people to sit on, etc., then the
rule of universalizability requires that we ought to apply the term to any object that is
similar to it in these relevant descriptive aspects. It is certainly inconsistent in our uses
of the term ‘chair’ if we call an object that has the relevant descriptive aspects ‘chair’
but refuse to apply it to another object that has exactly the same descriptive aspects.
Similarly, we ought to apply a moral term consistently to any act that is similar in
relevant descriptive aspects. For instance, if we apply the term ‘wrong’ to an act
because it causes suffering and conduces to sadistic character and so on, then we
ought to apply the term to any action that is similar to it in these relevant descriptive
aspects. If we do not do so, we are simply inconsistent in our application of the moral
term. Imagine someone who calls an action wrong because it causes suffering and
conduces to sadistic character but calls another action that he thinks has exactly the
same consequences not wrong. He is apparently inconsistent in his uses of the moral
term ‘wrong’. As rationality requires consistency, it is not rational of him to apply a
term arbitrarily.

Now, we are in a better position to see how the shapelessness of NM can lead to
the absurd consequence that we do not use a moral term consistently and thus violate
the requirements of rationality. To summarize, if NM is shapeless, this means that
there is no norm of meaning that can govern our uses of a moral term. If so, we can use a moral term in any way we like, including using it inconsistently. When we use a term inconsistently, we violate the requirements of rationality, as rationality requires consistency.

(3.3.3) P5: Absurd Consequences Are False.

The absurdity of the absurd consequences should be easily seen by the reader. First, we do think and talk about morality. It is not unusual to hear folks talk about the following: Bill Clinton did a very wrong thing by having an affair with Monica Lewinsky; George Bush was wrong to invade Iraq; or it is only right of me to keep my promise to my wife not to get drunk again. We are fairly competent users of moral concepts such as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. We are not only capable of thinking and talking about morality. We DO think and talk about them. Second, there is certainly a norm that governs our employment of a moral term. We can’t just apply a moral term to anything we like. For instance, on pains of misusing it, we cannot apply the moral term ‘rightness’ to something that is apparently wrong. Similarly, we cannot apply it to something that is completely morally irrelevant (e.g. the tree was right to conduct photosynthesis.) These examples show that there is a norm that governs our employment of a moral term, distinguishing its correct uses from incorrect ones. Finally, it is obvious that we can and do in fact use a moral term consistently. If we call an act of torturing a cat wrong, we do seem to call another similar act wrong too. Moreover, it should also be obvious that rationality requires consistency in our use of a moral term. A man can be rightly accused of being irrational if he calls torturing kitten A wrong but calls the same action done to kitten B not wrong without thinking that there is any morally relevant difference between the two cases.

(3.3.4) P6: It is not the case that the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is not shaped. (P4, P5 Modus Tollens)

Any reader familiar with first-order logic can tell that P6 follows validly from P4 and P5. No more explanation is needed here.

(3.3.5) C2: The necessarily true natural-moral conditional is shaped. (P3, P6 Disjunctive Syllogism)

Again, any reader familiar with first-order logic can tell that C2 follows validly from P3 and P6. I shall save my breath here too.
3.4 Third Stage

(3.4.1) P7 and P8 are exactly the same as C1 and C2. I have explained respectively in sections §§ 3.2 and 3.3 how the Canberrans justify their belief in them. More explanation here would only be redundant. I shall say no more here.

(3.4.2) P9: If a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form \( (x) \ (Nx \rightarrow Mx) \) is shaped, it is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle

Why do the Canberrans think that a shaped NM is a moral principle? To answer this question, we need to get clear on why the Canberrans mean by a moral principle. For them, a moral principle is a creature with the following feature: a moral principle displays “patterned connections between descriptive ways things might be and moral ways things might be.” The patterned connections, according to the Canberrans, can be cashed out at least in the form of a C-commonality. This means, of course, that the patterned connections assume the form of a shaped NM.

The Canberrans make it clear that the NM conditional per se (i.e. potentially shapeless conditional) does not constitute a principle of the sort in which the principlists believe (Jackson et al., 2000, p. 85). Why? Remember that the NM conditionals are short for a raft of necessarily true conditionals like the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If } N_1, \text{ then } X \text{ is right.} \\
\text{If } N_2, \text{ then } X \text{ is right.}
\end{align*}
\]

As we have seen in section § 3.2.2, for the Canberrans, these true conditionals merely follow from the fact that the thesis of moral supervenience is true. Presumably, the particularists do not deny the truth of moral supervenience. Hence, they do not deny that there are these necessarily true conditionals. However, they do deny that there are any necessarily true moral principles in the sense of “patterned connections between descriptive ways things might be and moral ways things might be.” It can be inferred from this that a moral principle is not a necessarily true conditional for a particularist. Hence, for there to be a real disagreement or debate between the principlists and the particularists, a necessarily true conditional cannot be the sort of moral principle the principlists believe. What they believe is what the particularists deny—moral principles in the sense of “patterned connections between descriptive ways things might be and moral ways things might be.” These moral principles, as I have pointed out a while ago, must take the form of a shaped NM.
(3.4.3) PIO: If there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form '(x) (Nx → Mx)', it is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle. (P8, P9 Hypothetical Syllogism)

Anyone familiar with first-order logic can see that PIO is derived from P8 and P9.

(3.4.4) C3: There is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle. (P7, PIO Modus Ponens); absolute principlism is true; (extreme) particularism is thus falsified.

Anyone familiar with first-order logic can see that C3 is derived from P7 and PIO. It has to be noted, though, the sort of moral principle that is established is the absolute kind of moral principle we mentioned in chapter 1. For as PIO indicates, the necessarily true natural-moral moral principle takes the following form: ‘(x) (Nx → Mx)’. As we have explained in chapter 1, there is an intuitive distinction between absolute moral principles and non-absolute ones. A moral principle that does not have any hedging clause is an absolute moral principle. The moral principle of the form ‘(x) (Nx → Mx)’ fits the bill. It does not have any hedging clauses such as ‘prima facie’, ‘pro tanto’ or ‘ceteris paribus’ in it. Hence, what we have got from the supervenience argument eventually is a moral principle of the absolute kind. Hence, if the supervenience argument is sound, absolute principlism will be proved to be true whereas extreme particularism will be proved to be false.
Chapter 4 A Critique of the Supervenience Argument I: 
Supervenience and Conceptual Competence

In chapter 3, I reconstructed the Canberrans’ supervenience argument and divided it into three stages. Let me briefly recapitulate the goals of the three stages. To begin with, the first stage is concerned to show that there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’. The second stage is concerned to show that the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is shaped in the sense that there is a pattern in the various Ns. The last stage is to show that there is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle. Whether the three stages can succeed in achieving their goals of course depends on whether the conclusions of each stage can have adequate support from their premises. By this, I mean that the arguments of which the three stages are consisted have to be sound—their premises have to be true, to say the very least, in order to provide adequate support for the conclusions of each stage. In this chapter and the next, I will argue that none of the three stages are supported by sound arguments. Or at the very least, the Canberrans have not provided any compelling arguments to convince us that they are.

The plan of this chapter is as follows: section § 4.1 casts some doubts on the soundness of the argument of the first stage. The argument of the first stage is problematic, because, as I will argue, there is no good reason to believe that P2 is true. Section § 4.2 divides P4 and P5 contained in the second stage of the supervenience argument respectively into P (4.a), P (4.b), P (4.c) and P (5.a), P (5.b), P (5.c). As the arguments contained in the second stage are enormously complex, I will deal with P (4.a), P (5.a) in this chapter and leave the rest for the next one. Section § 4.3 discusses three objections to P (4.a) made respectively by Dancy, Garfield and McDowell(ians) and argues that they are all toothless. I will advance an objection that I think is more damaging to P (4.a) at the end. Section § 4.4 reminds the readers of the truth of P (5.a).

4.1 First Stage

Let me first of all remind readers of the argument contained in the first stage. It can be presented as follows.

P1: The thesis of moral supervenience is true.
P2: If moral supervenience is true, there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’.

CI: There is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’. (P1, P2 Modus Ponens)

To see whether the above argument is sound, we need to examine P1 and P2 closely to see whether they are true. This is exactly what I will do in what follows.

(4.1.1) Is P1 true?

P1 is the claim that the thesis of moral supervenience is true. Recall that the Canberrans take the thesis of moral supervenience to be equivalent to the inter-world global version: descriptively identical worlds are morally identical. Is there any possibility that this inter-world global version might come out false? To put it differently, is it possible that descriptively identical worlds are morally different? The Canberrans suggest that the only chance for the inter-world global thesis to come out false is if moral properties are ‘sui generis’ properties. The idea is that moral properties have to be entirely autonomous, floating free completely of the constraints of the descriptive properties. To illustrate, it has to be possible for two descriptively identical worlds that one of them is immoral whereas the other is not. So for the Canberrans, the idea of moral properties being sui generis is incompatible with the thesis of moral supervenience. If the idea that moral properties are sui generis can hold, then the thesis of moral supervenience will be falsified.

Now, a natural question to ask here is this: can the particularists endorse the idea of moral properties being sui generis to disarm the supervenience argument? The Canberrans (Jackson et al., 2000, p. 88) contend that the particularists had better not do so for the following reason:

Jejune Thesis: If particularists appeal to the idea that moral properties are sui generis to disarm the supervenience argument, particularism can be accused of “false advertising”—“the new and exciting thesis that there are no moral principles collapses into the jejune doctrine advanced by Moore at the turn of the century: moral properties are sui generis.” (emphasis added)

Some comments about the jejune thesis are in place here. First of all, although it is true that Moore (1962) advocated the idea that moral properties are sui generis, he also held the thesis of moral supervenience (or is plausibly interpreted as doing so).
There does not appear to be, therefore, any inconsistency in holding both the thesis that moral properties are sui generis and the thesis of moral supervenience. By this I mean, in holding both theses, one is not thus committed to the inconsistency of holding true both \( p \) and \( \neg p \). It is a bit unclear, therefore, why the particularists, cannot follow in Moore’s footsteps in holding both the sui generis thesis and the thesis of moral supervenience. It is also unclear why the Canberrans think that if particularism espouses the sui generis thesis, it will have to negate the thesis of moral supervenience.

Perhaps the Canberrans object to the marriage between the sui generis thesis and the thesis of moral supervenience on grounds of incoherence instead of inconsistency. It is incoherent to hold both the sui generis thesis and the thesis of moral supervenience just as it is incoherent to hold both the claim that the object is colored and the claim that the same object is not extended.\(^{24}\) Although this incoherence objection is not explicitly stated, one can discern some clues of it in Jackson’s book (2000, especially chapter 5), *From Metaphysics to Ethics*. If my understanding is correct, Jackson in that book holds that if the thesis of moral supervenience is true, i.e. if moral properties supervene on natural ones, or if there cannot be a moral difference without a natural difference, then there must be an explanation for the modal connection between moral properties and natural ones (‘cannot’ is a modal term). Moore would presumably admit this. For anyone who admits that there must be an explanation for the modal connection, Jackson apparently thinks that s/he cannot coherently hold true the claim that moral properties are sui generis. For if moral properties were sui generis in the sense that they could float free of the constraints of the natural properties, there would be no explanation for the modal connection.

However, the question to ask here is: what is the standard of coherence? As we have seen, Jackson contends that the sui generis thesis may not be coherently maintained with the thesis of moral supervenience because the sui generis thesis does not provide an explanation for a logical consequence of the thesis of moral supervenience—i.e. it does not provide an explanation for the modal connections between moral properties and natural ones. However, it is important for us to note that the sort of standard of coherence adopted by Jackson is not the only sort people adopt. He owes us an explanation as to why the one he adopts is better than the other ones. Many people, for instance, construe coherence in terms of logical consistency. On such construal, it is coherent to hold both \( A \) and \( B \) if \( A \) and \( B \) are logically consistent (or \( A \) and \( B \) can be true at the same time). Such being the case, it is not clearly

\(^{24}\) All colored objects seem to be extended. It therefore seems incoherent to hold true both the claim that an object is colored and the claim that it is not extended. However, holding true both claims does not seem to commit one to flat-foot inconsistency as holding true both the claim that an object is colored and the claim that it is not colored does.
incoherent to hold both the sui generis thesis and the thesis of moral supervenience. For as we have seen, just as claiming that the object is both colored and not extended is not clearly logically inconsistent, the conjunction of the sui generis thesis and the thesis of moral supervenience is not clearly logically inconsistent either since it does not really come out in the form of \((p \land \neg p)\).

Finally, even if we agree with the Canberrans’ conclusion that the particularists should not endorse the idea of moral properties being sui generis, it is not clear that the Canberrans’ reason for making this claim is right. To be more specific, I don’t think there is anything wrong \textit{per se} with a doctrine being jejune. It may well be the case that we were not fully aware of the implications of a jejune doctrine when it was firstly advanced, but only came to discover them after several years of hard philosophical work. Consider Duhem’s thesis of under-determination. Its philosophical influence was relatively minor when it was first advanced in 1914.\textsuperscript{25} It was not until Quine’s putting forward his idea of meaning holism in 1953 that people realized what devastating implications Duhem’s thesis of under-determination had for verificationists’ theory of meaning.\textsuperscript{26} Likewise, it may well be the case that when Moore firstly put forward the idea of moral properties being sui generis, people at that time were not fully aware of what implications it had for the principlism/particularism debate. It was not until the rise of contemporary particularists that people came to know better its implications. There is nothing wrong with a doctrine being collapsed into a jejune doctrine \textit{per se}.

On a more charitable understanding, the claim the Canberrans should have made is this: the jejune doctrine is wildly implausible; that’s why it’s very bad for particularism to collapse into this jejune doctrine. For the sake of argument, let us assume with the Canberrans that the jejune doctrine is wildly implausible. An interesting question to explore here is however: does particularism collapse into this jejune doctrine? I think this is dubious.

Let us note first of all that although G. E. Moore (1962) clings to the jejune doctrine that moral properties are sui generis, he is by no means a particularist. In fact, he is a so-called ideal utilitarian, or an absolute principlist about the principle of utility, holding that there are some objective goods in our world such as beauty or happiness that ought to be promoted.\textsuperscript{27}

Second, Dancy (2004, p. 110) also notes that particularism might well admit that moral properties are not sui generis and still cling to the particularists’ central thesis that there are no true moral principles. So the truth of particularism does not depend

\textsuperscript{25} See Duhem (1914)
\textsuperscript{26} See Quine (1953)
\textsuperscript{27} To be fair to the Canberrans, they also acknowledge this point in their article (2000, p. 93, footnote 11).
on the idea that moral properties are sui generis. For even if moral properties can be reduced to and therefore are natural properties, it might still be the case that there are no true moral principles in the sense of there being patterned connections between the two kinds of properties. Dancy's view here is somewhat analogous to Donald Davidson's anomalous monism (1980b, pp. 207-227) in broad outlines. For Davidson, although mental events are physical events, he contends that there are no strict laws governing these two types of events such that all pain events are a specific type of events. There is merely token identity between a physical event token and a mental event token. To be more concrete, the view of anomalous monism, while holding that mental events are physical events, leaves open the possibility that mental events are physically 'multiply realizable'—they are not physical events of the same type; rather they can be individually, let's say, C-fiber firing events, D-fiber firing events, and F-fiber firing events, etc. Likewise, particularism, even if it holds the view that moral properties are natural properties, still leaves open the possibility that moral properties are naturally multiply realizable. This shows that particularism can still stick to their guns by claiming that there are no true moral principles in the sense of there being any patterned connections between the natural and the moral.

Given the two comments I made above, I think it is doubtful whether particularism really collapses into the jejune doctrine that moral properties are sui generis. Having said so, I think that the Canberrans are right to point out that particularism should not reject the thesis of moral supervenience, not because by doing so, particularism will collapse into the jejune Moorean doctrine that moral properties are sui generis, but because, in my view, the thesis of moral supervenience seems very plausible such that denying it will impose a heavy theoretical burden on the particularists. This theoretical burden is not necessary for the particularists to bear. For as we shall see, there are some other places in the supervenience argument the particularists can point their finger to.

It might rightly be wondered at this point: haven't some philosophers already voiced their doubts about moral supervenience? Dancy (1993, p. 78; 2004, p. 87), for instance, points out that the truth of moral supervenience might well be trivial because it is not clear whether action a and action b can be descriptively identical without being numerically identical. If they can't, then moral supervenience is merely trivial. For it says nothing more than the claim that self-identical action has the same moral property. However, I suspect that Dancy takes the thesis of moral supervenience to be

---

28 It has to be noted here that Davidson himself does not favor a property-exemplification view of events. See for instance Davidson (1980a, pp. 181-187). But for our purpose, this should not be a concern because nothing really hangs on taking this view of events. Moreover, as Kim (1993, p.42) argues, "there are no irreconcilable doctrinal differences between Davidson's theory of event discourse as a semantic theory and the property-exemplification account of events as a metaphysical theory".
trivial only because he adopts a controversial reading of ‘descriptively identical’; on
his reading, for action a and action b to be descriptively identical, they have to be
equal with respect to ‘being identical to action a’ and ‘being identical to action b’.
On such a reading, it is indeed (trivially) true that descriptively identical actions are
numerically identical. However, on a different reading of ‘descriptively identical’,
action a and action b can differ in aspects of ‘being identical to action a’ and ‘being
equal to action b’ while remaining ‘descriptively identical’. On such a reading, it is
not true that descriptively identical are numerically identical\(^{29}\); Dancy has not
provided very compelling reason for adopting one reading rather than another. So
there can be a reading on which moral supervenience is not trivial. Hence, Dancy’s
objection is not very powerful.

To sum up our discussion in this section, it seems to me that to disarm the
supervenience argument, it would be wise of the particularists not to place too many
of their bets on the rejection of moral supervenience.

(4.1.2) Is P2 true?

P2, as we stated it, is the claim that if moral supervenience is true, there is a
necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx⇒Mx)’? Is it true? It
seems that there is no good reason to think so. It seems to me instead that even if
moral supervenience is true, it might still be the case that there is not a necessarily
true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx⇒Mx)’. The Canberrans think that
the consequent of P2, viz. the claim that there is a necessarily true natural-moral
conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx⇒Mx)’, is entailed by its antecedent, viz. the claim
that moral supervenience is true, only because, I think, they mistakenly confuse moral
supervenience with moral necessitation.

The idea of moral necessitation is well explained by Alexander Miller (2003, p.
54) as follows:

Moral Necessitation: “To say that natural properties necessitate moral properties

\(^{29}\) It is noteworthy here that there is a parallel debate about whether qualitatively identical spheres are
numerically identical. See Black (1952). On one reading of ‘qualitatively identical’, sphere a and
sphere b have to be identical with respect to ‘being identical to sphere a’ and ‘being identical to sphere
b’ to be qualitatively identical. However, on a different reading, they don’t. If they don’t, then
qualitatively identical spheres are not numerically identical. Black adopted the reading on which sphere
a and sphere b do not have to be identical with respect to ‘being identical to sphere a’ and ‘being
equal to sphere b’ to be qualitatively identical. Likewise, with regard to moral supervenience, one
might well adopt the reading on which action a and action b do not have to be identical with respect to
‘being identical to action a’ and ‘being identical to action b’ to be descriptively identical. If so, then
descriptively identical actions need not be numerically identical. So when the thesis of moral
supervenience claims that descriptively identical actions are morally identical, it need not be
understood as the trivial claim that self-identical action has the same moral property.
is to say that, in any possible world, all of the moral properties of an act or event are determined by its complete naturalistic description $N$. To explain further, necessitation means that, for a given moral property $M$, it is necessarily the case that: if an act or situation has $N$, then it has $M$.” (Or to paraphrase for our purpose, there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘$(x) (Nx \rightarrow Mx)$’

We can notice from the above passage that moral necessitation is equivalent to the consequent of $P_2$, the claim that there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘$(x) (Nx \rightarrow Mx)$’. ³⁰ Such being the case, it follows naturally that the consequent of $P_2$ is entailed by moral necessitation. However, our question here is: is it entailed by moral supervenience? The Canberrans say ‘yes’ whereas my answer is ‘no’. To settle the issue, we need to get clear on the relationship between moral supervenience and moral necessitation. After all, if moral supervenience entails moral necessitation, and if, as I have suggested in the last paragraph, moral necessitation entails the consequent of $P_2$, then moral supervenience entails the consequent of $P_2$, too. The argument can be reconstructed as follows:

**Supervenience-Necessitation Argument:**

T1: Moral supervenience entails moral necessitation

T2: Moral necessitation entails the consequent of $P_2$.

T3: Therefore, moral supervenience (the antecedent of $P_2$) entails the consequent of $P_2$. (Therefore, $P_2$ is true.)

In order to substantiate their view that $P_2$ is true, the Canberrans have to prove that the above argument is sound. But is it? I suspect it is not. I think the problems lies in T1. The claim of T1 suggests that it is impossible that moral supervenience is true and moral necessitation is false. So, if we can find a possible world in which moral supervenience is true and moral necessitation is false, then the claim of T1 is falsified. Is there such a world? It seems that there is. Imagine the following world:

World 1: a is $N$ and a is not $M$.

³⁰ There is a complication to be noted soon in the objection below. I will reply to it. For now, we can ignore this complication.
The above world is allowed by moral supervenience. For moral supervenience merely says that descriptively (or naturally) identical worlds are morally identical. However, World 1 is ruled out by moral necessitation. For moral necessitation, as I have suggested earlier, says that anything that has N has M. However, in World 1, a has N but it does not have M. So World 1 reveals the possibility that moral supervenience is true and moral necessitation is false. So T1 is not true. Therefore, the supervenience-necessitation argument that is put forward on the Canberrans’ behalf to show that T3 is true is not sound. Hence, there is no compelling reason for us to believe that T3 is true. Or equivalently, there is no compelling reason for us to believe that P2 is true.

In the rest of this sub-section, I will consider a possible objection to my line of reasoning above. I will argue that although there is something right about this objection, it is toothless. Besides, I will consider a possible way for the Canberrans to duck the difficulties encountered in justifying P2. I will argue, however, that it only changes the subject of our discussion and does not affect my point that there is no good reason for believing P2.

**Objection:**

It might be objected that World 1 does not really reveal the possibility that moral supervenience is true and moral necessitation is false. For moral necessitation does not have to take the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’. It might well take the form ‘(x) (Nx→¬Mx)’ so long as ¬M is necessitated by N. That is to say, moral necessitation might well claim that given ¬M (as is given in the scenario of World 1), it is necessarily the case that there is a natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→¬Mx)’. If so, the scenario of World 1 does not prove moral necessitation to be false. It merely shows that moral necessitation does not take the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’ but takes the form ‘(x) (Nx→¬Mx)’ instead. Therefore, the existence of World 1 does not prove T1 to be false.

**Reply:**

I think there is something right about the objection. It is right in pointing out that moral necessitation need not take the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’. It might well take the other form ‘(x) (Nx→¬Mx)’ so long as ¬M is necessitated by N. So moral necessitation might take either one of the following forms: ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’ or ‘(x) (Nx→¬Mx)’. However, I take the above objection to be actually in favor of my
position. For if the objection is right, then it denies the claim of T2: moral necessitation entails that there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’. For as the objection itself has shown, moral necessitation does not entail this. Rather, what it entails is the following disjunction: there is either a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’ or one of the form ‘(x) (Nx→¬Mx)’. If so, there is no good reason for us to believe that T3 (or P2) is true, for the supervenience-necessitation argument that is meant to demonstrate its truth is not sound.

A Way Out? Or Change the Subject?

It might rightly be wondered here: couldn’t the Canberrans’ argument in the first stage still go through, using the idea of moral necessitation instead of moral supervenience? Can’t they put forward the following argument instead?

Moral Necessitation Argument*:

P1*: Moral necessitation is true.

P2*: If moral necessitation is true, then there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’ or of the form ‘(x) (Nx→¬Mx)’.

C1*: There is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’ or of the form ‘(x) (Nx→¬Mx)’.

The moral necessitation argument* is clearly valid. However, is it sound? As we have admitted, P2* is true. So to answer this question, the crucial premise to examine is P1*. Is P1* true? The idea of moral necessitation needs some explanation here. As it is conceived now, it is the idea that for a given moral property M, it is necessarily the case that for any act or situation that has N, it has M whereas for a given moral property ¬M, it is necessarily the case that for any act or situation that has N, it has ¬M. Or to paraphrase for our purpose, moral necessitation is the idea that either there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’ or there is one of the form ‘(x) (Nx→¬Mx)’. On such a construal, the idea of moral necessitation seems true enough (or so I will concede). So it seems fair to say that there is no good reason against believing that P1* is true. So it seems that the moral necessitation argument* is sound. Such being the case, it might seem that the Canberrans’ supervenience argument can still go through, using the idea of moral

67
necessitation rather than moral supervenience at the first stage.

Notice, however, how different P1*, when fully spelled out above, is from the original P1, the claim that descriptively identical worlds are morally identical. For the claim of P1 is entirely compatible with the existence of a Moorean world where there are only sui generis moral properties but no natural (descriptive) properties, whereas P1* is not. To be more specific, P1’s claim may still go through even if there is a Moorean world, for it merely claims that any world that is descriptively identical with the Moorean world is morally identical with it (Nothing in the claim of P1 per se rules out the existence of a Moorean world). By contrast, P1* will be falsified should a Moorean world exist, because P1* is the claim that moral properties are necessitated by natural (descriptive) properties. So according to P1*, there cannot be a Moorean world that has only moral properties but no natural (descriptive) ones. The situation here is analogous in broad outlines to the one in philosophy of mind. Mental supervenience claims that physically identical worlds are mentally identical. Despite the general impression, this is entirely compatible with the existence of a fairy world where only mental properties exist (Kim, 1998, pp. 10-11). For mental supervenience merely claims that any world that is physically identical with the fairy world is mentally identical with it (Nothing in the claim of mental supervenience per se rules out the existence of a fairy world). However, the existence of a fairy world is ruled out a priori by psychophysical necessitation for psychophysical necessitation claims that mental properties are necessitated by physical properties. So according to psychophysical necessitation, there cannot be a fairy world in which there are only mental properties but no physical properties. So psychophysical necessitation and mental supervenience are different ideas, because they differ over whether they allow the existence of a fairy world. Analogously, moral necessitation and moral supervenience are also different ideas, because they differ over whether they allow the existence of a Moorean world.

If the Canberrans appeals to the moral necessitation argument* in the first stage instead, this would completely change the subject. The original whole argument would no longer be an argument from supervenience, for it does not “take off from the fact of supervenience”, as the Canberrans (Jackson et al., 2000, p. 86) claim. Rather it is an argument from necessitation. If the whole argument from necessitation turns out to be sound, this does not affect my point that the Canberrans’ original supervenience argument is not. Moreover, even if the soundness of the moral necessitation argument* above is granted, it only means that the first stage of the whole argument from necessitation is sound. This does not mean that the whole argument is sound. In fact, as I will argue later, there is good reason to think it is not, for there are holes in the remaining two stages of the argument.
(4.1.2) Is C1 true?

As a reminder, C1 is the claim that there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form '(x) (Nx→Mx)'. C1 might well be true; however, its truth is not guaranteed by P1 and P2. There might be other reasons to show that C1 is true. However, the Canberrans have not shown us any. If P2 is false (as I have shown that there is good reason to think that it is), then the argument contained in the first stage is not sound. An argument that is not sound may well have a false conclusion. C1 may well be false.

4.2 Second Stage

Before we start to examine the argument contained in the second stage, let me first of all remind the readers of what the argument is. It can be presented as follows:

P3: Either the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is shaped or (exclusive 'or') it is not shaped (or shapeless).

P4: If the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is not shaped, then there will be Absurd Consequences (i.e. (a) we cannot think or talk about morality; (b) a moral term does not have a correct criterion of meaning; (c) we can not use a moral term consistently and thus violate the requirements of rationality).

P5: But Absurd Consequences are false (i.e. we do think or talk about morality; a moral term has a correct criterion of meaning; we can and do in fact use a moral term consistently and obey the requirements of rationality).

P6: It is not the case that the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is not shaped. (P4, P5 *Modus Tollens*)

C2: The necessarily true natural-moral conditional is shaped. (P3, P6 *Disjunctive Syllogism*)

Let me quickly point out that P3 is obviously true and P6 is merely making an obviously true logical point. So they are not the targeted premises for the particularists to attack. Rather, much of the philosophical action is focused on P4 and P5.

Before we embark on the examination of P4 and P5, however, there is a need to be more fine-grained about them. As the truth value of P4 might vary depending on...
whether its consequent is (a) (b) or (c), it is useful to break P4 accordingly into three independent theses as follows: P (4.a), P (4.b) and P (4.c). To illustrate, P (4.a) is the claim that if the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is not shaped, then (a) we cannot think or talk about morality, whereas the antecedents of P (4.b) and P (4.c) are the same as P(4.a) only with their consequents replaced respectively by (b) and (c). Similarly, it will be useful to break P5 into P (5.a), P (5.b) and P (5.c) in accordance with whether they claim (a) (b) or (c) to be false.

In what follows, I will argue that the Canberrans do not provide us with any compelling reasons for believing P (4.a). That is, I argue that even if the antecedent of P (4.a) is true, viz. even if the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is not shaped, we can, contrary to what the Canberrans think, still think or talk about morality.

4.3 Is P (4.a) True?

Let me first of all remind the readers of the claim of P (4.a). It is this. If the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is not shaped, then (a) we cannot think or talk about morality. Let’s call the necessarily true natural-moral conditional NM for short. What does it mean to say that it is not shaped? As we have previously explained in chapter 2, it means the following: there does not even exist a disjunctive commonality (or C-commonality, as we previously described) amongst the various Ns.

How does this lead to the absurd consequence that we cannot think or talk about morality? As we have previously explained, the Canberrans argue that if there were not any commonality, not even the disjunctive one, amongst the various Ns, then it would be impossible for us to learn moral concepts, let alone think or talk about morality. Why? Because we are finite beings and the items falling within the extension of the concept of rightness, viz. the Ns, can be unlimited in number. It is impossible for us to pick up the concept of rightness via acquainting ourselves with all the occasions it applies. So the Canberrans infer that there must be some sort of finite commonality in the Ns that we latch unto when we learn the concept of rightness. Otherwise, our conceptual competence with this concept will become totally mysterious.

For the ease of discussion, let us dub the claim that in order for us to be competent with moral concepts, there must be some commonality underlying all the various Ns the thesis of conceptual competence. And to focus our discussion, let’s follow the Canberrans in concentrating on the concept of rightness, although our discussion below may well be generalized to apply to other moral concepts.

In what follows, I will discuss three objections to the thesis of conceptual
None of them, I will argue, is successful. In the end, I will broach a new objection which I think is more damaging to the thesis of conceptual competence.

(4.3.1) Dancy’s Prototype Theory Objection

How can human beings, as finite creatures with finite learning processes, come to acquire the concept of rightness, which can be applied to an infinite number of actions? Given that we are finite creatures with finite learning processes, it is of course impossible for us to pick up the concept of rightness by acquainting ourselves with all the occasions it can apply. Such being the case, the Canberrans think that a reasonable explanation for our conceptual competence with the concept of rightness must, inter alia, include the following: there must be some sort of finite commonality or pattern amongst the various right actions, or the Ns, that we latch unto.

However, Dancy (1999a, pp. 59-72) objects that to explain our conceptual competence with the concept of rightness, there need not be any pattern at all in the various Ns. It may well be the case that what we learn when we learn the concept of rightness is not any pattern, but rather some ‘prototype properties’, or those properties that are typical of a right action. The chief difference between a pattern and those prototype properties can be explained as follows: a pattern, construed as commonality amongst all the items picked out by a concept, provides necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept. Take the concept ‘chair’ for instance. If there is a pattern or some commonality, let’s call it C, that unites all the items picked out by the concept ‘chair’, then the necessary and sufficient condition for the concept ‘chair’ is provided by C. The idea can be represented as follows:

\[ \text{X is a chair iff X has C.} \]

In contrast, prototype properties do not provide necessary and sufficient condition for a concept; rather, the prototype properties are merely had by those items that are typical examples of the concept. To illustrate with the concept ‘chair’ again, the prototype properties are merely had by typical chairs. For those falling on the borderline, they might not have all the prototype properties of chairs.

In my understanding, Dancy (1999a, pp. 59-72) thinks that when we learn the concept of rightness, we do not learn the necessary and sufficient condition of the concept; rather, what we learn are the prototype properties that are had by those paradigmatic examples of right actions. To use an analogy to illustrate, when we learn

\[ \text{Dancy’s objection is fueled by Rosch’s prototype theory. See Rosch (1975).} \]
the concept of a bird, we learn that a bird has the following properties—a bird has wings, a bird can fly, a bird has feathers etc. However, these properties do not constitute a pattern that provides a necessary and sufficient condition for the concept ‘bird’. A penguin is a bird; however, it cannot fly. Rather, those properties are prototype properties that are shared by the paradigmatic examples of a bird—such as robins or sparrows, etc. So the following seems to be true: we are fully competent with the use of the concept ‘bird’; however, there does not appear to be any pattern underlying all the items picked out by the concept ‘bird’. If so, why should we believe that there must be a pattern underlying all the items picked out by the concept ‘right’ to explain our conceptual competence with it?

In response to Dancy’s objection, Jackson (2000, p. 61) independently contends that to explain our conceptual competence with the concept ‘bird’, a prototype theorist would have to acknowledge that at least we learn the following:

\[ X \text{ is a bird iff } X \text{ has enough of those prototype properties of a bird.} \]

For if she doesn’t, then she has no way to explain our capacity to distinguish the category of bird from the category of non-bird. Hence, somewhat ironically, a prototype theorist also subscribes, though implicitly, to a pattern that provides a necessary and sufficient condition for the concept ‘bird’. So the prototype theory has no edge over the pattern theory the Canberrans advocate. If so, the prototype theory does no better than the pattern theory in explaining our conceptual competence with moral concepts.

(4.3.2) Garfield’s Family Resemblance Objection

Garfield (2000, p. 190, footnote 25) launches an attack on the Canberrans’ thesis of conceptual competence from a different front. He thinks that there are three major flaws with this thesis. First, he thinks that when the Canberrans advocate a disjunctive pattern to explain our conceptual competence with a family resemblance concept, the Canberrans misinterpret Wittgenstein’s idea of a family resemblance concept. According to Garfield, Wittgenstein by no means thinks that the items picked out by a family resemblance concept are unified by a disjunctive pattern. I think that Garfield is on firm ground here (with a caveat to be noted soon), for Wittgenstein (1963, § 67), when discussing a family resemblance concept ‘number’, says the following:

But if someone wished to say: “There is something common to all these constructions—namely the disjunction of all their common properties”—I should
reply: Now you are only playing with words. One might as well say: “Something runs through the whole thread—namely the continuous overlapping of those fibres.”

From the above passage, we can tell that Wittgenstein by no means thinks that there is a disjunctive pattern that is common to all the items the concept ‘number’ applies to. If Canberrans intend to provide a faithful interpretation of what Wittgenstein actually thinks about family resemblance concepts, then Garfield is right that the Canberrans’ interpretation is obviously wrong. However, the caveat that has to be noted here is that there is no sign in their co-authored article showing that the Canberrans are interested in interpreting Wittgenstein; in fact, they do not give any reference to Wittgenstein at all in that article. Rather, they are presenting their own idea of family resemblance. So the first objection about misinterpretation is toothless. Of course, from Wittgenstein’s perspective, to contend that there is a disjunctive commonality underlying the items picked out by a family resemblance concept is merely “playing with words”. However, we have not seen any reason why the Canberrans are not entitled to use the word ‘commonality’ in that way.

Second, Garfield charges that the Canberrans get the dialectic between particularists and principlists wrong. The particularists usually invoke Wittgenstein as an ally. They appeal to the family resemblance concepts to show that our conceptual competence with a concept need not presuppose the existence of a unifying pattern underlying all the items picked out by the concept. The concept of game is a good example. We are fully competent with it; however, there does not appear to be any unifying pattern that underlies the items picked out by the concept. Likewise, they think that similar things could be said of the concept of Tightness.

However, on the Canberrans’ understanding of a family resemblance concept, Wittgenstein turns out to be an enemy of particularists, because there is still a disjunctive pattern unifying all the items picked out by a family resemblance concept such as the concept of a game. Hence, Garfield thinks that the Canberrans got the dialectic wrong.

However, the Canberrans may well acknowledge that Wittgenstein is still an ally of particularists, for their understanding of a family resemblance concept is different from Wittgenstein’s. As I said on behalf of the Canberrans in my reply to Garfield’s first objection, the Canberrans are not interested in interpreting Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblance. The particularists may still side with Wittgenstein in claiming that there is no unifying pattern underlying the items picked out by a family resemblance concept, in pursuance with Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblance. The Canberrans can certainly allow this. What the Canberrans cannot allow is the
claim that the particularists are right to do so. They don't think that the particularists are right to think, pace Wittgenstein, that there is no unifying pattern underlying the items picked out by a family resemblance concept. So the Canberrans did not get the dialectic between the particularists and the principlists wrong. As to who win the dialectic, that's a different issue.

Third, Garfield contends that the disjunctive sort of pattern the Canberrans advocate is simply unlearnable because it contains an infinite amount of disjuncts. Hence, invoking it to explain our conceptual competence is a project doomed for failure. However, I suspect that the sort of disjunctive pattern Garfield attacks is not really the sort the Canberrans have in mind. Let us use a family resemblance concept 'game' to illustrate this. Suppose that G1, G2, G3, G4, G5, etc. are all games. The disjunctive sort of pattern Garfield has in mind might look like the right hand side of the following:

X is a game iff X is G1 or G2 or G3 or G4 or G5, etc.

Recall that this is the weaker sort of disjunctive pattern I mentioned in Chapter 2. The above pattern is apparently unlearnable because it contains an infinite number of disjuncts. However, it might not be the sort the Canberrans have in mind. The sort of disjunctive pattern the Canberrans have in mind might well be some finite disjunctive commonality amongst the infinite number of Gs. As I have explained in Chapter 2, it might look like the right hand side of the following:

X is a game iff X has (P1 or P2 or P3 or P4)

The disjunctive pattern constituted by (P1 or P2 or P3 or P4) might well be a common property all games share. In that case, it is finite and hence learnable. So Garfield's objection about the unlearnability of a disjunctive pattern does not work.

(4.3.3) McDowell's Response-Dependence Objection

Some might object to the thesis of conceptual competence by saying something like the following: It might well be the case that the Canberrans get the location of commonality wrong. There might never be any commonality in the various Ns themselves. Rather, their commonality comes from us; it is response-dependent. We respond to the various Ns in the same way by applying the same concept to them all, despite the fact that there is no commonality in them. Our conceptual competence with a moral concept is explained not by there being any pattern or commonality
amongst the things the moral concept applies to and our latching unto that pattern when we learn the concept, but by there being some particular way people carve up moral reality and our knowing the point why people carve it up in that way, viz. why they classify certain actions as being, let’s say, pious and others as treacherous.

John McDowell himself has never made the above objection directly to the thesis of conceptual competence. However, it is imaginable that people can make it, drawing some implications out of what McDowell (2002, essay 10, pp. 198-218) says in “Non-cognitivism and Rule-following”. In that article, McDowell argues that moral terms, despite their supervening on the natural terms, are response-dependent in that there might be nothing in common in the natural things they apply to. Here is what he (p. 202) says:

[H]owever long a list we give of items to which a supervening term applies, described in terms of the level supervened upon, there may be no way, expressible at the level supervened upon, of grouping just such items together. Hence there need be no possibility of mastering, in a way that would enable one to go on to new cases, a term that is to function at the level supervened upon, but is to group together exactly the items to which competent users would apply the supervening term.

So we can tell from the above passage that for McDowell, there need not be any pattern or commonality or “grouping” in the things a moral concept is applied to. Hence, McDowell claims that “there need be no possibility of mastering, in a way that would enable one to go on to new cases, a term that is to function at the level supervened upon.” If we want to go on to new cases, what we have to do instead is “to group together exactly the items to which competent users would apply the supervening term.” That is to say, the extension of a supervening term, (or a moral term in our case), depends entirely upon what sort of things we, as competent users, would apply the term to. To paraphrase for our purpose, if we, as competent users of a moral concept, would apply it to N1, N2, N3, etc, then they are what the concept can refer to and there need not be any commonality in the various Ns.

It might rightly be wondered how McDowell explains our conceptual competence with a moral concept though? For according to the thesis of conceptual competence, there is really no explaining for it without there being a commonality or a pattern in the various Ns that we latch unto. McDowell contends that our conceptual competence essentially consists in our sharing the same form of life. It is, he (2002, pp. 206-207) quotes Stanley Cavell approvingly,
a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life".

So, being competent with a concept requires one to share the same form of life with other competent users of the concept in the same linguistic community. People having a different form of life might well lack the sort of vision required for them to see why an utterance is an assertion rather than an explanation or an appeal or why Chaplin's show is humorous to the locals. To further illustrate, let me use the concept of piety for example. A Chinese would regard a senior adult dressed up in colorful costumes dancing in front of his aged parents as performing an action of filial piety while a foreigner might not have the slightest idea of why the concept of piety can be applied to it. The foreigner is not competent with the use of the concept 'piety' in Chinese society. Having a different "form of life", he lacks the sort of vision that is required to see the senior adult's action as one of filial piety. For McDowell, becoming competent with a moral concept does not consist so much in the acquisition of a pattern in the various Ns to which the moral concept can be applied as in the acquisition of the perspective from which the locals see things. The foreigner might well have seen the same senior adult performing the same sort of actions several times and spotted the commonality amongst the various performances, yet still do not have the slightest idea with regard to why what they have witnessed is an action of filial piety. "Form of life" is what makes all the difference.

Equipped with a better understanding of a McDowellian sort of response-dependent objection, we can now consider whether it poses a serious threat to the thesis of conceptual competence. In my view, the answer is 'no' and the Canberrans have a reply to this. They may well acknowledge that to be fully competent with the use of a moral concept in a particular linguistic community, one has to understand the cultural baggage the moral concept carries with it to apply it correctly. They may well also acknowledge that a foreigner who lacks relevant cultural vision that is required for competence with a moral concept in that community are unable to see things in the moral way the locals do; to learn how the moral concept is used in that community, he has to mix himself with the locals, whirl in the same organism, so to speak. However, these acknowledgements are entirely compatible with there being a pattern in the various Ns. In fact, we should note that McDowell can allow there being a pattern in the various Ns too. He only makes the weaker claim that there need not be any. He is not committed to the stronger claim
that there cannot be any. The Canberrans’ view differs from McDowell’s in that they make an even more stronger claim that there has to be a pattern in the various Ns. How can they substantiate their view here, given the response-dependent objection?

Two comments are in place here. First, I think that the Canberrans can meet the challenge head on and contend that the pattern or commonality cannot be just response-dependent. For if there were no pattern in the various Ns, as the response-dependent objection maintains, then the objectors would have to maintain that what we are responding to is merely “a mess” at bottom—those actions we call right are only randomly related to each other; they don’t have anything in common at the natural level. However, this seems incredible. If they are so different from each other at the natural level, it seems incredible that we apply the same moral concept to them so consistently and only to them for that matter.

In fact, the Canberrans (Jackson et al., 2000, p. 87, p. 93) point out that the response-dependent objection violates the platitude that “predication supervenes on nature”—predicates apply because of how things are. The example they gave to illustrate this platitude is this. If two things are similar in their natural or descriptive aspects, the same moral predicate will presumably apply to both of them, unless a good reason is given for not doing so. This is why, according to the Canberrans, “defenders of abortion are challenged to explain why they oppose infanticide; those who oppose contraception on the grounds that it is unnatural are asked to explain why they do not oppose the wearing of spectacles.” (Jackson et al., 2000, p. 94) So similarities or differences in our application of moral predicates must be explained in virtue of similarities or differences in how things are. Without paying any heed to this, our application of moral concepts would become entirely arbitrary. However, if our application of moral concepts were arbitrary, it would be doubtful we could claim any competence with them. However, it is a fact that we are fairly competent with these moral concepts. So the response-dependent objection, which violates the platitude that “predication supervenes on nature”, cannot be right.

Second, the response-dependence objection seems wrong in maintaining that there is only commonality in our responses to the various Ns, but no commonality in the various Ns themselves. For there is at least the following commonality amongst the various Ns: they elicit the same responses from people! If so, this is entirely compatible with the Canberrans’ thesis of conceptual competence, the claim that in order for people to be competent with a moral concept, there must be some commonality in the various Ns it applies to. For the Canberrans might well contend that the commonality of the various Ns lies in the fact that they elicit the same responses from people and to be competent with a moral concept is just to pick up people’s common responses to the things it applies to.
I have argued so far from § 4.3.1 to § 4.3.3 that none of the objections from Dancy, Garfield or McDowell poses serious threats to the thesis of conceptual competence. In what follows, I will argue, however, that there is a fatal objection to it. To begin with, recall the claim of

the thesis of conceptual competence: In order for us to be competent with moral concepts, there must be some commonality underlying all the various Ns.

That is, it says something like the following:

If there is not a pattern or commonality in the various Ns, then there will be no explanation for our conceptual competence with moral concepts.

By contraposition, we can get the following logically equivalent statement:

If there is an explanation for our conceptual competence with moral concepts, then there is a pattern or commonality in the various Ns.

Now, the thesis of conceptual competence, as stated above, actually says something that is quite remarkable. The remarkable thing about this thesis is that it forges a link between our conceptual competence with moral concepts and there being a pattern or commonality in the various Ns. Why is this remarkable? Well, this is because whether we are competent with moral concepts is a fact about us whereas whether there is a pattern or commonality in the various Ns is something about the world that is independent of us. (Recall that the Canberrans deny that the commonality is response-dependent). It is quite remarkable that we can infer from a fact about us to a fact about the world. These two facts are seemingly irrelevant. After all, whether there is a pattern or commonality in the various Ns does not seem to have anything to do with whether we are competent with a moral concept or not.

Let me illustrate with an example. Take the concept ‘natural number’ for instance. There is an infinite number of natural numbers. They are all different, ranging from 0 to infinity. However, there is a commonality amongst the various natural numbers. They all share the common property of satisfying the Peano’s axioms. This fact, however, does not seem to have anything to do with whether one is competent with the concept ‘natural number’ or not. Even if we are not competent with this concept, it
still seems to be the case that all the natural numbers share the commonality of satisfying the Peano’s axioms.

In order to contend that there is a link between our conceptual competence with a concept and there being a pattern amongst the various Ns it applies to, we need first of all to puzzle out the relationship between the two. To do so, however, requires further clarification of what it takes to be fully competent with a concept. There has been a lot of discussion of this in the literature. If my understanding of the Canberrans’ view (2000, p. 91) is correct, they think that it requires at least the following: we know what a concept means, i.e. what sort of things it can be correctly applied to. Take Jackson and Pettit’s view (2004) to illustrate this. For Jackson and Pettit (2004, pp. 192-193), there exist some conceptual “commonplaces”. A mastery of a concept requires one to know at least that these conceptual commonplaces in which the concept applies hold (p. 193). Take the concept of fairness for instance. To know what fairness means, one has to know, at the very least, the following conceptual commonplaces hold:

Conceptual commonplaces about justification: If one alternative is fair, and if other things are equal, then that is the right option for the agent to desire and pursue. The agent may reasonably feel guilt, and others resentment, about failure to choose such an option, at any rate where the choice would not have been very difficult to make.

Conceptual commonplaces about justificatory power: Fairness is potentially more important in the determination of rightness, and in the justification of choice, than being polite or diverting. But fairness is less important in general than saving innocent human lives: better be unfair than allow someone innocent to perish.

Conceptual commonplaces about motivational power: Believing one option to be fair is likely to motivate an agent more strongly than seeing another as polite or diverting, but less strongly than recognizing a further option as a means of saving innocent human life. If these asymmetries do not hold, that is probably due to some form of practical unreason.

If we don’t know the above-mentioned conceptual commonplaces hold, the claim that we are fully competent with the concept of fairness can hardly be maintained.

Jackson and Pettit (2000, pp. 192-193) listed seven commonplaces in total about the concept of fairness. For the sake of brevity, I omit four of them.
Notice that the requirement that we know these conceptual commonplaces hold is different from the requirement that we be able to articulate them. My grandmother, to the best of my knowledge, cannot articulate any conceptual commonplace about the concept of morality; however, seasoned with life's experiences, she can reliably distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. She is a person of great moral wisdom. It would be ridiculous to suggest that she does not know what morality means. In fact, I think she knows better than most of us.

But still, the claim that we know what a concept means is a claim about us. How can we derive from this a claim about the world, viz. the claim that there must be some sort of pattern amongst the various Ns the concept refers to? Here, what we need is a 'bridge' claim, so to speak, to connect the two seemingly irrelevant claims. What is this bridge claim? As far as I can see, the Canberrans must claim the following:

\[(A1) \text{If we know the meaning of a concept, we (must) know its underlying pattern. (If P then R)}\]

And to know the pattern, there must be a pattern amongst the various Ns for us to know. That is, the following statement obtains:

\[(A2) \text{If we know the pattern, then there is a pattern amongst the various Ns. (If R then Q)}\]

Now, it should be easy for readers to see how the bridge can be established between P and Q. From hypothetical syllogism of \((A1)\) and \((A2)\), we can get 'if P then Q' and hence establish the relationship between P and Q the Canberrans is after.

However, \((A1)\) is highly controversial. It is not necessarily the case, as \((A1)\) claims, that if we know the meaning of a concept, we must know its underlying pattern. Here, it is useful to borrow a distinction from Chomsky (1965) to explain our knowledge of the meaning of a concept: the distinction between competence and performance. On the competence model, if we know the meaning of a concept, it is true, as \((A1)\) claims, that we must know the pattern. That is, we know what sort of things the pattern can be applied to. For instance, it seems reasonable to think that if someone knows the meaning of the concept 'cup', she has to know that the pattern underlying the concept 'cup', whatever it is, can be applied correctly to cups but not to birds. However, on the performance model, this need not be the case in order for her to count as knowing the meaning of the concept 'cup'; she only has to perform the right action, so to speak. For instance, whenever she is told to fetch for a cup, she can
do it right (i.e. she doesn’t go after a bird or any object that is non-cup). Then, she can pass for knowing the meaning of the concept ‘cup’, even if she knows nothing (not even implicitly) about its underlying pattern. So on the performance model, (A1) might come out false.

Now, both the competence model and the performance model have their own supporters. Which of them is right is highly controversial. I do not mean to settle the issue here. However, I think that it is fair to say that the Canberrans are not entitled to subscribe to one model rather than the other without providing any argument for it. To put things differently, unless there is some good reason for us to think that the competence model is the only plausible theory for explaining our knowledge of a concept, it seems unreasonable to assume that the claim of (A1), which is based on the competence model, is true. For (A1) might come out to be false on the performance model. And if (A1) turns out to be false, the bridge between P and Q will collapse. Then it becomes doubtful whether P really entails Q. If so, it will also become doubtful whether the thesis of conceptual competence is true because it requires the link between P and Q to establish the connection between our conceptual competence and there being a pattern. In other words, there is no good reason to think that the claim that we are competent with the meaning of a moral term entails the claim that there must be a pattern. The thesis of conceptual competence can thus be cast into doubt.

4.4 Is P (5.a) True?

P (5.a) is the claim that it is false that we cannot think or talk about morality. As I have illustrated in section § 3.3.3 of chapter 3, it is obviously true, because we can and do think or talk about morality. So here, I shall not elaborate more on this.

4.5 Summary

As the chapter title suggests, this chapter focuses on the thesis of moral supervenience and the thesis of conceptual competence. If what I have argued so far is right, it seems that the first stage of the supervenience argument is problematic, for the reason that there is no good reason for us to believe that we can derive a natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx → Mx)’ from the thesis of moral supervenience.

With regard to the second stage of the supervenience argument, we have argued that the thesis of conceptual competence is problematic, despite the failures of challenges to it from Dancy, Garfield and McDowell(ians). The main reason is that it implicitly contains a highly controversial assumption that has not been argued for by
the Canberrans. Such being the case, there is reason for us to doubt whether P(4.a) contained in the second stage of the supervenience argument is true or not.

Despite the progress we have made, I have left some businesses unfinished in this chapter. I have only examined P(4.a) and P(5.a) of the second stage of the supervenience argument, but I have not examined P(4.b), P(5.b), P(4.c) and P(5.c). Moreover, we have not examined the argument of the third stage. In the next chapter, we will continue with our unfinished businesses of exploring whether the second stage consists of a sound argument. Besides, we will look at the argument of the third stage. As a brief forecast, in the next chapter, I will argue that the arguments of the both stages contain some holes in them.
Chapter 5: A Critique of the Supervenience Argument II: Normativity of Meaning, Rationality and Moral Principles

This chapter continues with where we leave off our discussion in chapter 4. As the chapter title of this chapter suggests, the focus of this chapter will be on two theses that are advanced at the second stage of the supervenience argument—the thesis of the normativity of meaning and the rational requirement thesis. In addition, we will also be examining the Canberrans’ conception of moral principles that is advanced at the third stage. I will argue that the two theses are not convincing and their conception of moral principle problematic.

Section § 5.1 reviews the claim of P (4.b), the claim that if the necessarily true natural-moral conditional (NM) is not shaped, a moral term does not have a correct norm of meaning, and reminds the readers of its truth.

Section § 5.2 argues that there is no strong reason for us to believe the claim of P (5.b), viz. the claim that there is a norm that governs our employment of a moral term. I argue that the norm that governs our employment of a term in our actual linguistic practices allows a garden-variety of ways a term can be legitimately put to uses, whereas the norm the Canberrans have in mind is a clear-cut one that does not accommodate these variations. Such being the case, I argue that there is no good reason to believe there is the sort of the norm the Canberrans have in mind that governs our employment of a moral term.

Section § 5.3 takes issue with P(4.c), the claim that if NM is not shaped, we do not use a moral term consistently and violate the requirements of rationality. I raise a Kripkean-style rule-following objection against it—the objection that the fact that we use a moral term consistently and thus obey the rationality requirement does not show that there is a pattern of the sort the Canberrans have in mind. Section § 5.4 is a review of the claim of P (5.c), the claim that we can and do in fact use a moral term consistently and thus obey the minimal requirement of rationality. Sections §§ 5.5 and 5.6 draw some logical conclusions from the discussions of the previous sections.

Sections §§ 5.7-5.10 examine the soundness of the argument contained in the third stage of the supervenience argument. Section § 5.11 provides an overall review of the supervenience argument. In view of the many holes in it, I conclude that there is no strong reason for us to believe the ultimate conclusion the Canberrans want to reach—there are necessarily true natural-moral moral principles.
Let me first of all recapitulate the claim of P (4.b). It is this. If the necessarily true natural-moral conditional (NM) is not shaped, a moral term does not have a correct criterion of meaning. That is, if there is not any pattern amongst the various Ns, then a moral term cannot have a correct criterion of meaning. Let us call the claim of (4.b) the thesis of the normativity of meaning.

There are two questions we need to ask here. First, what does it mean to say that a moral term has a correct criterion of meaning? As I have explained in section § 3.3.2.4.2 in chapter 3, it means that a moral term must have a norm of meaning that governs its employment, a norm that marks the correct uses of a term in accordance with its meaning from the incorrect ones. Second, how does the antecedent of (4.b) lead to the consequent? In other words, why does the fact that there being no pattern amongst the various Ns lead to the consequence that a moral term can not have a correct criterion of meaning? Again, as I have explained in section § 3.3.2.4.2 in chapter 3, the Canberrans contend that a pattern in the Ns (or a shape) is constitutive of the right hand side of the norm of meaning. To illustrate, suppose that the term ‘rightness’ applies to N1, N2, N3 and N4, etc, then there must be a norm of meaning governing the employment of the term ‘rightness’ which requires that it is only correct to apply the term to N1, N2, N3, N4, and all the other various Ns that are right but not to others. The norm looks like the following:

\[
x \text{is right iff } x \text{ is N1 or N2 or N3 or N4...etc.}
\]

Now, if there were no pattern or commonality amongst the various Ns that are right that sets them apart from the other Ns that are either not right or morally irrelevant, then a norm governing the employment of the term ‘rightness’ would no longer exist. For then we can apply the term ‘rightness’ even to Ns that are not right or morally irrelevant. However, it is incorrect, linguistically speaking, for us to do so. So there must be a pattern constitutive of the right hand side of the norm.

I think that the Canberrans’ line of reasoning in P (4.b) is reasonable (or this much I am willing to concede). However, I think that P (5.b) can be challenged on a number of fronts. Or so I will argue in § 5.2.

5.2 Is P (5.b) True?

P (5.b) is the claim that there is a norm that governs our employment of a moral term. This certainly seems to be true. For it does not seem to be the case that we can apply a
moral term to anything we like. The statement, ‘It is (morally) wrong for trees to conduct photosynthesis’, seems to reveal the speaker’s misuse of the moral term ‘wrong’. For trees’ conducting photosynthesis is not the sort of thing a moral term can apply to. So it seems reasonable to claim, at least initially, that there is a norm that governs our employment of a moral term.

However, things often turn out to be not what they initially seem. In order to determine whether P (5.b) is true, we need to look closer at the Canberrans’ notion of a norm. As we have seen in section § 5.1.2, for the Canberrans, a norm is constituted by a pattern that unites the various Ns a concept can apply to. A concept governed by the norm can only apply to the various Ns, but not the non-Ns. To be more specific, we can use the following picture to illustrate (Jackson et al., 2000, p. 87):

In Canberrans’ view, the term ‘right’ applies only to acts that fall within the region inside the oval but not to acts that fall outside it because only those acts that fall within have the pattern all right acts have in common whereas those outside don’t. If we apply the term ‘right’ to those outside the oval region, then we would be misusing the term.

However, the Canberrans’ conception of a norm as being constituted by a clear-cut pattern that divides the Ns from the non-Ns is problematic in two aspects. First, in the cases of vague concepts, their application does not seem to be governed by a norm constituted by a clear-cut pattern that divides the Ns from the non-Ns. If moral concepts turn out to be vague concepts, as they might well be, then there would be no norm of the sort the Canberrans have in mind that governs the employment of a moral term. Notice that this is different from saying that there is no norm whatsoever. There is still a norm that governs the employment of vague concepts such as ‘bald’. It is not as if we can apply it to anything we like. To say that jasmine tea is bald certainly strikes us as a case of misusing the term ‘bald’. So there is still a norm that governs the employment of a vague concept. It is just that the norm is not the kind of norm constituted by a clear-cut pattern. Rather it is a norm with blurred edges.

Second, the norm when conceived as being constituted by a clear-cut pattern that

33 Let’s assume that the speaker knows what jasmine tea is.
divides the Ns from the non-Ns seems too rigid to match the norm that governs our linguistic practices. The norm that governs our linguistic practices allows a garden-variety of ways a term might be legitimately put to uses. Calling Winston Churchill a bulldog is not a case of misusing the term 'bulldog' when it is used in a metaphorical context. To call someone a brave coward is neither a case of misusing the term 'brave' nor one of misusing the term 'coward' when their combination is intended to create an effect of oxymoron. Similarly, calling an action that is apparently wrong right may not be a case of misusing the term 'right' either when it is stated in a sarcastic tone. To deny these linguistic phenomena is to deny Shakespeare of his mastery at word-play. So it seems that the norm the Canberrans have in mind that draws a sharp line between Ns (things which a moral term can apply) and non-Ns (things which a moral cannot apply) is way too rigid such that there is really no such norm in our linguistic practices.

To bring out the contrast between the norm the Canberrans have in mind and the norm that governs our actual linguistic practices, a musical analogy from Schroeter & Schroeter (2009, pp. 16-17) can prove to be illuminating. They compare the norm the Canberrans have in mind to the common score classical musicians play by, whereas the norm that governs our actual linguistic practices is more like the norm that governs the performance of a jazz musician, which allows more improvisations and variations. Here are Schroeter & Schroeter's remarks (2009, pp. 16-17):

The members of a classical string quartet achieve a coordinated musical performance by settling in advance on a common score. This common score then serves as a fixed template, which guides each individual player's performance on the crucial night. The classical performance is coordinated and kept on track by each player playing the template they've agreed on. The members of a jazz quartet, [by contrast], have a very different way of achieving musical coordination: instead of settling on a specific template for their performance, jazz musicians can rely on their improvisational skills.

As we can tell from the above remarks, classical music has to go by a common score as a fixed template, whereas jazz does not; the latter allows improvised variations. This is not to say that anything goes in jazz. It is still governed by a musical structure, or a norm in our terminology, that marks jazz from "a cacophony of divergent voices" (Schroeter & Schroeter, 2009, p. 17).

To some extent, the Canberrans' conception of a norm is analogous to the common score classical music goes by. If you do not go by the common score, you 'mess up' the classical music performance, as it were. Likewise, if you apply a term to
something in violation of a norm, you also ‘mess up’ your linguistic performance. However, it seems that the norm that governs our actual linguistic practices is not as strict, as we have demonstrated by the garden-variety of ways a term can be legitimately put to uses. We are free to play with words just as jazz musicians are free to put various variations on the tunes they play. In our actual linguistic practices, we are more like jazz musicians than classical ones.

True, it has to be admitted that there is still a norm that divides our linguistic practices from mumbo-jumbo just as there is still a norm that divides jazz from “a cacophony of divergent voices”. However, if what I have argued above is right, it is not the sort of clear-cut norm the Canberrans endorse. So if the claim of P (5.b) is construed as the claim that there is a norm of the kind the Canberrans endorse that governs the employment of moral terms, it may well come out to be false.

5.3 Is P (4.c) True?

P (4.c) is the following claim: if the necessarily true natural-moral conditional (NM) is not shaped, we can not use a moral term consistently and will thus violate the requirements of rationality. Let us call this claim the rational requirement thesis. Is the rational requirement thesis true? To answer this question, we need to look a bit closer at the relationship between the antecedent and the consequent of the thesis and what they mean respectively.

To begin with, what does the antecedent mean? That is, what does it mean to say NM is not shaped? As I have explained in chapter 3, it means that there is not a pattern in the various Ns the moral term refers to. How does this lead to the consequent that we can not use a moral term consistently and thus violate the requirement of rationality? Again, as I have explained in chapter 3, the Canberrans believe that if there is no pattern, then there would be no norm of meaning that governs the employment of a moral term. If so, we might well apply the term ‘right’ arbitrarily or inconsistently if we like.

I have explained that it is doubtful whether it is true that if there is no pattern, then there is no norm of meaning, the main reason being that it is doubtful whether a norm of meaning is constituted by a pattern that draws a sharp line between those items a term applies to and those to which it doesn’t.34

Here, I want to press two different points against the rational requirement thesis. As a reminder, rational requirement thesis is the view that if the necessarily true natural-moral conditional (NM) is not shaped, we can not use a moral term

34 As the graph we have seen in section § 5.2 indicates, the Canberrans think that the pattern draws a sharp line between items to which it applies to (the oval region in the graph) and those to which it does not (the region outside the oval).
consistently and will thus violate the requirements of rationality. By contraposition, it is logically equivalent to the view that if we can (and do in fact) use a moral term consistently and follow the rational requirement, then NM is shaped (or there is a pattern in the various Ns). Against this thesis, I will raise the following two objections: (5.3.1) Following the rational requirement, per se, does not get us to the conclusion the Canberrans want—there is a pattern in the various Ns. It is entirely compatible with the rational requirement that there is no pattern in the various Ns. Or so I will argue. (5.3.2) I contend that a Kripkean-style rule-following objection can be mounted against the rational requirement thesis in that all that rationality requires is consistently following a rule while remaining silent on what sort of rule we follow. Such being the case, I argue that there can be rules that we follow consistently, which do not give us the kind of pattern the Canberrans have in mind.

(5.3.1) Objection 1: Rationality Does Not Necessarily Give Us Patterns

First thing first, why do people think that rationality requirement can give us the pattern the Canberrans have in mind? They might reason as follows. Rationality requires us to use a moral term consistently; And to use a moral term consistently, as I have explained in chapter 3, means, pace Hare, that we have to apply it to anything that we judge to be descriptively similar in morally relevant aspects. For instance, if we apply the term 'wrong' to an action because it increases suffering and conduces to sadistic character, then we have to apply the term to any action that we judge to be descriptively similar in exactly these aspects. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be using the term ‘wrong’ in a consistent way. As rationality requires consistency, we might rightly be accused of being irrational if we do not use the term consistently. To paraphrase, in the case we are currently considering, rationality requires us to follow the following rule consistently:

\[ R1: \text{We ought to apply the term 'wrongness' to any act that increases suffering and conduces to sadistic character.} \]

To further illustrate, in a different case where we apply the term ‘wrongness’ to an act because it is lying, then rationality requires us to follow a different rule:

\[ R2: \text{We ought to apply the term 'wrongness' to any act that is a case of lying.} \]

In a still different case where we apply the term ‘wrongness’ to an act because it is killing, then rationality requires us to follow a still different rule:
R3: We ought to apply the term ‘wrongness’ to any act that is a case of killing.

As should have been familiar to the readers by now, the Canberrans reason that if ‘wrongness’ can be applied to the above acts mentioned in the three rules, there must be some pattern those acts have in common. For as I have mentioned in chapter 3, the Canberrans hold the view that ‘predication supervenes on nature’—if the same moral predicate applies to different acts, those acts must have some commonality; the things ‘wrongness’ can be applied to cannot be just “a mess” at bottom. If rationality requires us to follow R1, R2, and R3, and if there is some common pattern amongst the acts mentioned in R1, R2, and R3, let’s say, the common pattern of reducing utility, for instance, then rationality will also require us to follow the following rule:

R4: We ought to apply the term ‘wrongness’ to any act that reduces utility.

Without the common pattern of reducing utility, then there will not be R4. If there is no rule like R4, then this means, according to the Canberrans, we can apply the term ‘wrongness’ arbitrarily. However, as we have seen, this is not acceptable to the Canberrans. So they contend that there must be a rule like R4. If we don’t follow it, then we violate the requirement of rationality, because rationality requires us to use a moral term consistently. If there is a rule like R4 rationality requires us to follow, as it does, then there must be a pattern amongst the various Ns, for R4 is constituted by such a pattern. So from rational requirement, we can derive the existence of a pattern amongst the various Ns.

However, I think that the above line of reasoning is defective. Rational requirement taken by itself does not imply that there must be a rule like R4 which is constituted by a pattern amongst the acts mentioned in R1, R2 and R3. The Canberrans err in making the assumption that without a pattern amongst the acts in R1, R2, and R3, the rational requirement will break down and we can thus use a moral term arbitrarily, as if the rational requirement totally depended on there being a rule like R4 constituted by a pattern among the acts mentioned in R1, R2, and R3. However, this is not true. As we can observe from R1, R2 and R3, the rational requirement, per se, is not committed to any specific content of the rule. Rather it is, in Hare’s construal, a requirement of consistency. As long as we are following R1, R2 or R3 consistently, we will be meeting the requirement of rationality. Such being the case, it is entirely compatible with the requirement of rationality that there is no pattern or commonality amongst actions of increasing suffering and conducing to sadistic character, actions of lying, and actions of killing. The requirement of
rationality, per se, does not tell us whether there is any pattern amongst the three types of actions we apply the term ‘wrongness’ to.

One caveat to be noted is that without the pattern in the acts mentioned by rules like R1, R2 and R3, this doesn’t mean that we can use a moral term entirely arbitrarily in any way we like. Rationality still requires us to follow rules like R1, R2, and R3 consistently when we apply the term ‘wrongness’.

(5.3.2) Objection 2: Rule-Following

I think that a Kripkean-style rule-following objection can pose a serious threat to the rational requirement thesis. Here is why. Following the lines of reasoning Kripke (1982) uses in his brilliant work, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, in using a moral term consistently, we might have all along been following the following, a so-called ‘bent’ rule:

R4: We ought to apply the term ‘wrongness’ to any action that is wrong before time t and to any action that is right after time t.

The rationality requirement in itself does not rule out the above possibility. If so, in using the term ‘wrongness’ consistently and following the requirement of rationality does not mean that there is some commonality of the sort the Canberrans have in mind amongst the various Ns the term refers to. For, as a reminder, the sort of commonality they have in mind has to be able to unite the class of wrong actions and separate it from the class of right ones.

True, Kripke’s Wittgenstein (or Kripkenstein as it is sometimes called) eventually appeals to the iron-clad fact that in our practices (or forms of life in Wittgenstein’s language), we simply do not regard following R4 as rational (Kripke, 1982, chapter 3). Or to put it differently, on our community’s conception of rationality, following R4 is not rational. If Kripkenstein’s line of reasoning is right, then R4 does not pose any threat to the rational requirement thesis, the view that in following the rational requirement of using a moral term consistently, there must be a pattern amongst the various Ns the term refers to. For the following of R4 is simply a violation of the rational requirement of using a moral term consistently. In order to pose a real threat to the rational requirement thesis, we need a case in which we do follow the rational requirement of using a moral term consistently but there is no pattern amongst the various Ns the term refers to. R4 simply is not such a case. Such being the case, it may rightly be wondered why the Canberrans couldn’t adopt Kripkenstein’s view here in reply to the rule-following objection. I think there are two
reasons for this.

First, Kripkenstein’s view of rationality as being community-relative hardly squares with the Canberrans’ own view of rationality, especially that of Michael Smith’s. Famously, Smith (1994) argues that what is morally right in a circumstance C is simply what our fully rational selves want our non-fully-rational selves to do in C. If the idea of rationality turns out to be completely community-relative, then Smith will turn out to be a moral relativist, as what our fully rational selves want our non-fully-rational selves to do will become community-relative. That is, relative to community A, our fully rational selves may want our non-fully-rational selves to φ. But relative to community B, our fully rational selves may want our non-fully-rational selves not to φ. If Smith or the Canberrans in general want to stick to their moral realist position, then Kripkenstein’s reply, which is based on a community-relative conception of rationality, to the rule-following objection is simply not available to them.

Second, even if Kripkenstein’s reply to the rule-following objection is available to the Canberrans, Kripkenstein’s reply does not exclude the possibility that on some community’s conception of rationality, following R4 is rational. It merely excludes the possibility that on our community’s conception of rationality, following R4 is rational. Such being the case, I think it is fair to demand from the Canberrans an account as to why we should prefer one conception of rationality over another. Until such an account is produced, I think that the rule-following objection still looms large.

5.4 Is P (5.c) True?

P (5.c) is the claim that we can and do in fact use a moral term consistently and can thus obey the minimal requirement of rationality. This claim seems to be true. As I have explained in section § 3.3.3 of chapter 3, we do in fact use a moral term such as ‘wrong’ or ‘right’ consistently. We do not call an action of torturing a cat wrong and call another similar action right on pains of being irrational. In using a moral term consistently, we thus obey the requirement of rationality.

5.5 Is P6 True?

P6 is the claim that it is not the case that the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is not shaped. Recall that in chapter 3, section § 3.3.4, I mentioned that P6 follows validly from P4 and P5. So if P4 and P5 are both true, then P6 is true too. However, as I have shown, there is reason to doubt whether P (4.a), P (4.b) and P (4.c) are true. So there is reason to doubt that whether P6 is true too. Moreover, as I have also indicated,
there is reason to doubt whether P (5.b) is true. If so, it is even more doubtful whether P6 is true.

5.6 Is C2 True?

C2 is the claim that the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is shaped. Recall that in chapter 3, section § 3.3.5, C2 follows validly from P3 and P6. P3 is a tautology. However, as I have indicated in section § 5.5 this chapter, there is reason for us to doubt the truth of P6. So, it is also reasonable for us to doubt whether C2 is true.

5.7 The Examination of the Third Stage

First of all, let me remind you what the argument of the third stage is. It is the following:

P7: There is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx\(\rightarrow\)Mx)’. (C1)

P8: If there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx\(\rightarrow\)Mx)’, it must be shaped. (C2)

P9: If a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx\(\rightarrow\)Mx)’ is shaped, it is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle

P10: If there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx\(\rightarrow\)Mx)’, it is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle. (P8, P9 *Hypothetical Syllogism*)

C3: There is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle. (P7, P10 *Modus Ponens*); absolute principilism is true; particularism is thus falsified.

The above argument is valid. The important question for us is whether it is sound. As we can see, P7 and P8 are identical respectively with C1 and C2. As I have already argued, there is reason for us to doubt whether C1 and C2 are true. Such being the case, there is also reason for us to doubt whether P7 and P8 are true. So, there is already reason for us to doubt whether the above argument is sound.

5.8 Is P9 True?
The claim of P9 is as follows: If a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’ (NM) is shaped, it is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle. To determine whether the claim of P9 is true, it is obviously important for us to clarify the meaning of ‘shaped’ and the meaning of ‘moral principle’.

As should have been familiar to the readers by now, for a NM to be shaped is for there to be a pattern in the various Ns the moral term refers to. How do the Canberrans infer from this claim about there being a pattern in the various Ns to the claim that there is a moral principle? Well, for the Canberrans, for there being a moral principle is just for there being "patterned connections between descriptive ways things might be and moral ways things might be." Hence, P9 is true by definition.

5.9 Is P10 True?

P10 follows validly from P8 and P9. However, as I have demonstrated, there is no strong reason for us to believe P8. So there is no strong reason for us to believe that P10 is true.

5.10 Is C3 True?

C3 follows validly from P7 and P10. However, since it is doubtful whether P7 and P10 are true, they do not provide strong support for C3. It is therefore also doubtful whether C3 is true.

5.11 A Review of the Supervenience Argument

With all the holes in the supervenience argument identified, it is now time for us to do a bit of review to piece together the big picture. In what ways does the supervenience argument fail? Let me lay out the argument in front of you again and review the holes in each stage of the argument.

The Supervenience Argument:

First Stage:

P1: The thesis of moral supervenience is true.

P2: If moral supervenience is true, there is a necessarily true natural-moral
conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx → Mx)’.

C1: There is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx → Mx)’. (P1, P2 Modus Ponens)

The argument in the first stage is valid, but it is not sound chiefly because P2 is not true. As I have demonstrated, the Canberrans confuse the idea of moral supervenience and the idea of moral necessitation. While the idea of moral necessitation might well entail the consequent of P2, the idea of moral supervenience doesn’t. So, P2 is actually false. The argument in the first stage is therefore not sound. There is no strong reason for us to believe C1.

Second Stage:

P3: Either the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is shaped or (exclusive or) it is not shaped (or shapeless).

P4: If the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is not shaped, then there will be Absurd Consequences (i.e. (a) we cannot think or talk about morality; (b) a moral term does not have a correct criterion of meaning; (c) we can not use a moral term consistently and will thus violate the requirements of rationality).

P5: But Absurd Consequences are false (i.e. (a) we do think or talk about morality; (b) a moral term has a correct criterion of meaning; (c) we can and do in fact use a moral term consistently and thus obey the requirements of rationality).

P6: It is not the case that the necessarily true natural-moral conditional is not shaped. (P4, P5 Modus Tollens)

C2: The necessarily true natural-moral conditional is shaped. (P3, P6 Disjunctive Syllogism)

The argument in the second stage is valid but does not seem to be sound. As I have demonstrated, there is no strong reason for us to believe P4 is true, i.e. there is reason to doubt P (4.a) and P (4.c) respectively. There is also reason for us to doubt the claims of P (5.b). If so, there is no reason for us to believe P6, since P6 follows from P4 and P5. Such being the case, there is no reason for us to believe in C2 either, because it follows from P3 and P6.
Third Stage:

P7: There is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’. (C1)

P8: If there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’, it must be shaped. (C2)

P9: If a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’ is shaped, it is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle

P10: If there is a necessarily true natural-moral conditional of the form ‘(x) (Nx→Mx)’, it is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle. (P8, P9 Hypothetical Syllogism)

C3: There is a necessarily true natural-moral moral principle. (P7, P10 Modus Ponens); absolute principlism is true; (extreme) particularism is thus falsified.

The argument in the third stage is valid; however, there is reason to doubt whether it is sound. As I have demonstrated at stage 1 and stage 2, there is no strong reason to believe that C1 and C2 are true. That is to say, there is no strong reason to believe that P7 and P8 are true, since they are exactly identical respectively with C1 and C2. So, given our explanations at the first two stages, there are already some reasons for us to doubt whether the argument in the third stage is sound. Such being the case, I conclude that there is no strong reason for us to believe C3, the ultimate conclusion the Canberrans want to reach.

38 The pro tanto principlists may well appeal to the supervenience argument too. But presumably, the argument will face similar sorts of problems we mentioned in chapters 4 and 5. So I will not consider this possibility any further.
Chapter 6 The Argument from the Atomism of Reason

My goal has been to defend the claim of extreme particularism—the view that there are no necessarily true natural-moral moral principles, be they of the absolute kind or the pro tanto kind. In the previous two chapters, I have shown that the Canberrans’ supervenience argument fails to establish the existence of necessarily true natural-moral moral principles of the *absolute* kind. This, we should note, does not really disprove their existence. This is merely to say that one major argument that has been advanced to prove their existence is no good. Nonetheless, if I am right about this, the aim of defending extreme particularism is partly achieved since a major threatening attack on extreme particularism has been effectively deflected.

Now, to complete our defense of extreme particularism, we need to consider a different issue, the issue of whether there are necessarily true natural-moral moral principles of the *pro tanto* kind. Saying that there is no good reason for us to believe the existence of necessarily true natural-moral moral principles of the *absolute* kind is not the same thing as saying that there is no good reason for us to believe necessarily true natural-moral moral principles of the *pro tanto* kind, since they are different creatures. In fact, the pro tanto principlists contend that there are indeed moral principles of the pro tanto kind. They support their claim by the argument from the atomism of reason (I will explain what this argument is in section § 6.1). In this chapter, I will lay out what the argument from the atomism of reason is. In the next chapter, I will present objections to it. In the end, I argue that the argument from the atomism of reason is not a very persuasive argument. If I am right about this, then pro tanto principlism lacks strong support for it. We can thus be more confident about the claim of extreme particularism.

Before I enter into the discussion of the argument from the atomism of reason, however, I want to make explicit the connection between these two chapters (i.e. chapters 6 and 7) and the previous chapters. As I have clarified in chapters 1 and 2, there are various kinds of principlism corresponding to the kinds of moral principles they claim there are. My thesis focuses exclusively on the claims of two particular kinds of principlism—absolute principlism and pro tanto principlism. They are respectively the claim that there are necessarily true natural-moral principles of the absolute kind, and the claim that there are necessarily true natural-moral principles of the pro tanto kind. And it is important to emphasize that the central tenet of my thesis is to argue that there are no strong reasons for us to believe the claims of the above-mentioned two kinds of principlism. If I am right, then I think this would provide a forceful defense of extreme particularism—the view that there are no
necessarily true natural-moral moral principles, be they of the absolute kind or the pro tanto kind.

Chapters 3 to 5 focus on the supervenience argument, which the Canberrans invoke to justify absolute principlism—the view that there are necessarily true natural-moral *absolute* moral principles. However, as I have argued, due to the various holes it has, it does not work. But this does not mean that our defense of extreme particularism has finished. No, not yet. To complete its defense, one has to deflect not only the attack from absolute principlism but also the attack from pro tanto principlism as well. In this chapter and the next (i.e. chapters 6 & 7), I explore an argument that is meant to establish the truth of pro tanto principlism—the view that there are necessarily true natural-moral *pro tanto* moral principles. It is the argument from the atomism of reason. I will argue, however, that it is not a persuasive argument.

Now, with all the preliminaries in place, we can proceed to explain what the argument from the atomism of reason is.

### 6.1 Argument from Atomism of Reason

To begin with, what is pro tanto principlists’ argument from the atomism of reason? It can be presented roughly as follows:

**Argument from the Atomism of Reason:**

P1: The atomism of reason is true.

P2: If the atomism of reason is true, there are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles

C: There are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.

The above argument is apparently valid in its form. However, is it sound? In order for us to assess its soundness, there is apparently a key term we need to clarify, that is, the atomism of reason. In order for us to know whether P1 and P2 are true, we need to know what atomism of reason means.

### 6.2 Atomism of Reason

The atomism of reason is a theory of how (moral) reasons work. To a first approximation, it claims that reasons work in an atomistic way in the sense that their

---

39 According to Dancy (1993, p. 104), this argument provides the rationale for Rossian principlism.
status as reasons for or against an action remains constant, independent of the change of the contexts. To illustrate, on a certain interpretation of W. D. Ross (2002), the feature of keeping a promise constitutes a reason for performing the promised action and it always does. Its status as a reason for is never undermined.

Now, let me motivate the idea of the atomism of reason by way of an analogy. Let's look at the following example first.

**Height:** Bill's height is 200 centimeters. He is the tallest boy in Class A. One day, he transfers to Class B. Class B has a boy, Tom, whose height is 210 centimeters. Such being the case, Bill is not the tallest boy in Class B.

In the height case, whether Bill is the tallest boy in the class depends on the context, i.e. on which class he is in. He is the tallest boy in Class A, but he is not the tallest boy in Class B. Nevertheless, his height does not change according to context. Rather, it remains constant. It is just that in class B, his height is exceeded by Tom's. So while whether he is the tallest boy in the class depends on the context, his height does not. His height is *atomic* in the sense that it does not change according to the context.

Now, the atomism of reason contends that the way a reason works is quite similar to the way Bill's height works. Its status as a reason for (or against) remains constant in all contexts. Now, let's look at an example in support of this view.

**Promise:** You promise to meet your friend to have lunch together. Keeping you promise is the right thing for you to do. However, on your way to meet your friend, you happen to witness a car accident. Several severely injured victims need your help; if you do not stop and help them, they will die. Such being the case, keeping your promise is not the right thing for you to do.

In the promise case, whether keeping your promise is the right thing for you to do also depends on the context, just as whether Bill is the tallest boy in the class does. When you are in a normal context, keeping your promise is the right thing for you to do; however, when you are in a context where severely injured victims of the car accident are in desperate need for your help, it is not.

On the other hand, however, just as Bill's height does not change according to contexts, the feature of keeping a promise as a reason for does not seem to change its status as a reason for according to contexts, either. In other words, the feature of keeping a promise seems to be always a reason for. Even in the context of the car accident, the feature of keeping a promise still constitutes a reason for performing the promised action. It is just that it is outweighed by a weightier reason to save lives.
(This is why you still owe your friend an apology even if not keeping your promise to him is overall the right thing to do in the context of saving lives. If the feature of promise-keeping were no reason at all, no apology would be owed.) Its status as a reason for performing the promised action seems to remain constant in all contexts.

So the promise example seems to provide some support for the view of the atomism of reason, which we can formalize with more precision as follows:

**Atomism of Reason:** For all F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

The above thesis requires some clarification. What does it mean exactly? Let’s begin by using the above mentioned feature of keeping a promise to illustrate. If the feature of keeping a promise is a reason for performing the promised action in a normal circumstance, then for all other circumstances, if the feature of keeping a promise obtains, then the feature of keeping a promise is a reason for performing the promised action in those circumstances. To put it simply, the feature of promise-keeping, if it is a reason, is a reason for in all circumstances. In Dancy’s terminology (2004, p. 6), the feature of promise-keeping has a constant ‘positive valence’.

Another thing that may require some clarification is the word ‘feature’. What does it mean exactly? As I understand Dancy’s view (1993, pp. 73-74; 1999b, p. 25), he takes a feature to be a property of an action. An action can have many features or properties (I shall use ‘feature’ and ‘property’ interchangeably henceforth). Some of them are morally relevant; others are not. The morally relevant ones jointly determine the moral status of an action. For instance, to a first approximation, an action can have a property of being a lie and it can also have a property of saving lives, etc. These morally relevant properties that it has jointly determine its moral status.

### 6.3 Two Caveats

So far, we had been talking as if the way the feature of promise-keeping qua reason works is really analogous to the way Bill’s height works and it thus provides some support for the view of the atomism of reason, since its status as a reason for does not change according to contexts. However, this way of talking is, strictly speaking, wrong in two aspects.
First, there is a dis-analogy between the feature of promise-keeping and Bill’s height. That is, while Bill’s height remains constant in all contexts (or so we may assume), it is not really clear whether the feature of promise-keeping really retains its status as a reason for in all contexts, too. What the promise example shows at most is only that the feature of promise-keeping retains its status as a reason for in both the normal context and the context of a car accident. That is, the example provides us at most two contexts in which the feature of promise-keeping retains its status as a reason for. It seems to be a hasty generalization to infer from this example to the atomists’ view that the feature of promise-keeping is a reason for in all contexts in which it appears. In fact, there might even be good reasons for us to think that it is not a reason for in all contexts in which it appears. Consider the following example:

Immoral Promise: You promise to kill your friend’s political enemy for him.

In this example, it seems reasonable to say that the feature of keeping a promise is not a reason for performing the promised action. It is not as if the feature of keeping a promise is still a reason for performing the action but its moral significance is outweighed by that of a weightier reason against killing. The feature of promise-keeping in the immoral promise case seems to be no reason at all, or even a reason against performing the promised action, since the content of the promise is immoral. To put it differently, the fact that you made a promise with immoral content seems to be a reason against performing the promised action. So, it seems that the feature of promise-keeping can lose its status as a reason for in the context of immoral promise. Such being the case, it is not a good example to provide support for the claim of the atomism of reason. (In fact, it seems more like a counterexample against the claim of the atomism of reason.)

Second, as we presented the view of the atomism of reason, it is a universal claim about how all features qua reasons behave. Even if it is true that the feature of promise-keeping is a reason for in all contexts it appears, this shows at most that at least one feature is a reason for in all contexts. This does not in any way vindicate the atomists’ universal claim that all features behave in an atomistic way. Although it may well be contended that the fact that there is at least one feature that behaves in an

---

40 Here, the immoral promise example is meant to pump your pre-theoretical intuition. Some might have a different intuition and insist that the feature of promise-keeping is still a reason for performing the action; it is just that its moral significance is outweighed by that of a weightier reason against killing. I have to confess that I find this intuition somewhat incredible and do not share it. I even doubt if anyone really has it. Admittedly, there are cases in which the immorality of the promised action is milder such that the feature of promise-keeping is still a reason for performing the action, despite its content is immoral. For instance, you promise your friend to tell a lie to save him from undeserved embarrassment (Kagan, 1998, p. 125). But the immoral promise example we are considering here is nothing like this. Its content is a serious offense against morality.
atomistic way provides some support for the atomists' universal claim that all features behave in an atomistic way, the support it provides is clearly quite limited.

Now, we can summarize the above two points as follows:

(1) The atomism of reason is not clearly supported by the promise example.
(2) Even if it is, the support it receives is very weak.

In light of these two points, two sorts of reactions are initially plausible.

(1) It is useless to seek other examples to provide support for atomism of reason. For no matter how many examples you find, the second point mentioned above still looms large. If the failure of the confirmation theory in philosophy of science teaches us anything, it is this: no matter how many times a universal scientific law is confirmed by repeated well-controlled experiments, it is never verified (or proved to be true), since the scope of a universal scientific law is infinite and the number of confirming experiments is finite. Moreover, even if the experiments provide some support for the universal law, the support is very limited, given the universal scope of the universal law. Likewise, the universal unlimited claim of the atomism of reason will never come to be verified by limited number of examples. The support it receives from them is also very limited.

So in order for the claim of the atomism of reason to be warranted, the right thing to do here is not to find more other examples to confirm its claim but to restrict its unlimited scope. Instead of making a universal claim about how all features behave, it can weaken its claim to an existential claim about how some features behave. If some features can be found behaving in an atomistic way, this weakened variation of the atomism of reason can be vindicated. We can formalize the view of this weakened variation as follows:

Weak Atomism of Reason: For some (but not all) F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

(2) A second sort of reaction that is plausible, at least initially, is this. The

---

41 Here are Karl Popper’s (1968, p. 1) related remarks: “Now it is far from obvious, from a logical point of view, that we are justified in inferring universal statements from singular ones, no matter how numerous; for any conclusion drawn in this way may always turn out to be false: no matter how many instances of white swans we may have observed, this does not justify the conclusion that all swans are white.”
atomism of reason is completely unmotivated. Even the more restricted variation as mentioned above cannot be vindicated. For there are simply no features that behave in an atomistic way. For all features, there must be some contexts in which they change their status as reasons for to reasons against (or vice versa). (The example of immoral promise we mentioned above seems to bear a testament to this). Or to put it differently, no features, qua reasons, behave in an atomistic way. This is in fact the view of holism of reason. It can be expressed in a more formalized way as follows:

Holism of Reason: For no F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

The idea of holism of reason requires some explanation. Why is it called holism? One reason, I think, is that it is analogous in its broad outline to Quine's holism of meaning. According to Quine's holism of meaning, a concept does not have empirical content of its own that determines its meaning. Rather, its meaning is determined relative to the conceptual scheme it is embedded in. Analogously, according to holism of reason, no feature has its own constant valence. A feature can be a reason for in one case, but a reason against or no reason at all in another. (Or to put it in valence talk, it can carry a positive valence in one case, but carry a negative or neutral valence in another.) Its valence is determined relative to the context it is embedded in. Another reason for its name, I figure, is that a feature qua reason works in a holistic way in the sense that it is context-sensitive—it can change its valence from positive to negative (or negative to positive) in different contexts. To use the height case we mentioned in section § 6.2 to illustrate, the truth value of the statement 'Bill is the tallest boy in the class' also functions holistically in the sense that it can change from true to false (or from false to true) in different contexts. In one class, it is true that Bill is the tallest boy in the class. In another, it isn't. Likewise, according to holism of reason, a feature can be a reason for in one context, but not a reason for in another. Hence, the name 'holism' of reason.

6.4 Varieties of Atomism and Holism

Now, a bit of review is in place before we move on. Now, we have the following three theories of reason at hand.

Atomism of Reason: For all F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)
Weak Atomism of Reason: For some (but not all) F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

Holism of Reason: For no F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

As we can see from their formulations, the above three theories are distinguished from one another by their quantifiers. Or to put it in mundane language, they are distinguished from one another by the quantity of features that they contend behave in an atomistic way.

Now, remember that our goal in this chapter is to lay out the argument from the atomism of reason. Structurally, it is the following:

Argument from the Atomism of Reason:

P1: The atomism of reason is true.
P2: If the atomism of reason is true, there are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles
C: There are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.

So far, we have been trying to figure out how to understand 'the atomism of reason' in the above argument. We have argued by way of the immoral promise example that the atomism of reason, the claim that all features behave atomistically, does not seem to be a promising contender. The feature of promise-keeping is normally a reason for, but does not appear to be so in the context of an immoral promise. Hence, it provides a counterexample to the universal claim of the atomism of reason. Such being the case, a more promising contender seems to be the weak atomism of reason, the view that some features behave atomistically. Yet, as we can see from its formulation and the formulation of the holism of reason, the weak atomism of reason faces a threat from the holism of reason, since they are clearly incompatible. If the holism of reason is true, then the weak atomism of reason will be falsified. If the weak atomism of reason is falsified, then this would mean that the argument from the atomism of reason is doomed for failure, for the falsification of the weak atomism of reason means that the only possible candidate that remains to be the right sort of atomism turns out to be a
failure. Now, how do we proceed from here, if we want to know whether the weak atomism of reason is the right sort of atomism of reason to have in the argument from the atomism of reason? Of course, we have to know whether the weak atomism of reason is true, because that is simply the requirement of P1.

Such being the case, there are two possible ways to proceed, as far as I can see. One is to try to vindicate the claim of holism of reason. If its claim is vindicated, then the claim of the weak atomism of reason is automatically falsified (since they are clearly incompatible with each other). However, how can we vindicate the claim of holism of reason? Dancy (1993, 2004) tries to do this by giving many examples. However, this is not a promising route to take, for the claim of holism of reason is a universal one. Recall that it claims in effect that no features behave atomistically. It is equivalent to the universal claim that all features behave holistically (in the sense that a feature that is a reason in one case might not be so in another). It is impossible to vindicate the holists’ universal claim by appealing to a limited number of examples just as it is impossible to vindicate the atomists’ claim by doing so either.

A more promising way to proceed, I take it, is to try to vindicate the claim of the weak atomism of reason. Since its claim is an existential claim, it can be vindicated by a limited number of examples. If some convincing examples can be given, then its claim can be vindicated.

In fact, weak atomists have been trying to produce some convincing examples over the years to vindicate their claim. However, none of the examples is without controversy, or so I will argue. In what follows, we will examine these examples one by one. But before we do so, there is a caveat to be noted. Strictly speaking, the claim of the weak atomism of reason does not depend on any of the particular examples working in an atomistic way. Even if all of these examples turn out to work in a holistic way, the weak atomism’s claim that some features behave in an atomistic way might still hold. For it may well be the case that although those particular examples do not work in an atomistic way, some others might do; it is just that we have not found them. But still, the best way to vindicate the claim of the weak atomism is of course to display some features qua reasons that do behave in an atomistic way. If none of the features given by the weak atomists as examples supporting their claim really behaves in an atomistic way, this would of course make us doubt whether there are really any such features that behave atomistically. At least, there will be no good reasons for us to believe that there are. The claim of the weak atomism of reason will thus be cast into doubt.

Now, with all the above preliminaries in place, we can proceed to investigate whether the weak atomists can provide us with some convincing examples of the features that behave atomistically qua reasons. If they can, the weak atomism will be
proved to be true. In what follows, I will focus on three types of features weak atomists offer as examples of features that behave atomistically: (6.4.1) **Specified Features** (6.4.2) **Morally Thick Features** (6.4.3) **Morally Thin Features**

(6.4.1) **Specified Features**

On a certain interpretation of Henry Richardson’s *specificationism* (1990), it claims that specified features behave atomistically; that is, specified features qua reasons do not change their status as reasons for (or against) from one context to another; only unspecified features do. Take the feature of lying for instance. It can change its valence from negative to positive. In the normal context, it is a reason against, however, if we are playing a Taiwanese poker game called ‘bluffling’, then the feature of lying is not only not a reason against, it might even be a reason for since it is permitted by the rule of the game and makes the game more exciting. It seems fair to maintain that the feature of lying qua reason does not behave atomistically, since its status as a reason against is undermined in the context of playing a bluffing game. However, according to specificationism, the feature of lying qua reason behaves *non*-atomistically (or holistically) only because it is rather unspecified. Once it is specified as a feature of lying-in-a-normal-case-where-the-feature-of-playing-a-bluffing-game-is-not-involved, then it is always a reason against. Or alternatively, if the feature of lying has a positive valence in the bluffing game, then once it is specified as a feature of lying-in-a-bluffing-game, then it is always a reason for.

(6.4.1.1) **Cullity’s Normality Objection**

Cullity (2002) contends that there is a serious defect in the above line of reasoning. To use the example of lying to illustrate, he contends that the reason against lying in a normal case is just that the action has a feature of being a lie, but not that the action has a feature of being-a-lie-in-a-normal-case-where-no-feature-of-playing-a-bluffing-game-is-involved. Why? The chief reason for this, he contends, is because “the explanation it is rational to give of any phenomenon is relative to background expectations of normality” (Cullity, 2002, p. 178). He gives the following example to illustrate this point:

If the trees next to the vineyard normally flower before the vintage, it may be rational to appeal to the fact that they did not in order to explain why the vineyard suffered a lot of bird damage this year; but if not, it will not. If the trees

---

42 This line of reasoning is also pursued by Little & Lance (2008)
never flower before the vintage, it may be true that had they done so, there would not have been a lot of bird damage; but it does not follow that their not flowering before the vintage should be included in an explanation of the bird damage. (Cullity, 2002, p. 178)

The moral we can draw from the above example, Cullity thinks, is that “in general, it is fallacious to reason that if A would not have happened in the presence of B, the absence of B should figure in a rational explanation of why A happened.” (2002, p. 178) To be more concrete, it is fallacious to reason that if the bird damage would not have happened in the presence of the trees’ flowering, the absence of the trees’ flowering should figure in a rational explanation of why the bird damage happened. It is fallacious because when it is normal that trees do not flower, then the trees’ not flowering does not figure in a rational explanation of why the bird damage happened. Presumably, the bird damage does not always happen when the trees do not flower.

To apply the above moral back to the example of lying, if the feature of lying would not have a negative valence in the presence of the feature of playing a bluffing game, it is fallacious to reason that the absence of the feature of playing a bluffing game should figure in a rational explanation of why the feature of lying has a negative valence. Why is this fallacious? Well, to explain in detail, if the feature of lying *normally* has a positive valence, then if it does not, it may be rational to appeal to the absence of the feature of playing in a bluffing game to explain why this is so.

However, if the feature of lying normally has a negative valence, as it does, then it is not rational to appeal to the absence of the feature of playing in the bluffing game to explain why this is so, just as it is not rational to appeal to the absence of the trees’ flowering to explain why the bird damage happened when the trees normally do not flower. For the feature of lying does not always have a negative valence in a case where the feature of playing in the bluffing game is absent, just as the bird damage does not always happen when the trees do not flower. For instance, the feature of lying in the context of lying to a knave to save an innocent life might well have a positive valence, but it involves no feature of playing a bluffing game.

When the feature of lying normally has a negative valence, the rational explanation or reason we expect people to provide for why an individual feature of lying has a negative valence is simply because it is a feature of lying, not because it is a feature of lying-in-a-context-where-no-feature-of-playing-the-bluffing-game is involved. So to sum up Cullity’s discussions, the specified feature of lying in a normal context (where the feature of playing the bluffing game is absent) does not play the role of reason at all in a normal context. What plays the role of reason in a normal context is simply the feature of lying.

106
(6.4.1.2) My Criticism of Cullity’s Normality Objection

Despite the initial plausibility of Cullity’s objection, I think it ultimately fails for the following reason. It is true, as Cullity implicitly contends, that against the background that the feature of lying is normally wrong, the absence of the feature of playing a bluffing game is not sufficient for a rational explanation for why an individual feature of lying has a negative valence, just as against the background that the trees normally do not flower, the absence of the trees’ flowering is not sufficient for a rational explanation for why there is bird damage either. For there are many cases where there is no feature of playing a bluffing game involved, but still the feature of lying does not have a negative valence. For instance, the feature of lying in the context of lying to save an innocent life might well have a positive valence, but it involves no feature of playing a bluffing game.

However, the absence of the feature of playing a bluffing game is nevertheless necessary, to explain why a feature of lying has a negative valence. For if the feature of playing a bluffing game were present, then the feature of lying would not have a negative valence. So it seems that the absence of the feature of playing a bluffing game should figure into a rational explanation for why a feature of lying has a negative valence even when it normally has a negative valence. It is true, as Cullity (2002, p. 174) noted, that practically speaking, it might sound odd to offer as a reason why an individual feature of lying has a negative valence by claiming that we are in a context where there is no feature of playing a bluffing game involved. However, as Cullity himself admitted, a specified feature when offered as a reason need not sound like music to our ears. So Cullity’s objection that specified feature cannot be reasons in a normal context cannot be sustained.

(6.4.1.3) My Objection to Specificationism: ‘Specification’ Unspecified

I think that the real problem with specified feature qua reason lies in the fact that there is little evidence for us to believe that once a reason gets fully specified, its valence does not change. To begin with, specification comes in degrees. It is not clear what really counts as a specified feature. True, ‘the feature of lying-in-a-bluffing-game’ is more specified than ‘the feature of lying’. Nevertheless, its valence still can change. There is usually no reason against lying when we are playing a bluffing card game. However, if doing so will for some reason cause a participant to hurt the other participants when he finds out he is being lied to, then perhaps lying in a bluffing game does not always carry a neutral or positive valence; it may carry a negative
valence, too. So, does ‘the feature of lying-in-a-bluffing-card-game’ count as a specified feature? If yes, the view that specified features work atomistically is apparently falsified, for as we have seen, even the more specified feature can change its valence too. If the answer is no because the feature is not specified enough, then there will be the further question of whether all the possible exceptions it might encounter can be exhaustively included into its more detailed specification. There does not appear to be any evidence that they can. Before such evidence is produced, I think it is premature to conclude that there are specified features that behave atomistically.

Perhaps some might counter that what we have shown so far at most is just that there is no specified enough feature of lying such that it can behave atomistically, but this does not mean that we cannot find other features that are specified enough that can do so. Fair enough. In fact, Cullity (2002, p. 182), despite his earlier attack on the idea of seeing specified feature as a reason in a normal context, gestures at the feature of inflicting suffering on others for your own enjoyment as always carrying a negative valence. However, the question to ask here is: does the feature include a law executioner’s taking delight and comfort in seeing that the unjust and devious suffer what they deserve? If yes, it is not entirely clear to me that such a feature always carries a negative valence. If no, the burden is on the weak atomists who hold the view that specified features behave atomistically to tell us exactly what such a specified feature includes. So still, the evidence is not conclusive for the claim that there is a specified feature that behaves atomistically.

(6.4.2) Morally Thick Features

On a certain interpretation of Crisp (2000) and McNaughton and Rawling (2000), they hold the view that morally thick features behave atomistically qua reasons. Let’s call them thick feature atomists for short. They attempt to justify this view by way of a distinction between primary reason and secondary reason.\(^{43}\) In what follows, I will, first of all, recap the idea of morally thick features. Then, I will proceed to explain why Crisp, McNaughton and Rawling think that the distinction between primary reason and secondary reason can help to justify their view. To a first approximation, the idea is that if morally thick features are primary reasons, they will behave atomistically since primary reasons behave atomistically. Finally, I will argue that there is no good reason for us to believe that morally thick features are primary reasons.

\(^{43}\) Crisp (2000) makes a similar distinction, using a different terminology. His distinction is between ultimate reasons and non-ultimate reasons. But nothing hangs on using any particular terminology.
(6.4.2.1) Morally Thick Features Recapped

First thing first, morally thick features, as we have explained in chapter 1, are features that are thick with cultural implications such that only insiders sharing the same culture can fully understand their meaning. Take filial piety for instance. Only people who share the Chinese culture can understand why a seemingly preposterous dance performance of an old man dressed up in colorful costumes counts as an act of filial piety when performed before his aged parents. To put it differently, only people with the relevant cultural vision can tell whether the dance is an act of filial piety. The lesson here can be generalized. It also takes people from the same culture to know whether telling falsehood is an act of dishonesty, or whether eating animals is an act of cruelty, etc, since moral features such as dishonesty or cruelty are also thick with cultural implications.

(6.4.2.2) Primary Reason VS. Secondary Reason

According to Crisp (2000) and McNaughton and Rawling (2000), the realm of (moral) reasons can be divided into primary reasons and secondary reasons. A feature is a primary reason for or against acting in a certain way if it is always a reason for or against acting in that way, whereas a feature is a secondary reason (or non-primary) for or against acting in a certain way if it “brings about” a primary reason for or against acting in that way. For instance, the feature of lying is merely a secondary rather than a primary reason against performing the action, because it is not always a reason against taking the action. In the case where we are playing a Taiwanese card game called ‘Bluffing’, according to the rules of which lying is permitted, the feature of lying is not a reason against lying in the card game at all; indeed, it even provides a reason for doing so because doing so adds to the excitement of the card game. The feature of lying only provides a reason against taking that action when it “brings about” a feature of dishonesty, which is a primary reason, according to McNaughton and Rawling, against performing the action.

(6.4.2.3) Are Morally Thick Features Primary Reasons?

Now, as we have seen above, primary reasons behave atomistically. So if morally thick features are primary reasons, then they will certainly behave atomistically. The natural question to ask here is: are morally thick features primary reasons?

In order to answer this question, we need to focus in a bit on the concept of a
primary reason. What does it mean exactly? From the discussion above, we can gather one of its central characteristics:

(i) **Explanation:** It provides an explanation for why a feature qua secondary reason can have different valences

The above characteristic requires some explanation. Let’s use the feature of lying to illustrate. As we have argued, it can be a reason against in one context, but not so in another. Presumably, it does not do so by magic. So, how it can switch its valence in different contexts requires some explanation. The primary role of a primary reason is to provide such an explanation. A natural explanation would be along this line: the feature of lying is a reason against if it brings about a feature of dishonesty whereas if it does not, then it is not a reason against. Here, the feature of dishonesty plays the role of a primary reason, for it helps to explain why the feature of lying switches its valences in different contexts. In order for the feature of dishonesty to play the role of a primary reason, it is supposed to carry a constant negative valence. Otherwise, it is hard to explain why, when it is brought about, the feature that brings it about is conferred the status of being a reason against. Here, we can derive a second characteristic of a primary reason:

(ii) **Atomic:** Any feature that plays the role of a primary reason behaves atomistically.

In the case we have just given, the feature of dishonesty does seem to play the role of a primary reason, because it seems to provide a nice explanation for why the feature of lying switches its valence (i.e. it seems to satisfy (i)). Such being the case, the feature of dishonesty seems to be a primary reason. And according to (ii), it behaves atomistically. From this, we can conclude that at least the morally thick feature of dishonesty behaves atomistically. The same line of reasoning may well be applied to other morally thick features as well. Take the feature of cruelty for instance. It seems to provide an explanation for why the feature of causing pain has a negative valence in the case of torturing a cat but not so when it is constitutive of giving a shot to a child to inoculate him against bird flu. It has a negative valence in the former case because it brings about the feature of cruelty whereas in the latter case it does not because it does not bring about the feature of cruelty. So feature of cruelty seems to play the role of a primary reason too, and thus seems to behave atomistically. To conclude, it seems that morally thick features qua reasons play the role of primary reasons and thus have a constant valence.
My Objection to Thick Feature Atomism

The thick feature atomists’ line of reasoning can be reconstructed and summarized as follows:

**Stage 1:** There is a distinction between primary and secondary reasons. The primary reason plays the functional role of explaining the valence-switching phenomenon of secondary reasons. If there is no primary reason, the valence-switching phenomenon of secondary reasons will be left explained, which is apparently absurd. So there must be some features that play the role of primary reason.

**Stage 2:** Whatever plays the role of primary reason must have a constant valence. For if it did not, it would lose its explanatory power and hence could not be a primary reason. From the examples we have seen, morally thick features seem to play the role of primary reason because they seem to provide good explanations for the valence-switching phenomenon of secondary reasons. So, morally thick features must have a constant valence.

I think that there is something wrong about both stages. Let me explain. First of all, what’s wrong with stage 1 is the statement, “If there is no primary reason, the valence-switching phenomenon of secondary reasons will be left explained”. This is certainly not the case. The valence-switching phenomenon may well be explained by the feature’s sensitivity to the context. Take the feature of lying for instance. It is a reason against in a normal context, but it is not so in the context of playing a bluffing game. The change of the context explains the change of valence. So even if there is no such thing as primary reason, the valence-switching phenomenon can still get explained. There is no need to invoke the notion of primary reason in the first place unless we think that the explanation for the valence-switching phenomenon can only be provided by a primary reason. However, there is no good reason to think so.

On the other hand, even if the notion of primary reason is needed to explain the valence-switching phenomenon, it is not clear that morally thick features play the role of primary reasons. Morally thick features do not provide a good explanation for the valence-switching phenomenon as they firstly appear. This is where stage 2 gets it wrong. Take the feature of dishonesty for instance, it is claimed by the thick feature atomists that when it is brought about, it makes the feature of lying to be a reason against. However, this is not always the case, there are cases in which the feature of
dishonesty is brought about but the feature of lying seems to be not a reason against, or at least, not clearly. It seems that telling your three-year-old kid Santa Claus is coming to town on Christmas eve is dishonest as you clearly know there is no Santa Claus. However, it is not clearly the case that the feature of dishonesty makes the feature of lying as such wrong-making, especially if you make up yourself in the appearance of Santa Claus and show up in front of your kid on Christmas Eve. Similar things could be said about the feature of cruelty. It is claimed by thick feature atomists that when the feature of cruelty is brought about, it makes the feature of causing pain to be a reason against. When it is not brought about, the feature of causing pain is not a reason against. Again, this is not clearly the case. There are cases in which the feature of cruelty is brought about, but the feature of causing pain is not a reason against, or at least, not clearly. For instance, causing pain to an infantry soldier by ordering him to inhale tear gas in the gas chamber is cruel, but it is not clearly a reason against, especially when it is part of the training and the soldier is about to be sent to the battlefield of Iraq. So I suspect that morally thick features do not play the role of primary reasons, for they do not really provide a good explanation, contrary to what they might appear initially, for why a feature as secondary reason changes its valence. It is not as if when the features of dishonesty or cruelty are brought about, the features that bring them about will necessarily have a negative valence, as it is implicitly contended by thick feature atomists. So I suspect that morally thick features in general cannot claim to have the constant valence primary reasons have.

(6.4.2.5) Is the Feature of Injustice Exceptional?

Here, we have to note that although in the last sub-section, § 6.4.2.4, I have argued that there is no good reason to believe that morally thick features such as cruelty or dishonesty play the role of primary reasons, it can still be coherently maintained that there is good reason to believe that other morally thick features do. In fact, Crisp (2000, p. 37) contends that the feature of injustice, as a morally thick feature, plays the role of a primary reason. It is somewhat exceptional amongst the morally thick features, in that unlike other morally thick features, it seems to provide a good explanation for why some features as secondary reasons change their valences. For instance, it seems to provide a good explanation for why returning what one has borrowed is a reason for in a normal context but not so when the thing borrowed is stolen. The former case does not bring about a feature of injustice whereas the latter does. So the feature of injustice seems to provide a good explanation for why the
feature of returning what one has borrowed can have different valences. However, like all other morally thick features we have discussed, I suspect that there are also cases in which the feature of injustice is brought about, but this does not make the feature of returning what one has borrowed a reason against. For instance, returning a stolen thing to your thief friend brings about a feature of injustice, however, returning a stolen thing might not be a reason against when it is the only way to save your thief friend’s mother, and especially when you know that the owner of the stolen thing couldn’t care less about it. So the fact that a feature brings about the feature of injustice does not provide a good explanation for why the feature is a reason against (or why the feature has a negative valence), because as the example shows, there are cases in which the feature of injustice is brought about but this does not make the other feature a reason against.

However, Crisp (2000, p. 37) takes issue with the above line of reasoning. This is due to the thesis of the unity of virtue he implicitly holds. The idea is that the requirements of virtues (or at least the core ones) must be of a unity and cannot conflict with each other. Hence, if an action satisfies the requirement of one virtue, it must satisfy the requirements of other virtues as well. The thesis of the unity of virtue can be stated as follows:

The Unity of Virtue: An action cannot satisfy the requirement of one virtue without satisfying the requirements of all virtues.\textsuperscript{45}

There can be two interpretations of this statement. On a strong interpretation, the unity of virtue implies that if an action has the feature of justice, it has the feature of other virtues such as benevolence, kindness or honesty as well. That is, whenever I perform a just action, I perform an action of benevolence, kindness or honesty as well. However, this strong interpretation seems somewhat incredible, as an action of justice might involve nothing about truth-telling at all. It is not clear how it can necessarily be an action of honesty as well. So this strong interpretation of the thesis of the unity of virtue seems to be a non-starter. However, there is another weaker interpretation Crisp can reasonably adopt. On the weaker interpretation, the unity of virtue does not imply the above. Rather, it implies that if an action has the feature of justice, it must satisfy the requirement of other virtues in the sense that it cannot violate them. So when I perform a just action, I do not thereby perform an action of benevolence and kindness, but it is impossible for my action to violate the requirements of benevolence and kindness. So the idea of a just Scrooge (someone whose actions are just but not benevolent and kind) is just incoherent.

\textsuperscript{45} Cf. Penner (1973), Wolf (2007)
According to the unity of virtue thesis as elaborated above, Crisp (2000) contends that it cannot be the case that returning the stolen thing to save your thief friend’s mother, while being a feature of benevolence, brings about a feature of injustice. For this implies that the requirement of benevolence conflicts with that of justice. To be more specific, it implies that while the feature of benevolence requires returning the stolen thing to your thief friend, the feature of justice requires the opposite. (This is why returning the stolen thing, while fulfilling the requirement of benevolence, brings about a feature of injustice.) But this just conflicts with the thesis of the unity of virtue, for the thesis of the unity of virtue says that the requirements of virtue cannot conflict.

Such being the case, Crisp maintains that to think that the feature of justice requires *not* returning the stolen thing to your thief friend in such a context is to misunderstand the meaning of justice. It requires no such thing, in view of the fact that returning the stolen thing to your thief friend can save his mother’s life. Hence, returning the stolen thing to your thief friend in such a context does not really bring about a feature of injustice. So it is not a good (counter)example against seeing the feature of injustice as providing a good explanation for the valence-switching phenomenon. The claim that whenever the feature of injustice is brought about, it makes the feature that brings it about a reason against can still go through.

In reply to Crisp, I go along with Nussbaum (1986) in rejecting the thesis of the unity of virtue. As Nussbaum correctly points out, the understanding of virtues in a way such that they can never conflict often requires distorting the meaning of the virtues. She illustrates this point by Sophocles’s *Antigone*. As Creon, one of the chief protagonists in the play, serves as a representative of the city, loyalty requires him not to honor treachery by arranging for Polynices’ corpse to be buried within Attic territory. But on the other hand, as a family member, familial benevolence requires him to arrange for the burial. Such being the case, the audience would expect to find in Creon, as Nussbaum puts it, “an extremely painful tension between these two roles and requirements.” But to their surprise, what they would see is “a complete absence of tension and conflict.” For Creon’s use of the virtuous terms is “wrenched away from their ordinary use, so that they apply to things and persons simply in virtue of their connection to the well-being of the city, which Creon has established as the single intrinsic good.” Nussbaum (1986, p. 55) continues:

[Creon] uses the full range of the traditional ethical vocabulary—but not in the traditional way. These words no longer refer to features of the world that are separate from and potentially in conflict with the general good of the city; for Creon acknowledges no such separate goods. Through this aggressively
revisionary strategy, he secures singleness and the absence of tension. (emphasis added)

Similarly, holding the view that the feature of justice requires returning the stolen thing to your thief friend to save his mother, I suspect, commits one to the same sort of “revisionary strategy” Creon commits himself to. It ameliorates the conflicts by distorting the meaning of justice such that it can never conflict with the requirement of benevolence. Although the requirements of justice and those of benevolence are in harmony in many cases, there is no good reason for us to believe that they always are.

(6.4.2.6) A Caveat

A caveat to be noted here is that the discussion of the morally thick features involves a lot of examples that are meant to pump the readers’ intuitions. These examples might be controversial. Some readers might have very different intuitions. However, I want to point out that these examples are not so much meant to destroy the claim of thick feature atomists as to cast some doubt on it. To the extent that the examples we gave are controversial, this is sufficient for our purpose. For it means that thick feature atomists’ case is not entirely clear.

(6.4.3) Morally Thin Features

Some might argue that although morally thick features might not behave atomistically, morally thin features do. Let’s call those who contend that morally thin features behave atomistically the thin feature atomists for short. As we have explained in chapter 1, morally thin features are features that are thin with cultural implications such that even an outsider can know what they mean. Typical examples are rightness (or wrongness) and goodness (or badness). It does not take an insider to know that (moral) rightness and goodness means, inter alia, the thing to be done.

Thin feature atomists’ claim is not much discussed in the literature, perhaps because it seems to be trivially true. The feature of (moral) rightness and goodness qua reason seems to be always a (moral) reason for. Once an action has the feature of (moral) rightness or goodness, this simply constitutes a (moral) reason for doing it. Having said so, it is important to note that Simon Kirchin is a rare exception who takes exception to the thin feature atomists’ claim. Indeed, Kirchin (2007, pp. 31-32) gestures at the possibility that the feature of goodness may not behave atomistically. It may not even be a reason, under the ‘buck-passing account’. Here is what he says:
Some might wish to defend a buck-passing account of goodness. Instead of goodness being a feature that can generate reasons, it is rather a feature that is nothing over and above a summation of some other features, such as kindness and justice, that a possible course of action might have and, hence, by itself goodness cannot generate reasons to act. Any reasons there are to pursue the action stem from its kindness, not from its goodness (Hence, when considering what reasons one has to act, goodness 'passes the buck'.)

If Kirchin’s remark is right, then thin feature atomists’ claim about the thin feature of goodness always being a reason for may well be falsified. However, their claim about the thin feature of rightness always being a reason for can still go through.

(6.4.4) Summary

In this section, section § 6.4, we have been considering whether the view of the weak atomism, the view that some features behave atomistically, can be vindicated. Three sorts of features are invoked to support this view: specified features, morally thick features and morally thin features.

So far, we have argued that there is no good reason for us to believe that specified features behave atomistically and that the case for morally thick features behaving in such a way looks pretty suspicious. The only clear exception is perhaps the morally thin features, especially the thin feature of moral rightness. It seems to behave atomistically and thus seems to support weak atomists’ claim that some features behave in an atomistic way. Such being the case, ‘the atomism of reason’ in the argument from the atomism of reason can seem to be interpreted as the weak atomism of reason (or as thin feature atomism in particular).

However, in the next section, section § 6.5, I will argue that neither thick feature atomism nor thin feature atomism is the right sort of atomism to have in the argument from the atomism of reason, since even if they are true, what they establish are moral-moral moral principles. They cannot establish the conclusion of the argument, i.e. pro tanto principlists’ claim that there are natural-moral moral principles of the relevant kind.

6.5 The Varieties of Atomism Required by the Argument

Now, with all varieties of atomism in place, we can further elucidate the argument from the atomism of reason. As a reminder, the argument can be stated as follows:
Argument from the Atomism of Reason:

P1: The atomism of reason is true.
P2: If the atomism of reason is true, there are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.
C: There are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.

What sort of atomism we have discussed is required by the argument? To answer this question, it is important for us to remember the chief purpose of the argument. Its chief purpose is to establish pro tanto principlists’ claim that there are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles. So now the question can be re-construed as the following question: what sort of atomism can help to establish the pro tanto principlists’ claim that there are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles? Now, our choices are as follows:

Atomism of Reason: all features behave atomistically.
Weak Atomism of Reason: some (but not all) features behave atomistically.
   Specificationism: specified features behave atomistically.
   Thick Feature Atomism: morally thick features behave atomistically.
   Thin Feature Atomism: morally thin features behave atomistically.

Which amongst the above choices is the right sort of atomism to have in the argument from the atomism of reason? Apparently, the right sort of atomism has to be true. This is what the first premise (P1) of the argument requires. And as we have argued in sections §§ 6.3 and 6.4, there does not appear to be any good reason for us to believe that atomism of reason or specificationism is true. (As a reminder, atomism of reason faces the counterexample of immoral promise whereas specificationism has difficulty clarifying the notion of a specified feature.) Although I have also cast my doubts on thick feature atomism in section § 6.4, I shall let it pass the test at this stage, for I don’t think it can survive the next test, or so I will argue. So now, by method of elimination, we are left with the choices below:

Weak Atomism of Reason: some (but not all) features behave atomistically.
   Thick Feature Atomism: morally thick features behave atomistically.
   Thin Feature Atomism: morally thin features behave atomistically.

Now, which amongst them can satisfy the second premise (P2) of the argument? That
is, which amongst them, if true, will establish P2’s consequent that there are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles? To answer this question, some preliminary work is necessary. To begin with, as a reminder, if a feature behaves atomistically, this just means that the feature has a constant valence. Take the feature of lying for instance. If it behaves atomistically, this just means that the feature of lying has a constant negative valence or, to put it differently, the feature of lying is always wrong. If the feature of lying is always wrong, then a corresponding pro tanto moral principle that says so is true. If it is true, it is necessarily true, because the feature of lying is always wrong. Besides, the corresponding pro tanto moral principle is a natural-moral moral principle, because it connects a natural feature, the feature of lying, with a moral feature, the feature of wrongness.

With the above preliminary in place, we can now proceed to examine whether thick feature atomism and thin feature atomism are the right sorts of atomism to have in the argument from the atomism of reason. Let’s start with thick feature atomism. As we have mentioned in the above preliminary, if a feature behaves atomistically, this just means it has a constant valence. So, if a morally thick feature behaves atomistically, this just means that it has a constant valence. Take the feature of injustice for instance. If it behaves atomistically, this just means that it has a constant negative valence or it is always wrong. If so, then a corresponding pro tanto moral principle that says so is true. Now, here comes the rub: is it a natural-moral moral principle? If it is not, then thick feature atomism does not really satisfy the requirement of P2, for P2’s consequent is that there are natural-moral moral principles of the relevant kind. Unfortunately, the sort of moral principles thick feature atomism establishes is not natural-moral moral principles. Rather, they are what we call moral-moral principles, for they connect a morally thick feature, the feature of injustice in the current case, with a morally thin feature, the feature of rightness in the current case. So even if thick feature atomism is true, the moral principles it establishes are not the sort of moral principles we want. So it is not the right sort of atomism to have in the argument from the atomism of reason.

A similar line can be run against the idea that thin feature atomism is the right sort of atomism to be had in the argument from the atomism of reason. For even if morally thin features behave atomistically and thus have a constant valence, the sort of moral principles thin feature atomism establishes are moral-moral principles, for they connect morally thin features, the features of rightness or goodness in the current case, with the same sort of morally thin features, the features of rightness or goodness. Since the kind of moral principles required by the argument are the natural-moral ones, thin feature atomism is not the right sort of atomism to have in the argument from the atomism of reason, either.
Now, by method of elimination, we are only left with the following choice:

**Weak Atomism of Reason:** some (but not all) features behave atomistically.

Can it pass the test by satisfying P2? One thing we can learn from the failure of thick feature atomism and thin feature atomism to be the right sort of atomism is that in order for any variety of atomism of reason to establish the right kind of moral principles, the *natural-moral* ones, it has to be about the behavior of natural features. For only when natural features behave atomistically would it be possible for the kind of atomism of reason in question to establish *natural-moral* moral principles. Take the feature of lying for instance. It is a natural feature. If it behaves atomistically, then, as we have mentioned, it has a constant valence, or to put it differently, it is always wrong(-making), and a corresponding moral principle that says so is true. And the corresponding moral principle is a *natural-moral* one because it connects a natural feature, the feature of lying in the current case, with a moral feature, the feature of wrongness. Such being the case, if weak atomism is to be the right sort of atomism of reason to have in the argument, it seems plausible to think that there is at least the following constraint it has to satisfy: it has to be about the behavior of a natural feature. So it seems that weak atomism has to be interpreted in the following way in order for it to be the right sort of atomism:

**Natural Feature Atomism:** natural features behave atomistically.

If the above doctrine is true, then we can get *natural-moral* moral principles of the relevant kind. It can pass the test by satisfying P2. Now the question is: is it true? Or to put it differently, does it satisfy the requirement of P1? I will postpone the discussion of question until next chapter. For present purpose, we need only to point out that the right sort of atomism need not be a *universal* claim as implied by natural feature atomism. For the consequent of P2 is an *existential* claim but not a *universal* one. It claims in effect that there are *some* moral principles of the relevant kind. So, so long as there are *some* natural features that behave atomistically, then it would follow from this that there are *some* corresponding natural-moral moral principles of the relevant kind. This would suffice for the purpose of the argument from the atomism of reason. Such being the case, the right sort of atomism to be had in the argument might well be the following:

**Weak Natural Feature Atomism:** some (but not all) natural features behave atomistically.
In chapter 7, I will discuss several objections to natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism. For now, let’s just keep in mind that natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism seem to be the only promising candidates that remain at the current stage. If they turn out to be false, or not properly supported by any evidence, then the prospect for the argument from the atomism of reason to establish pro tanto principlism looks bleak.

6.6 The Step from Atomism to Pro Tanto Principlism

Before we move on to the next chapter to discuss the objections to the argument from the atomism of reason, there is one issue that needs to be further clarified. That is, what is the argument from the atomism an argument for? The argument from the atomism of reason, as we presented it, is an argument that has been advanced to establish pro tanto principlism. However, we have to note that the idea of the atomism of reason actually underlies many kinds of principlism we discussed in chapters 1 and 2. If so, why is it invoked to provide exclusive support for pro tanto principlism? Why not appeal to it to support other kinds of principlism, especially absolute principlism, which is one of the major concerns in this thesis? In short, the step from atomism to pro tanto principlism needs to be clarified.

To address the above-mentioned issues, the logical relations between the atomism of reason and these various kinds of principlism need to be clarified. Here, there are several things we need to take note of. First, since we have argued that only natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism remain to be plausible candidates for the right sorts of atomism to be had in the argument from the atomism of reason, in what follows we shall only focus on their relations with various sorts of principlism. Second, since the two major kinds of principlism, i.e. absolute and pro tanto principlism, we are concerned with are both of the necessary natural-moral kinds, in what follows, when we consider how natural feature atomism and weak feature atomism logically relate to various kinds of principlism, we will operate on the assumption that these principlisms are of the necessary natural-moral kinds, too. The only difference between these various kinds of principlism lie in whether they are of the absolute or the non-absolute kind. Now, with the above two points in mind, we can proceed to clarify how natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism relate to various kinds of principlism.

(6.6.1) pro tanto principlism
Sufficient: natural feature atomism, and weak natural feature atomism
Necessary: weak natural feature atomism

Pro tanto principlism is the view that there are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles. As we have argued in section § 6.5, both natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism, if true, are sufficient to establish pro tanto principlism. On the other hand, weak natural feature atomism (but not natural feature atomism) is a necessary condition for pro tanto principlism. For pro tanto principlism is an existential claim, it would only take some natural features instead of all natural features to behave atomistically to establish its truth. However, if no natural features behave atomistically, then it would not be clear how pro tanto principlism can be true. So, weak natural feature atomism is a necessary condition for pro tanto principlism.

(6.6.2) other-things-being-equal principlism

Sufficient: natural feature atomism, and weak natural feature atomism
Necessary: weak natural feature atomism

Other-things-being-equal principlism is the view that there are other-things-being-equal moral principles such as ‘other things being equal, lying is morally worse than not lying’. Suppose that other things can indeed be held equal, then the most plausible explanation for the truth of the principle ‘other things being equal, lying is morally worse than not lying’ is that the feature of lying is always wrong-making whereas the feature of not lying is always right-making (or at least morally neutral). So the truth of the other-things-being-equal moral principle presupposes the fact that there must be some features that behave in an atomistic way. So if there are some true other-things-being-equal moral principles, as other-things-being-equal principlism implies, this means that there must be at least some natural features that work in an atomistic way. So weak natural feature atomism is necessary for the truth of other-things-being-equal principlism. If no features behave atomistically, it would not be clear how other-things-being-equal principlism could be true.

On the other hand, both natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism seem sufficient to establish the truth of other-things-being-equal principlism (on the supposition that other things can indeed be held equal). For instance, suppose that the feature of lying is always wrong-making whereas the feature of not lying is always right-making (or morally neutral), then surely when other things are held equal, then lying is morally worse than not lying. Then, the corresponding
other-things-being-equal moral principle that claims so is true.

(6.6.3) absolute principism

Sufficient: none
Necessary: weak natural feature atomism

Absolute principism, as we presented it in chapter 1, is the view that there are absolute moral principles such as ‘lying is wrong’. Apparently, neither natural feature atomism nor weak natural feature atomism suffices to establish its truth. For they only claim respectively that all or some features, when functioning as a reason, always carry the same moral valence. They do not claim that an action always carries the same moral valence or property. An action can have many features such that it may well be the case that one of its features is constantly right-making but the action, due to the other features it has, is not overall right. For instance, it may well be the case that the feature of promise-keeping is constantly right-making but the action of promise-keeping is not because it might involve other features such as the feature of disregarding the victims of a car accident who are in desperate need for help, as mentioned in our earlier example, such that the action of keeping the promise is not right in that context.

On the other hand, however, weak natural feature atomism is necessary for the truth of absolute principism. For if absolute principism is true at all, there must be some reasons for us to perform (or avoid) the sort of actions enjoined (or prohibited) by the true absolute moral principles. For instance, if there is a true absolute moral principle against killing, then there must be a constant reason against killing. If no features carry a constant valence in different contexts, viz. if weak natural feature atomism is false, then it is not clear how there can be a constant reason against killing. So if there are some absolute moral principles, there must be at least some features that carry a constant valence. That is, the truth of absolute principism must depend on the truth of weak atomism of reason.

(6.6.4) ceteris paribus principism

Sufficient: none
Necessary: weak natural feature atomism

Ceteris paribus principism, as supported by Little and Lance (2008), is the view that there are true ceteris paribus moral principles, such as ‘ceteris paribus, lying is wrong’.
It means that, according to Little and Lance, it is in the nature of the feature of lying that it is wrong-making. However, neither natural feature atomism nor weak natural feature atomism suffices to establish the truth of ceteris paribus principlism. Why? Well, this is because both kinds of atomism of reason, as we presented them, are claims of de dicto necessity, whereas the claim of ceteris paribus principlism is a claim of de re necessity. Since a claim of de dicto necessity does not entail a claim of de necessity, neither natural feature atomism of reason nor weak natural feature atomism is sufficient for ceteris paribus principlism. Take the feature of lying to illustrate this. Let’s suppose that both natural feature atomism and weak natural are true about it such that the way it behaves is atomistic. Does this mean that ceteris paribus principlism is true? No, it doesn’t. If the feature of lying behaves atomistically, this means that it is wrong in all contexts. We can translate this claim into the following de dicto claim of necessity: necessarily, if x is a feature of lying, then it is wrong-making. By contrast, the claim of ceteris paribus principlism, when construed in terms of the nature of a thing, is, I take it, a claim of de re necessity. Its claim that it is in the nature of the feature of lying that it is wrong-making can be understood as the claim that if x is a feature of lying, then it is necessarily wrong-making. The de dicto claim expressed respectively by natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism does not suffice to establish the de re claim of ceteris paribus principlism, for the former does not carry any ontological commitment to the nature of a thing. Let me illustrate this with an analogy.

(1) Necessarily (The Queen of England is a queen)

(2) The Queen of England is necessarily a queen.

(1) is a de dicto claim whereas (2) is a de re claim. The truth of (1) does not suffice to establish the truth of (2). In fact, while (1) is true, (2) is actually false. It is certainly not the case that the Queen of England is necessarily a queen. She might not be a queen should the royal system be abolished in England. (Or to put it differently, being a queen certainly is not the nature of the Queen of England.) Likewise, to return to our own case, the de dicto claims of both kinds of atomism do not suffice to establish the de re claim of ceteris paribus principlism. For just as (1) might be true while (2) comes out to be false, it might well be the case that the de dicto claim of natural feature atomism or weak natural feature atomism is true while the de re claim of the ceteris paribus principlism is false. Neither natural feature atomism nor weak natural feature atomism is sufficient to establish ceteris paribus principlism.

However, weak natural feature atomism seems necessary for the truth of ceteris
paribus principlism. Let's stick with our example of the feature of lying to illustrate this. If the feature of lying is de re necessarily wrong-making, as ceteris paribus principlism claims, then de dicto necessarily it is wrong-making. For it seems incoherent to maintain that it is in the nature of the feature of lying that it is wrong-making, as the de re necessity claim implies, and that it is possible that it is not wrong-making. If so, it seems impossible that the de re necessity claim of ceteris paribus principlism is true while the claim of weak natural feature atomism is false. For there must be some features, when functioning as reasons, that work in an atomistic way in order for ceteris paribus principlism to be true at all. Weak natural feature atomism is a necessary condition for ceteris paribus principlism.

How about natural feature atomism, is it necessary too? No, it is not, for ceteris paribus principlism is an existential claim whereas natural feature atomism is a universal claim. It need not be the case that all features have to behave atomistically in order for the existential claim of ceteris paribus principlism to obtain.

(6.6.5) that’s-it principlism

Sufficient: none
Necessary: weak natural feature atomism

That’s-it principlism, as endorsed by Holton (2002), is the view that there are some true that’s-it moral principles, such as ‘if x is killing and that’s it, then x is wrong’. As we have explained in chapter 2, the that’s-it moral principle only has a truth value in the context of an argument. To use the true that’s-it moral principle about killing to illustrate, it is true when an action has the feature of killing and that’s it (or there are no more morally relevant features). It is not clear how the truth of natural feature atomism or the truth of weak natural feature atomism, is sufficient to establish the truth of that’s-it principlism. Let’s suppose that natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism are true about the feature of killing such that it has a constant negative valence in all contexts. However, this in itself does not tell us anything about the moral status of the action of killing, which is what that’s-it moral principle purports to tell us. So, neither natural feature atomism nor weak natural feature atomism seem to be a sufficient condition for that’s-it principlism. However, the weak natural feature atomism is necessary for that’s-it principlism. For if that’s-it principlism is true at all, there must be some features that behave in an atomistic way. Let’s take a true that’s-it moral principle about killing to illustrate. It says that if an action has the feature of killing and that’s it, then it is wrong. If the feature of killing were not constantly wrong-making, it would not be clear how the that’s-it moral
principle about killing could be true. So that’s-it principlism is built upon the truth of weak natural feature atomism.

(6.6.6) *prima facie principlism*

Sufficient: none
Necessary: none

Prima facie principlism is the view that there are true prima facie moral principles. Remember that we construe ‘prima facie’ as meaning ‘at first glance’. So a prima facie moral principle which claims that ‘lying is prima facie wrong’ is tantamount to the claim that ‘at first glance, lying is wrong’. Suppose that this moral principle is true. Its truth has nothing to do with either natural feature atomism or weak natural feature atomism. For the prima facie principle is a generalization about people’s psychology. People typically think that lying is wrong at first glance. By contrast, both kinds of atomism, if they are true of the feature of lying, claim that the feature of lying in fact has a constant negative valence, not just at first glance. It may well be contended that the truth of weak natural feature atomism provides the most plausible explanation for why people typically regard certain features as right-making or wrong-making at first glance. This can be readily granted. However, even if weak natural feature atomism is true of the feature of lying, it still does not suffice to establish the truth of prima facie principlism, in that it may well be the case that, for instance, the feature of lying is in fact constantly wrong-making while people do not typically regard lying as wrong at first glance (due to their evil nature or whatever). On the other hand, neither natural feature atomism nor weak natural feature atomism is necessary for the truth of prima facie principlism. For those who think that there are true prima facie moral principles can allow that none of the features work in an atomistic way. That is, they can allow that a feature behaves in a non-atomistic (or holistic) way even if there is a true prima facie moral principle claiming that an action having that feature always appears to have a certain valence. For instance, they might well contend that (a) the action of lying always appears wrong while maintaining that (b) the feature of lying operates in a non-atomistic way and changes its valence from negative to positive with the change of the context. There is nothing incoherent in this contention for (a) is, as we have argued, a generalization about people’s psychology whereas (b) is a claim about how a feature operates.

As as side note, a reviewer objected that our understanding of prima facie principles here as generalizatoins about people’s psychology means that they can only be *contingently* true at their best. Hence, it is not the sort of necessary principlism I
should be concerned with. In reply, I agree that prima facie principles as
generalizations about people’s psychology can only be contingently true in the sense
that their truth depends on people’s psychology. However, there is a sense of
‘necessary’ in which prima facie principles may well be necessary. For instance, one
may well hold to the following prima facie principle: lying is necessarily prima facie
wrong. Should this principle turn out to be true, its truth is necessary.46

(6.6.7) dispositional principlism

Sufficient: none
Necessary: none

Dispositional principlism, as endorsed by Luke Robinson (2006), is the view that
there are true dispositional moral principles such as ‘lying is dispositionally wrong’.
The idea is that moral properties are dispositional properties rather than occurrent
properties. They are only manifested when certain background conditions are satisfied.
However, neither from natural feature atomism nor from weak natural feature
atomism can we infer that an action has dispositional moral properties. Let’s suppose
that natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism are true of the feature
of lying. It may well be the case that the feature of lying behaves atomistically while
the action has no dispositional moral properties. So neither natural feature atomism
nor weak natural feature atomism is a sufficient condition for dispositional
principlism. On the other hand, neither natural feature atomism nor weak natural
feature atomism is a necessary condition for dispositional principlism, either. For it
may well be the case that there are true dispositional moral principles while both of
them are false. To put things differently, it may well be the case that some actions
have constant dispositional moral properties, whereas no features have constant
valence. To illustrate, let’s suppose, for instance, that the feature of lying does not
have a constant valence (i.e. it is wrong-making in some contexts and right-making in
some others.) In those contexts where it is right-making, the action that instantiates it
might still have a dispositional property of moral wrongness that is not manifested in
those contexts. What we say about the feature of lying can be generalized to other
features as well. So dispositional principlism is compatible with the negation of
natural feature atomism or the negation of weak natural feature atomism. In other
words, neither natural feature atomism nor weak natural feature atomism is necessary
for dispositional principlism.

46 Cf. Dancy (2008), pp. 116-117
Default principlism, as we presented it in chapter 2, is the view that there are true default moral principles, such as 'lying is wrong by default'. Neither natural feature atomism nor weak natural feature atomism is a sufficient condition for default principlism. Let's suppose that they are true of the feature of lying. Even so, it may still be the case that the feature of lying is constantly wrong-making but it is not wrong by default. In some interpretation, Alan Thomas (2007), for instance, has argued that the feature of lying, when viewed in isolation from the context, is on the same par with the feature of the color of one's shoelace in terms of valence.^ It does not carry any particular valence by default. Nevertheless, this does not rule out the possibility that the feature of lying when instantiated in the concrete context is constantly wrong-making. On the other hand, neither natural feature atomism nor weak natural feature atomism is necessary for default principlism. The truth of default principlism does not rule out the possibility that no features carry a constant valence. In fact, as we have explained in chapter 2, the idea of a feature having a valence by default allows for the possibility that it might lose its default valence in a different context due to the presence of other features. For instance, even if the feature of the color of one's shoelaces is morally neutral by default, this does not exclude the possibility that it can be morally significant when it figures into the content of a promise. What is said here about the feature of the color of one's shoelaces can be generalized to apply to other features too. So the truth of default principlism depends on neither natural feature atomism nor weak natural feature atomism.

(6.6.9) Morals

Now, we can draw some morals from our classification of how natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism relate to various kinds of principlism. First, for all those kinds of principlism for which weak natural feature atomism is a necessary condition, i.e. pro tanto principlism, other-things-being-equal principlism, absolute principlism, ceteris paribus principlism, and that's-it-principlism, if weak natural feature atomism turns out to be false, they will apparently all be falsified. Actually, falsifying the view of weak natural feature atomism is exactly what an

^ Here is what Thomas (2007, p. 83) says, “One can hardly hope to classify certain ethically relevant considerations as ‘central’ or ‘peripheral’ independently of any given particular pattern of inference.”
objection from Dancy's holism of reason aims to do. The objection claims, roughly, all features, when functioning as reasons, behave in a holistic (or non-atomistic) way (I will discuss this objection in chapter 7).

Second, for all those kinds of principlism for which neither natural feature atomism nor weak natural feature atomism is a necessary condition, i.e. prima facie principlism, dispositional principlism and default principlism, a refutation of them does not thereby refute those kinds of principlism. Namely, those kinds of principlism might still be true while natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism are proved to be completely false. For our purpose, we can safely ignore the issue of whether these kinds of principlism are true, since we focus exclusively on absolute principlism and pro tanto principlism in this thesis, both of which depend on weak natural feature atomism. So what is important for our purpose is rather to investigate whether weak natural feature atomism is true. If it is not, then absolute principlism and pro tanto principlism will be falsified. As I will show in next chapter, there is no good evidence for thinking that weak natural feature atomism is true. If I am right, then absolute principlism and pro tanto principlism are on shaky grounds.

Third, as we have seen, even if natural feature atomism or weak natural feature atomism is true, they are not sufficient to establish absolute principlism. By contrast, however, they are sufficient to establish pro tanto principlism. This provides an explanation as to why the argument from the atomism of reason is invoked to justify pro tanto principlism rather than absolute principlism. To justify absolute principlism, on the other hand, the Canberrans’ argument from supervenience, as we have discussed in chapters 3, 4 & 5, is more fitting (although, as we have seen, it ultimately fails).

Fourth, as I have shown, both natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism suffice to establish not only the truth of pro tanto principlism, which is one of our major concerns in this thesis, but also the truth of other-things-being-equal principlism as well, which is not one of our major concerns in this thesis. This should not concern us too much, however, unless other-things-being-equal principlism is wildly implausible. Then there will be the question of “proving too much”, in David Lewis’s apt terms (2000, p. 49). For if other-things-being-equal principlism is wildly implausible, this tells us that natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism are implausible too. In this thesis, however, I leave open the question of whether other-things-being-equal principlism is implausible. For even if it is not, I think there are other problems with natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism, which I will discuss in chapter 7. So my rejection of natural feature atomism and weak natural atomism does not rely on the implausibility of other-things-being-equal principlism.
With the above morals in mind, we can now proceed to investigate whether the argument from the atomism of reason (of the right sorts) can succeed.
Chapter 7 Objections to the Argument from
the Atomism of Reason

In chapter 6, we have clarified what the argument from the atomism of reason is. As a reminder, it takes the following form:

P1: The atomism of reason is true.
P2: If the atomism of reason is true, there are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles
C: There are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.

To recap the main points we discussed in chapter 6, remember that the only promising candidates that remain for the right sorts of atomism to be had in the argument from the atomism of reason are *natural feature atomism* and *weak natural feature atomism*. As a reminder, they are the following views:

**Natural Feature Atomism**: all natural features behave atomistically.

**Weak Natural Feature Atomism**: some (but not all) natural features behave atomistically.

Or to put it in a more formalized way:

**Natural Feature Atomism**: For *all* natural F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

**Weak Natural Feature Atomism**: For *some* (but not all) natural F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

They are the only promising candidates that remain because they are the only sorts of atomism that satisfy the requirement of P2, i.e. if they are true, they will give us the right kinds of *natural-moral* moral principles required by the argument. Or to put it differently, as we demonstrated in section § 6.6 of chapter 6, they are sufficient
conditions for the claim of pro tanto principlism.

Now, remember that to be the right sorts of atomism in the argument from the atomism of reason, they not only have to satisfy the requirement of P2. Perhaps more importantly, they have to satisfy the requirement of P1. That is, they have to be true. Otherwise, the argument from the atomism is not a sound argument. It will not thus provide support for pro tanto principlism. Now, the crucial question to ask here is: are these two sorts of atomism true?

In the first part of this chapter, I will discuss two objections to the claim that they are true. They are respectively the objection from holism of reason and the objection from counterexamples. These two objections, however, are toothless. At the very most, the objection from counterexamples shows that natural feature atomism is false; however, they leave the claim of weak natural feature atomism unscathed. Or so I will argue. So at the very least, it seems fair to say that there is no good reason for us to believe that weak natural feature atomism is not true. Such being the case, weak natural feature atomism of reason may well be the right sort of atomism to have in the argument from the atomism of reason. If so, when ‘the atomism of reason’ in the argument from the atomism of reason is interpreted as weak natural feature atomism, it might seem that it might well come out to be a sound argument.

However, we have to note that the fact that the above two objections to weak natural feature atomism are not compelling does not mean that there are therefore good reasons to believe that it is true. In fact, in the second part of this chapter, I will argue that it is completely unmotivated. For the best case that has been presented to support it is not very convincing. Or so I will argue in section § 7.4. If I am right about this, there is even good reason for us to doubt whether weak natural feature atomism is the right sort of atomism for the argument from the atomism of reason. But let’s suppose for the sake of the argument that both natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism are true and that the argument from the atomism of reason is therefore sound, does this mean victory for pro tanto principlism? I doubt it too. For, as I will argue in section § 7.5, both natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism face a problem of individuation of features. Due to this problem, their claims are trivially true in the sense that they do not really tell us whether natural features behave atomistically or not.

Finally, in section § 7.6, I will present a critique of the argument from the atomism of reason from a dialectical perspective. I will argue that even if it is a sound argument, it is hard to win over its opponents, because it uses as its premise a claim that is not well-motivated and its opponents simply rejects—the atomism of reason, regardless of whether it is interpreted as natural feature atomism or weak natural feature atomism. If so, the argument from the atomism of reason fails to be a
persuasive argument.

7.1 Holism of Reason

The first objection to the claims of natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism comes from Dancy's holism of reason. As a reminder, holism of reason is the view that no features behave atomistically or, to put it in a different way, all features behave holistically. As we mentioned in chapter 6, its view can be stated as follows:

Holism of Reason: For no F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

As we can see from the formulation of holism of reason, it contends that no features behave atomistically. Surely natural features are no exceptions. So, if holism of reason is true, then of course, both natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism will be falsified, as they are respectively the claims that all and some natural features behave atomistically. But now, the question is: is there any reason for us to believe that holism of reason is true?

Dancy (1993, pp. 60-61) appeals to some examples to motivate the idea of holism. Here are some adapted ones for our purpose. A feature of lying is normally a reason against, but it is not when we are playing a bluffing game. A feature of promise-keeping is normally a reason for, but it is not when the content of the promise is evil. A feature of causing pain is normally a reason against, but it is not when giving a child a shot to inoculate him against a deadly disease. These examples seem to demonstrate that the way a feature qua reason works is holistic, i.e., there must be some circumstances in which a feature qua reason might lose its status as a reason for or against. However, this way of looking at things faces a serious challenge from Joseph Raz.

(7.1.1) Raz's Objection to Holism: Intelligibility of Value

Raz (2000) contends that holism of reason is fundamentally wrong because it violates a thesis of what he dubs as the intelligibility of value. Take the feature of lying to illustrate this. According to Dancy's holism of reason, the feature of lying has a negative valence in a normal case but not so when we play a bluffing game. It even has a positive valence because it makes the game much more fun and exciting.
However, Raz contends that it cannot be the case that in the two cases of lying, it is
the same feature of lying at work. If so, the feature of lying really fails to motivate the
idea of holism, because as we can observe in our formulation of holism, it is really the
same feature F that operates as reason in both circumstances C and C*. As Dancy
(2004, p. 7) himself puts it, “a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at
all, or an opposite reason in another”

Why does Raz think that it cannot be the same feature of lying at work in both
circumstances? As I have mentioned, Raz’s critique of holism is based on a view
which he dubs as “the intelligibility of value”. The view can be formulated as follows:

Intelligibility of Value: “[T]here is nothing ‘arbitrary’ in the domain of
value... There is an explanation for everything, an explanation for why what is
good is good, what is bad is bad, etc.” (Raz, 2000, p. 50; also quoted in Cullity,
2002, p. 175)

Given the above view, it is not enough to claim that a feature can carry a negative
valence in one case but a positive one in another. There must be some differences in
these cases that explain the different valences (Cullity, 2002, p. 175). Can Dancy
provide a satisfactory explanation?

According to Dancy, what explains the differences in valences of the feature of
lying is the enabler. In the case of lying in the bluffing game, the feature of lying has
a positive valence because of the presence of the enabler—the feature of playing
bluffing. The enabler enables the feature of lying to have a positive valence. On the
other hand, in a normal case of lying, due to the lack of such an enabler, the feature of
lying does not have a positive valence.

However, Raz argues that Dancy’s way of looking at things is wrong, because
what constitutes a reason for lying in the case of lying in the bluffing case is not just
the feature of lying simpliciter, but the feature of lying-in-the-bluffing-game. The
feature of lying by itself cannot constitute a reason for in the bluffing game. For if the
feature of lying were not accompanied by the feature of playing the bluffing game, it
in itself would not suffice to constitute a reason for lying in the bluffing game. So the
feature that constitutes a reason for lying in the bluffing case is different from the one
that constitutes a reason against lying in a normal case.

In reply, Dancy contends that despite the fact that it requires both the feature of
lying and the feature of playing a bluffing game to work together in order for the
feature of lying to have a positive valence in the case of lying in a bluffing game,
nevertheless they still play different roles. The feature of lying plays the role of a
reason whereas the feature of playing a bluffing game plays the role of an enabler. An
enabler, even when it is included into the content of a reason, still retains its role as an enabler. It does not therefore become a reason by itself.

To illustrate this, Dancy (2000, p. 153) provides the following example. Suppose that ‘ought implies can’. The fact that you can do A is not among the reasons why you ought to do A. It merely enables other features to be the reasons they are, viz. the reasons why you ought to do A. To be more concrete, “if I were not alive”, Dancy (2000, p. 153) contends, “the reasons that there are for me to help the needy would not be able to be the reasons they are. But this does little to show that among the reasons why I should help the needy is the fact that I am alive.” That is, the fact that I am alive merely plays the role of an enabler. It in itself is not a reason. Likewise, it may well be contended that the feature of playing the bluffing game is merely an enabler that enables the feature of lying to have a positive valence. However, it in itself is not a reason.

So to sum up, even though the differences in moral valences of the feature of lying might well have to be explained by the differences of the features of the situation, as Raz contends, nevertheless they might well be explained by the differences of the enablers. The features that function as reasons in both cases, according to Dancy, are still the same.

(7.1.2) My First Objection to Holism: Individuation of Features

Having argued that the objection from Raz’s thesis of the intelligibility of value fails, I have to make it clear that I do not thereby think that Dancy’s holism is right. In fact, I think there is good reason for us to think that it is wrong. Let me recap a bit before I move on to show why it is wrong.

Remember that Dancy’s holism contends that it is the same feature of lying that has different valences in different cases. In reply to Raz’s criticism, Dancy contends that what explains its different valences in different cases is the presence or the absence of an enabler. The enabler in itself is no part of the feature that functions as a reason.

However, in order for Dancy to be able to say so, he has to presuppose that the enabling feature can be individuated from the lying feature that functions as a reason. Why? For if the enabling feature cannot be individuated from the lying feature that functions as a reason, it is not clear how Dancy is justified in claiming that it is the lying feature alone, rather than its fusion with the enabling feature as a whole, that functions as a reason.

However, in the lying in the bluffing game example, it is not clear that the feature of lying can be individuated from the feature of being in the context of playing
the bluffing game, i.e. from the so-called enablers. This is due to what I call the ‘embedded character’ of the feature of lying:

**Embedded Character:** The feature of lying is always embedded in a context which involves, inter alia, the following factors: a liar, her motive for lying, a person being lied to and the consequences of the lie. (Tsu, 2009, p. 90)

To use the case of lying in a bluffing game to illustrate, the feature of lying involves the following factors in that context: the liar is a participant in the bluffing game, her motive for lying is, inter alia, to win the game, the person being lied to is another participant in the game, and the consequences of the lie are the increase of excitement of the game. Two things to be noted about these factors.

1. **Enabler:** These factors, with their concrete contents, are what enable the feature of lying to have a positive valence in that particular context. They are the so-called enablers. It is not hard to imagine that if they were to take on a different content, let’s say, if the person being lied to were not a participant in the game, then the feature of lying might well take on a different moral valence.

2. **Constitution:** These factors, without taking on any particular concrete contents, are essential to the feature of lying. To clarify, they are not only essential to the feature of lying in the bluffing game but essential to any feature of lying in any other contexts. They are in fact what constitute the feature of lying. If the feature of lying were stripped of these factors, say, if it did not involve a liar at all, then it would not be a feature of lying at all. It would not make any sense to maintain that a feature of lying, absent these factors, could still carry a moral valence. Absent these factors, the feature of lying would disappear, as it were.

For the ease of exposition, I shall henceforth call those factors without any particular concrete contents the *general factors* and those factors that have taken on particular concrete contents the *particular factors*. To summarize, whereas the general factors are what constitute the feature of lying in general, the particular factors are enablers to enable the feature of lying in the bluffing case to have a positive valence.

It is interesting to note here that the general factors are also enablers in some way. For without these general factors, there would not even be a feature of lying in the bluffing game. It would then not even make sense to maintain that the feature of lying in the bluffing game carries a positive valence, for there would be no such feature.
The presence of these general factors enables, as it were, the presence of the feature of lying. It also enables, albeit in a derivative way, the feature of lying to have a positive valence. Absent these general factors as enablers, the feature of lying in the bluffing game would not be able to have a positive valence, for, as we have mentioned, there would be no such a feature of lying at all. And since the feature of lying is constituted by these general factors, no feature of lying can be individuated from these general factors qua enablers.

For our purpose, however, the major issue that concerns us is not whether the feature of lying in the bluffing game can be individuated from its general factors qua enablers, but whether it can be individuated from its particular factors qua enablers. Remember that our purpose is to argue that the feature of lying in the bluffing game cannot be individuated from its particular factors qua enablers so as to prove that the feature of lying in the bluffing game is different from the feature of lying in a normal case.

Now, with the above preliminaries in place, we can proceed to address the question of whether the feature of lying in the bluffing game can be individuated from its enablers, i.e. from its particular factors. The answer, I suspect, is 'no'. I take it that if the feature of lying in the bluffing game can be individuated from its enablers, this implies that the feature of lying in the bluffing game can exist without any enablers, for they are different things. To use an analogy to illustrate, if a table can be individuated from its attendant chairs, this implies that the table can exist without any chairs, for the table and chairs are different things.

However, it simply cannot be the case that the feature of lying in the bluffing game can be individuated from its enablers (or its particular set of particular factors), unless the feature of lying is a feature in the abstract. For in order for the feature of lying in the bluffing game to be individuated from its enablers, this would require us to imagine a feature of lying sitting in vacuum, as it were, without any particular factors. Even if there is such an abstract feature of lying, it cannot be the sort of feature Dancy has in mind. For it is not clear whether such an abstract feature of lying is capable of having any moral valence (since it lacks any particular factors that determine the valence of a feature of lying), let alone change its valence from negative to positive in different contexts.

Three comments are in place here. First, if the feature of lying, qua reason, cannot be individuated from the enablers in its embedded context (which I have shown by the bluffing example above), then the enablers are certainly part of the feature of lying in the context of the bluffing game. To use an analogy to illustrate, if chai tea cannot be individuated from the melted sugar in it, then the melted sugar in it is certainly part of chai tea. Given that the feature of lying, qua reason, cannot be
individuated from the enablers in its embedded context, I think that Dancy is not entitled to claim that the enablers cannot be part of the feature of lying qua reason. For if the feature of lying is a reason, then surely the enablers, as part of the feature of lying, are part of what constitutes the reason.

Second, worse still for Dancy, if the feature of lying, due to its embedded character, cannot be individuated from its enabling particular factors, then the feature of lying qua reason cannot be the same in the bluffing case and in a normal case. This is because the enablers of the feature of lying in the bluffing case are absent in the feature of lying in the normal case. So, two features of lying, instead of one, are actually at work here. If so, the lying example often employed by Dancy to support his holism of reason actually does not support it, for his holism of reason requires that the same feature of lying can have different valences in different contexts whereas, as we have seen, in the lying example, what are actually at work are two different features of lying with different constituents.

Finally, it may well be objected that the truth of holism of reason does not depend on this one example of lying. Our argument so far has only illustrated that the example of lying fails to support the claim of holism of reason. However, this does not mean that holism of reason itself is false.

However, if this is the objection, it will be not very useful in salvaging Dancy’s holism of reason. This is because the embedded character is not the unique character of the feature of lying. Rather, it is a general character, I suspect, of all the features in the likes of stealing, or killing, or helping, or telling the truth, etc. Our argument above can be generalized to apply to these other features as well. Take the feature of killing for instance. If it is enabled to have a positive valence in the context of self-defense, then it cannot be individuated from its enabler(s) in that context either.

**Dancy’s Objection Reconsidered**

A bit of review is in place here before we move on. So far, we have argued that the feature of lying in the bluffing game, qua reason, cannot be individuated from those its enabling particular factors in the embedded context. Thus, it cannot be maintained as Dancy does that it is the feature of lying alone, rather than its fusion with the enablers as a whole, that carries a moral valence in the context of the bluffing game.

How about Dancy’s objection earlier that even if the enabler is included into the reason, it in itself does not play a role as a reason and what plays the role of reason is still the feature of lying? With our analysis above, I think we are in a position to contend that this objection is misguided. As I have argued, the feature of lying cannot
be individuated from its enabler in the embedded context (vice versa). Such being the case, it does not make sense to speak of the existence of the enabler independent of the feature of lying. So surely the enabler in itself does not play a role as a reason, but not for the reason Dancy suggested, i.e. not for the reason that the enabler is a feature independent of the feature of lying and plays its role as an enabler in that particular context. Rather, it is for the reason that the enabling feature cannot be individuated from the feature of lying. The enabler is an inalienable part of the feature of lying in the particular context. So the enabler, in itself, does not play the role of a reason. Rather, as we have argued, it is the fusion of the feature of lying and its enabler that plays the role of reason in the bluffing game.

It might be thought that our line of reasoning might resuscitate Raz’s claim. However, it does not. For Raz also supposes with Dancy that the enabler can be individuated from the feature that functions as a reason. The difference between his view and Dancy’s lies in the fact that he thinks that the enablers are also part of the reason, whereas Dancy is of the view that they are not. However, if our line of reasoning above is correct, they are both wrong in assuming that the enabler can be individuated from the feature that functions as a reason in the embedded context.

(7.1.3) My Second Objection to Holism: No Enough Motivation

Despite my first objection to holism above, let’s suppose with Dancy for the sake of the argument that it is really the same feature that is at work as a reason in different cases, does this mean that the examples he gave can prove holism of reason to be true? I think the answer is ‘no’. Here is why. Although those examples do seem to show us that there are some natural features that behave holistically, yet the claim of holism of reason is a universal claim. It claims in effect that no features behave atomistically. This is logically equivalent to the universal claim that all features behave holistically. This universal claim cannot be proved to be true by just a few examples. I think that it is a hasty generalization to infer from these few examples to the holists’ universal claim that all features behave holistically. There is really no enough motivation for holism of reason. And since Dancy’s holism of reason cannot be proved to be true, an objection based on it is therefore not a very forceful one. At the very least, it is not conclusive against the claims of natural feature atomism or weak natural feature atomism.

7.2 Counterexamples

48 The relation of individuation is symmetrical. If A can be individuated from B, then B can also be individuated from A. On the other hand, if A cannot be individuated from B, then B cannot be individuated from A, either.
A second way to object to natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism is by giving counterexamples. Due to the intuitive plausibility of the examples we mentioned in section 1, it is generally accepted that there are at least some natural features that behave in a non-atomistic way. Take the natural feature of causing pain for instance. As we have mentioned in section 1, the feature of causing pain is normally a reason against; however, it might not be so when it is constitutive of giving a child a shot to inoculate him.

However, if we are right about the embedded character of a feature qua reason, as we have pointed out in the last section, then the feature of causing pain in a normal case is really different from the feature of causing pain in the case of inoculating a child. And remember that for either natural feature atomism or weak natural feature atomism, when they talk about a feature behaving atomistically, they are talking about the same feature. This can be easily seen in their formalized views:

**Natural Feature Atomism**: For all natural F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

**Weak Natural Feature Atomism**: For some (but not all) natural F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

Notice that for both kinds of atomism, it is the same F that works as a reason in different circumstances, C and C*. So, the counterexample, being about two different features of causing pain, is not really effective against either sort of atomism. Moreover, even if this strategy of appealing to counterexamples succeeds, it is only effective against the claim of natural feature atomism. It shows at its best that there are some natural features that behave non-atomistically (or holistically). This is entirely compatible with the following claim of weak natural feature atomism:

**Weak Natural Feature Atomism**: some (but not all) natural features behave atomistically.

As we can see from the formulation of weak natural feature atomism, it can allow for the possibility that some natural features behave non-atomistically. Such being the case, while the strategy of appealing to counterexamples might be effective against
natural feature atomism, the claim of weak feature atomism is not going to be defeated by these examples that are meant to demonstrate that some features work non-atomistically.

7.3 Interlude

Having argued that the objection from counterexamples is only effective against natural feature atomism at its best but not against weak natural feature atomism, and that the objection from holism of reason is effective against neither natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism, it seems plausible, at least initially, to think that since there is no good objection against weak natural feature atomism, it might well come out to be true. However, it is one thing to claim that there are no effective objections against one doctrine, it is quite another to claim that we have good reason to believe it. In fact, in what follows, I will argue that there is no good reason to think that weak natural feature atomism is true, since the best case presented for it is not that convincing.

7.4 No Reason

So far, we have only argued that there are no good objections against weak natural feature atomism. This doesn’t mean, however, there are positive reasons for us to believe its claim that some features behave atomistically. Is there any positive evidence supporting the claim of weak natural feature atomism? The best evidence that has been presented is the following:

**Torture 1**: the feature of torturing an innocent merely for fun is always a reason against.

If the above claim is true, then weak natural atomism’s claim that some features behave atomistically is vindicated, because there is at least the feature of torturing as presented in Torture 1 that behaves atomistically.

However, I suspect that Torture 1 is not really a convincing example. First, it is not clear, as I have mentioned in chapter 2, that the feature of torturing an innocent merely for fun is a reason against when it is constitutive of a consensual masochist sexual intercourse (I imagine that the participants of which are both innocent). The masochists get immense gratification out of the sexual intercourse exactly because they get tortured. In a context like this, it is not clear that the feature of torturing an innocent merely for fun is a reason against. Second, it is not clear, as Mark Timmons
(2002, p. 259) correctly points out, that ‘innocent’ is a natural term. It is morally loaded. If so, Torture 1 merely shows that there is a moral feature that behaves atomistically. This in no way helps to vindicate the weak natural feature atomists’ claim that some natural features behave atomistically. Third, the word ‘merely’ does not appear to be describing any natural feature either. So we have even more reason to doubt whether the feature of torturing an innocent merely for fun is a natural one.

Having said so, weak natural feature atomists might feel tempted to massage the Torture 1 example a little bit and try to crank out an example that avoids the above-mentioned difficulties. They might come up with an example as follows:

Torture 2: the feature of torturing a child for fun is always a reason against.

Notice that in this example, all the morally loaded terms that were used to describe the feature of torturing in Torture 1 have been taken out. Besides, a child can’t really consent to having sexual intercourse in the full-blooded sense of ‘consent’, for she might yet lack the capacity required for decision-making. Now, have we got a convincing example that illustrates a feature that behaves atomistically?

Still, I don’t think the example is clear. Notice that ‘for fun’ seems to suggest that the torturing is done for no good moral reasons. If so, what we have got here in Torture 2 is still a moral feature instead of a natural one. It in no way helps to vindicate weak natural feature atomists’ claim that some natural features behave atomistically. At this juncture, it will be no wonder that the natural feature atomists might feel tempted to massage their example even more, but it will be no wonder either that particularists will come up with more stories to tell why the newly cranked out example are not convincing. This to-and-fro dialectic might go on forever, as Little (2000, p. 279) rightly comments. There is no reason for us to think that weak natural atomists will eventually win the day.

Incidentally, in spite of our earlier examples against natural feature atomism in sections §§ 7.1 and 7.2, some people might still remain unconvinced and retain their sympathies for natural feature atomism. For those people, they can at least take the following lesson from the above discussion: if weak natural feature atomism is not properly motivated, natural feature atomism certainly will not be. For if there is no convincing example showing that some features behave atomistically, then surely there is no convincing example showing that all features behave atomistically.

7.5 Individuation of Features Revisited

In the last section, we have argued that there are in fact no good reasons for us to
believe either the claim of natural feature atomism or that of weak natural feature atomism. Now, I am going to argue that there are in fact good reasons for us to disbelieve them. For their claims face a similar sort of problem that plagues Dancy’s holism—the problem of the individuation of features. Due to this problem, their claims are trivially true and do not really tell us how a feature qua reason behaves.

To begin with, let me recap the claims of natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism:

**Natural Feature Atomism:** For all natural F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

**Weak Natural Feature Atomism:** For some (but not all) natural F, if F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V-ing in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

Notice what these two claims have in common is that they both contend that it is the same feature F that works as a reason in both C and C*. To illustrate, suppose for the sake of the argument that both kinds of atomism are true of the feature of lying. So, this means that if the feature of lying is a reason against in a normal case C, then if it obtains in a bluffing game case C*, then it is a reason against in the bluffing game case C*.

However, there are two problems with natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism as characterized above. First, as we have argued in § 7.1.2, due to the embedded character of the feature of lying, the two cases, i.e. the normal case and the bluffing case, really have two different features of lying at work as reasons. To recap, the feature of lying in the bluffing game cannot be individuated from its particular enabling factors that enable it to have a positive valence in that context. If so, it is a feature different from the feature of lying in a normal case. Such being the case, both natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism, like holism of reason, are wrong in supposing that it is the very same feature of lying that operates as a reason in both cases.

Second, if it is the case that there are two features of lying at work in different cases (as we have shown, it is indeed so), then the claims of both natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism will come out trivially true. They are trivial, because they do not tell us anything about how a feature qua reason behaves. To illustrate, let us recall the formalized claim of natural feature atomism again:
Natural Feature Atomism: For all natural F, if F is a reason for (or against) V in circumstance C, then for all circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V. (F: feature; V: action; C: circumstance)

Weak Natural Feature Atomism: For some (but not all) natural F, if F is a reason for (or against) V in circumstance C, then for all other circumstances C*, if F obtains in C*, then F is a reason for (or against) V in C*. (F: feature; V: action)

Now, let us suppose that they are both true of the feature of lying. They both claim: if the feature of lying is a reason against in a normal circumstance C, then if the feature of lying obtains in the bluffing game C*, then it is a reason against in C*.

Now, notice the following two things. First, the above claim has the following logical structure: $P \rightarrow (Q \rightarrow R)$. Second, as we have argued, the feature of lying in the bluffing game is different from the feature of lying in a normal case. So the feature of lying that obtains in C does not really obtain in C*. Such being the case, Q is false. If Q is false, $(Q \rightarrow R)$ is true anyway, regardless of whether R is true or false. For the only situation a conditional comes out false is one in which the antecedent is true and the consequent is false. In the current case where the antecedent Q is false, the conditional is true anyway, regardless of the truth value of the consequent R. Now, if $(Q \rightarrow R)$ is true, $P \rightarrow (Q \rightarrow R)$ is clearly true, for P merely states the fact that the feature of lying is a reason against in the normal circumstance C. In other words, since both P and $(Q \rightarrow R)$ are true, $P \rightarrow (Q \rightarrow R)$ is true. Now, why is it trivially true though? The reason, as I have suggested, is that it does not tell us anything about how a feature qua reason behaves. For $P \rightarrow (Q \rightarrow R)$ is true, even when R is false. (Don't forget that P is true and Q is false). Namely, it is compatible with the claims of both natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism that the feature of lying is not a reason against in the bluffing game. Such being the case, these two kinds of atomism do not really tell us how a feature qua reason in C behaves in other circumstances C*.

7.6 Begging the Question

Now, having argued that both natural feature atomism and weak natural feature atomism are not only ill motivated but also not very informative about how a feature qua reason behaves, this should suffice for us to conclude that the argument from the atomism of reason is not a persuasive argument. Here, however, I want to set aside these issues for the moment and press a different point against the argument from the atomism of reason. For I do not think that it is a very persuasive argument for pro
tanto principlism (or against extreme particularism) anyway, even without the burden of the problems we already mentioned above. As a reminder, the argument from the atomism of reason can be stated as follows:

P1: The atomism of reason is true.
P2: If the atomism of reason is true, there are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles
C: There are necessarily true natural-moral pro tanto moral principles.

So now, let us suppose for the sake of the argument that the atomism of reason is true (it can be either natural feature atomism or weak natural feature atomism) and the argument from the atomism of reason is sound. Does this mean that the argument from the atomism of reason is a persuasive argument for pro tanto principlism? I suspect that the answer is ‘no.’ Before I provide an explanation for this, it has to be pointed out that not all sound arguments are persuasive arguments. A sound argument might fail to be persuasive in that the premises of the argument presuppose the truth of the conclusion it is meant to establish. To illustrate, let’s look at the following toy argument:

\[
\text{P} \\
\therefore \text{Q}
\]

Let us suppose that the above argument is sound and let us suppose that it is an argument meant to convince those who have some doubts about Q. It seems that in order to do so, you can do it by convincing those skeptics about Q of the truth of P. However, if they are not convinced of the truth of P either, it is useless to invoke Q to justify P, for that will bring us full circle to where we begin and begs the whole question against those skeptics about Q. So if our only reason to believe P is Q, then the argument fails to be persuasive, for it will not move those skeptics about Q.

Likewise, even if the argument from the atomism of reason is sound, this does not mean automatically that it is a persuasive argument for the claim of pro tanto principlism. Just as our toy argument above fails to be persuasive for the reason that the premise of the argument, P, presupposes the conclusion it is meant to establish, the argument from the atomism of reason might also fail to be persuasive for similar reasons. In fact, I suspect that there are good reasons for thinking that the argument from the atomism of reason fails to be persuasive exactly for the sort of reasons the toy argument fails to be so.
For in the argument from the atomism of reason, its first premise P1 seems to presuppose the truth of its conclusion C. In other words, the atomism of reason seems to presuppose the truth of pro tanto principlists’ claim that there are pro tanto moral principles of the relevant kind. How so? For a pro tanto moral principle of the relevant kind maintains that a feature F is wrong (or right). This is very close to the claim of the atomism of reason: a feature F, qua reason, is wrong (or right). The claim of the atomism of reason seems to presuppose that such pro tanto moral principles must be true. For if they were not, it would not be clear how the atomism of reason can hold. Such being the case, the argument from the atomism of reason fails to be persuasive for the same sort of reason the toy argument fails to be, for all of us who are skeptical about C, or the pro tanto principlists’ claim that there are pro tanto moral principles of the relevant kind, will not be moved by P1, or the claim of the atomism of reason. In order for the argument from the atomism of reason to be persuasive, there have to be some independent reasons to believe P1, to say the very least. Absent independent reasons, as is in the current case, the argument from the atomism of reason is not persuasive.

To sum up our discussion, the argument from the atomism of reason is not a persuasive argument for pro tanto principlism. So even if the atomism of reason turns out to be true and informative against all the odds, still the argument from the atomism of reason fails to be persuasive for those of us who are skeptical about pro tanto principlism.
Conclusion

In my thesis, I have examined two major arguments that have been advanced by principlists to attack extreme particularism. They are respectively the argument from supervenience and the argument from the atomism of reason. The argument from supervenience is meant to establish absolute principlism, the view that there are necessarily true absolute natural-moral moral principles, whereas the argument from the atomism of reason is meant to establish pro tanto principlism, the view that there are necessarily true pro tanto natural-moral moral principles. I have argued that neither of them succeeds. What is the moral we can draw from this?

I think it is this. If what I have argued so far is right, I think that we can be more confident in the claim of extreme particularism, the claim that there are no necessarily true natural-moral moral principles, be they of the absolute kind or the pro tanto kind. Notice that this is not to say that the view of extreme particularism is absolutely right; this is only to say that there have been no compelling reasons for us to disbelieve it. Perhaps principlists who maintain the existence of relevant moral principles of the absolute kind and the pro tanto kind will have some compelling reasons to offer in the future. But until we are shown this is indeed so, extreme particularism is still very much a live option.


Brandt, Richard (1968). “Toward a Credible Form of Utilitarianism” in (ed.) M. D.


Dancy, Jonathan. (1999a). “Can the Particularist Learn the Difference Between Right
and Wrong”, in K. Brinkmann (ed.), *The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, vol. 1, Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, pp. 59-72


