Consequences of "Particularism"

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> "No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story." – Hannah Arendt[1]

1. What is Particularism?

Particularism is a position in meta-ethics. It has antecedents as old as Aristotle, but recently John McDowell, Jonathan Dancy, Maggie Little, and others have developed new arguments for it.

A full-blown particularist believes that whole situations are either good or bad; they can be validly judged. However, the separate qualities or aspects of situations can *never* be assessed out of context. We can never know in advance what difference a given quality will make. For instance, the quality of generosity is (probably) good if it makes me donate to the homeless, but it is bad if I give generously to a terrorist organization.

According to particularists, the moral aspects of situations are analogous to splashes of red paint.[2] Adding a red patch might make a painting by de Kooning better, but a Vermeer worse; by itself, the splash of paint it is neither beautiful nor ugly. The de Kooning (overall) is a good painting and the Vermeer (overall) is a great one. We can make valid judgments, but only about whole works of art, not about small components of them.[3]

The main lesson of particularism is to doubt "switching arguments."[4] We like to form opinions about the moral meaning of a concept that arises in well-understood case, and then apply (or "switch") it to new situations. So, for example, if we admire conventional marriage because it reflects *long-term mutual commitment*, then we assume that we should admire the same feature in gay relationships. Such switching arguments are rife in philosophy—but particularism implies that they are fallacious.

2. A Moderate Version of Particularism

Radical particularists think that the following is true of *all* moral concepts:

1. They have moral significance, because they usually make situations better or worse when they apply, yet we cannot tell in advance whether they will help or hurt in each circumstance. We must look at the whole situation to assess the moral "polarity" or "valence" of each of its features. Thus moral concepts are ambiguous out of context.

In contrast to radical particularists, I believe that our moral vocabulary is very heterogeneous. In addition to the category described above, we also use concepts like these:

2. Some concepts are good or bad by definition. For instance, the "right" thing to do is always right, all things considered. To say that it is "right" is to make a full, all-things-considered judgment of the whole act, policy, choice, decision, constitution (etc.).[5]

3. Some concepts are good or bad *pro tanto*, which is Latin for "as far as that goes." For instance, one might argue that kindness always makes things better, but an act can be both kind and stupid, and the stupidity is sometimes more important than the kindness. Thus kindness is always—but only—*pro tanto* good.

4. Some concepts are good or bad *prima facie*, "on their face." For example, we rightly assume that if an act is generous, then it is good—overall. However, unusual circumstances sometimes arise that make generosity a bad feature of an act, so we need to check the particular circumstances.

5. Some concepts are morally neutral most of the time, but in specific circumstances they take on moral significance. For instance, "American" is neither good or bad, but being an American in Iraq today would impose specific moral obligations on you.

Radical particularists claim that every important moral concept fits in category #1. I am a moderate particularist because I believe that the other categories also exist, but #1 is common and unavoidable.

I would, for example, place pleasure, happiness, trust, courage, order, and love in this first category. The Romantics thought that love was always *pro tanto* good. I think they were wrong. If Guinivere is married to Arthur, then Guinivere's love for Lancelot is not even *pro tanto* good; it is bad, and she should work to reduce it. As Virgil tells Dante in Purgatory, *not* "every love is in itself a laudable thing."[6]

An opponent of particularism may say: Love is sometimes good and sometimes bad. This makes it a highly imperfect concept. We would actually be better off with two words, for instance, "good-love" and "bad-love." The definition of these words would not be morally tautological; we wouldn't just say that "good-love" is love whenever it is good. Instead, a proper definition would connect "good-love" to more general moral concepts like justice and virtue, which we would also define. For example, "good-love" might be carefully defined so that it included all instances of love between pairs of consenting adults who are not married to others, because our general moral theory tells us to value love when it is both monogamous and free.

Many philosophers hope to reason exclusively with words that are predictably good or bad in all contexts. They may be willing to settle for *prima facie* or *pro tanto* moral concepts (categories #3 and #4, above). However, they distrust words that change their moral valence unpredictably.[7] In practice, of course, we must retain our inherited

vocabulary. We can't actually talk about "good-love" (the coinage is too ugly), but philosophers want to provide general definitions of love that is good, and love that is bad.

As a moderate particularist, I reply: love is an extremely important moral concept. It is morally ambiguous, in the precise sense that it only has a moral valence in context— sometimes it makes things better *pro tanto*, and sometimes it makes things worse, but it is almost always morally significant. Although it may be good more often than it is bad, it is not *prima facie* good; it's too unpredictable to support any assumption about its moral "polarity" until we see how it works in context.

I believe that we cannot live morally without the concept "love," nor can we split it into two categories. "Love" is not just the union of two concepts: good-love and bad-love. Part of the definition of "love" is that it can be either good or bad, or can easily change from good to bad (or vice-versa), or can be good *and* bad at the same time in various complex ways.

In short, there is no escaping particularism about love. However, we don't have to be particularists about *everything*. We have good reason to treat some concepts as strongly loaded, either positively or negatively. For instance, it is true and meaningful to say that "generosity is good"or "murder is bad."[8] Nevertheless, there are morally important and irreducible concepts whose *pro tanto* significance can only be known in context.

3. Two Observations About Particularist Concepts

1. Particularist Concepts are "Thick"

Words like "love" and "happiness" are examples of what Bernard Williams called "thick" concepts, terms that "seem to express a union of fact and value. The way these notions are applied is determined by what the world is like (for instance, by how someone had behaved), and yet, at the same time, their application usually involves a certain valuation of the situation, of persons or actions. Moreover, they usually (though not necessarily directly) provide reasons for action."[9]

It would be impossible to identify "love" by applying only morally neutral, non-evaluative criteria. To say that someone is in love is to make a moral judgment, although not always a positive one. On the other hand, "love" is not *simply* a moral concept. It has empirical aspects, and one can cite empirical data to support the claim that it exists. This capacity to bridge moral and empirical is extraordinarily important. With "thick" words, we can "hold in a single thought reality and justice."[10]

2. Many Particularist Concepts are Family-Resemblance Terms

"Love" has real meaning, but its meaning does not arise because every instance of love shares one or more features that are lacking in other cases.[11] Rather, each instance is similar to many others; they cluster together. But there is no common denominator to love for ice cream, love for a newborn baby, love of country, brotherly love for humanity,

self-love, tough love, Platonic love, puppy love, making love, *amor fati*, etc. Some (but not all) of these forms of "love" involve a high regard for the object. Some (but not all) imply a commitment to care for the object. Some (but not all) signify an intense emotional state. Dictionaries cope by providing numerous definitions of love, thus suggesting that "love" means "lust" or "enthusiasm" or "adoration" or "agape" or "loyalty." But "love" never quite means the same as any of these other words, because we faintly recognize all of its other meanings whenever it is used in a particular way. For instance, "love" is always different from "lust," just because the former word can mean loyal adoration as well as sexual desire.

4. Particularism and Relativism

In ethics, the words "universal," "general," and "particular" are used in three entirely different contexts.

Universalism about …		
cultures	the scope of duties	the nature of reasoning
$Universalism_1$: The same rules or judgments ought to apply to members of any culture	$Universalism_2$: We have the same duties to all human beings. For instance, perhaps we are required to maximize everyone's happiness, to the best of our ability, not favoring some over others.	$Universalism_3$: What is right to do in a particular case is shown by the correct application of a general moral rule
Relativism: At least some moral principles are particular to cultures (they only bind people who come from some backgrounds).	Communitarianism: We have stronger obligations in particular people, such as our own children or compatriots.	Moral particularism: we can and should decide what to do by looking carefully at all the features of each particular case. General rules and principles are unreliable guides to action. Any rule or principle that makes one situation good may make another one bad.

I am arguing for the thesis in the bottom right-hand box. This thesis does not entail the other positions along the bottom row. On the contrary, moral particularism, as described in this paper, helps to explain how all human beings can be part of *one* dialogue about ethics. It provides arguments against cultural relativism (the view in the bottom left-hand box).

If one assumes that moral judgments follow from the application of abstract concepts, then the problem of cultural relativism is very serious. Abstract moral concepts differ from place to place and time to time. If all our concrete judgments flow from abstract concepts, how then can we know that our views are valid? If several cultures make universal claims, they cannot all be right, but there is no independent criterion for deciding which is preferable. Worse, we always see other cultures through our own lens, so even our factual descriptions of what they believe are biased. We do not know what is right; we do not even know what other people think. We only know that people always think what their culture teaches; and cultures vary.

But this is a completely unrealistic picture of a "culture." To have a "culture" is to possess a large set of biases, experiences, beliefs, and commitments; a store of examples, archetypes, and role models; a vocabulary and a repertoire of reasoning skills. Everyone has a different set. No one's set is fully consistent or coherent. Nevertheless, we can usefully categorize people into different cultures depending on what issues concern us. For example, someone's culture could be American for some purposes, Southern for other purposes, and Baptist for still others.

If this is correct, then moral beliefs and practices and philosophical arguments generally do not rest on "foundations" composed of a finite set of abstract, general assumptions. In our culture (broadly defined), we share a few important premises, e.g., that human beings have equal moral worth. But most of our morality consists not of such generalizations or their implications, but rather of numerous concrete judgments.

Each person makes judgments somewhat differently. It is unlikely, however, that any two people would reach different judgments on all cases. Even if there are two such people in the world, there are many others who share some views with one, and other views with the other. In short, human beings are not divided into a set of detached "cultures," each one with its own worldview. Rather, we are always part of a dialogue with people who are somewhat similar and somewhat different.

5. Implications of Moderate Particularism

A. Evaluations of Justice or Social Welfare

Particularism implies that we cannot empirically assess some of the most important moral concepts. It therefore implies that there are limitations to the idea of maximizing a social-welfare function.

Consider "justice." Some actions and situations really are more just than others. There is a correct answer to the question, "How just is this law?" Furthermore, one cannot change the justice of a situation without also changing some observable facts about the world. If two situations are exactly identical empirically, then they are also the same morally. In short, I accept what philosophers call the "supervenience" of the moral on the non-moral. Values depend in a certain way upon facts.

This is the problem: all the just situations do not have empirical characteristics that are missing in all the unjust situations. Thus one cannot define justice in non-moral terms. One cannot give it a naturalistic definition: a definition that exclusively cites factors that a natural scientist would recognize.

If we look for evidence of justice in the world, we may observe enumerated legal rights, measure the percentage of the population living below the poverty line, count prosecutions for expressing opinions, and so on. These are appropriate empirical data to collect, and put together, they will allow an observer to tell correctly whether a given society is just. But each factor is interrelated with the others and dependent on context.

Prosecuting people for expressing political opinions is usually a sign of injustice, but not necessarily in cases involving neo-Nazis in post-War Germany. The percentage below the poverty line is a measure of economic fairness, but an irrelevant measure if some natural catastrophe recently occurred, or if many people have renounced worldly goods for religious reasons.

In short, justice is always good (by definition), but the factors that make up justice are particularist. Each one by itself has an unpredictable moral valence. Thus there can be no checklist or algorithm that generates a reliable overall justice score for a nation, based on a set of empirical facts. It may be useful to provide such a score as a rule of thumb, but no index will prove that a society is just. Rather, we must examine the particular society holistically and assess its justice. We can then look at the results of an algorithm and ask ourselves—not whether our judgment of the particular country was right—but how accurate the formula was. A good index should usually predict the correct verdict about a country (this makes it a useful shortcut). But the truth comes from closely examining all the facts about each case.

What all just situations have in common is that they are all just.[12] Justice is a moral concept with moral implications: there is a *prima facie* reason to infer that any just situation is also good or desirable. Furthermore, it is interesting to connect justice to other moral concepts. For liberals, it connects most closely to fairness; for Platonists, to the Good. Using either theory will guide our moral judgments. However, there is no way to identify the just situations in the world by citing non-moral characteristics.

Incidentally, I view happiness differently. It is a particularist concept, something that usually has moral relevance but whose valence cannot be predicted out of context. The fact that ice cream gives pleasure is a reason to value it. But if someone gets pleasure from squishing a worm, then the squishing is bad *just because of* the pleasure.[13] If happiness is a morally ambiguous concept, then utilitarianism is false.

B. Common Law Reasoning

There is an evident analogy between particularist moral reasoning and the decision-making procedure enshrined in common law. A common law court decides whether the case being litigated is, as a whole, relevantly similar to other cases that have been decided either for or against the defendant.

I'm not sure how tight this analogy is. I'm also not sure what it implies. Possibly, I should use particularist moral reasons to argue for preserving or even expanding the common law. (We could, for instance, do less rulemaking and have more jury trials.) I would welcome advice about whether this is a good idea.

C. Deliberation

In any case, not all decisions can or should be made by courts or court-like bodies. Sometimes we must deliberate about policies, laws, even constitutions.[14] But deliberation

is often a convenient "black box." When we realize that we cannot settle a moral or social issue through some exercise in calculation (e.g., maximizing a social welfare function) or by applying clearly defined principles, or by asking a judge and jury to decide, then we delegate the decision to "the public" or their representatives. This begs the question of what process and decision-rule to use, which I cannot address here. It also begs the question of how people are supposed to address an issue that cannot be settled by calculation or by the application of principles. What are people supposed to *say* once they start to deliberate?

C. Narrative

In practice, deliberators often exchange stories. Particularism provides a defense of narrative as a form of moral reasoning. If this defense is valid, then certain social and methodological implications follow: We should encourage the telling of rival stories, and not be satisfied with social-scientific analysis. We should create and nurture public forums in which rival stories can be exchanged. We should teach ethics through narrative: in other words, through history and literature. Finally, we should approach social criticism in a particular way.

A story, whether fictional or historical, is a coherent description of a set of events. Its coherence is not simply causal, such that the first event causes the second, which causes the third, etc. Instead, narrative coherence can take many forms, including: unity of character (one agent does a set of things sequentially); unity of community (a set of connected agents do a set of things); teleological unity (a set of events build up to a significant conclusion); or thematic unity (many things with similar meanings are described). Often more than one form of unity applies.

I would like to mention four relevant features of narratives:

1. Narratives enable "thick descriptions." In Gilbert Ryle's famous example, we may either say that someone "contracted his eyelid" or that he "winked conspiratorially." The former is a thin description; the latter, a thick one.[15] Thick descriptions often have moral significance. Contracting an eyelid is neutral, but winking conspiratorially is morally dubious. If it turns out that the contracting eyelid was a signal to commit murder, then that even thicker description marks the act as *prima facie* immoral. (Thus Bernard Williams adopted Ryle's word "thick" to describe concepts that combine empirical and moral meanings).

What justifies a thick description is almost always a story. For example, a video camera would record a wink as a wink, whether it was a signal to commit murder or the result of biting a lemon. We know that it is one thing rather than the other because of what comes before and after it. But we don't consider *every* prior and subsequent event, nor do we focus exclusively on actions that cause the wink or are caused by it. Rather, we "thicken" the description by placing the event within a coherent narrative. This brings me to the second point …

2. The selection of events in a coherent narrative is moral: Human institutions and actions are always dramatically overdetermined; they arise because of many events that are *i*nsufficient but *n*ecessary parts of *u*nnecessary but *s*ufficient (INUS) conditions.[16] It is a common ambition of social science to measure as many of these factors as possible in order to assess their relative contribution to the outcome. For instance, we try to predict the decision to vote in terms of factors like the voter's demographics, the nature of the election, and the voter's opinions and preferences. Only an unreconstructed positivist would claim that this approach is value-neutral. Social scientists must always omit some contributing factors, and they must always decide how to measure the factors that are included in their models. (For example, demographic background includes race, which is a morally contested category). Nevertheless, social science aspires to neutrality and comprehensiveness. Ideally, every contributing factor goes into the model. If the morally significant factors play no explanatory role, so be it.

In contrast, a historian almost always emphasizes factors of moral significance—especially the intentions of human beings. (So does a novelist, in constructing fictional narratives). Writers of narrative combine causal explanation with moral judgment by making salient those causes that they deem most morally weighty. They are not engaged in retrospective prediction; their goal is much closer to moral interpretation. I think social science is extremely useful, because it allows us to assess causes that may not be deliberate or intentional. But if we want to make judgments and decisions, we need to tell stories.

3. Narratives help to ascribe responsibility for collective actions: As a matter of common sense, I assume that "I am accountable for a harm only if what I have done made a difference to that harm's occurrence." I also assume that "I am accountable for a harm's occurrence only if I could control its occurrence, by producing or preventing it."[17] We are raised to make these two assumptions. Unfortunately, we may belong to groups that do very serious harms, yet each member of the group can rightly say, "I made no difference to the outcome, and I couldn't control what happened." In these cases—which probably create the bulk of the world's evils—*no one* is responsible or accountable for the wrong.

You need not will an end to be responsible for it; you only have to be knowingly part of a group that is moving toward some end. And it doesn't matter whether the predictable or intended outcome of the group is actually reached: you are accountable if you associate yourself with a group that has a bad *telos*. Unfortunately, it is often unclear whether a person is an intentional participant in a group. It's one thing when I voluntarily join a defined and formal body. For example, if I choose to buy stock in a company whose negligence kills people, that is my problem (morally), even if I had no reason to know about the company's behavior. But there are many harder cases, especially ones involving loose social networks.

When we consider whether someone morally belongs to a group, the form of our reasoning is a narrative. We want to know whether people are intentionally part of a set of coherent actions that lead toward some *telos*.[18] Novelists are good at showing that sets of characters are linked in morally salient ways; indeed, such linkages often provide the

main themes of "bourgeois" novels. Like novelists, historians tell stories that link people together for teleological reasons. Their methods, which we also use in ordinary life, are the only means we have for ascribing responsibility for group behavior.

4. Stories have themes. A theme is usually a concept or situation that is significant and that repeats throughout the narrative.[19] Determining the theme of a story is a dynamic process. We become gradually aware that a concept or situation is going to be repeated. As we look for themes, we also decide what is literally going on in a text. For instance, in the first scene of *King Lear*, is Cordelia proud and hurt, or young and very shy, or perplexed by the formal ritual? Our answer does not determine the words she utters, but it decides much else (her tone, body language, location, expression). The only way to determine how she literally behaves is to consider what *Lear* is about as a whole. Thus Roger Seamon argues that a story's theme is not some general proposition that we derive (validly or invalidly) from the words on the page. Rather, our emerging sense of a theme helps to tell us what literally happens. [20]

The importance of thematic interpretation has at least two moral implications. First, themes are essential to rhetoric. We deliberate by telling (putatively) factual stories that have themes; therefore we need to know how to tell good thematic stories and how to judge their quality.

Second, it was Hannah Arendt's view that modern history has no causal coherence. The terrible events of her century could not be retrospectively predicted by measuring the factors that jointly created them. We must understand these events, but their explanation beggars the mind. At best, we are capable of identifying repeating motifs in history. That is why Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* is not a causal explanation of Hitler and Stalin, but rather a search for relevant themes in preceding history. It describes "certain fundamental concepts which run like red threads through the whole." [21] If we can identify the major themes of *our own* time, we are doing the best that can be done.

NOTES

[1] Arendt *Men in Dark Times* (Harvest Books, 1970), p. 22.

[2] Cf. Simon Blackburn, "Securing the Nots," p. 97. in W. Sinnott-Armstrong and M Timmons, eds., *Moral Knowledge* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996),

[3] Note: there is a problem here about what constitutes a "component" or a "whole." Can one make moral judgments about people, about policies and institutions, about whole societies? Is a law a component of a society, or a whole object in itself? The same problem sometimes arises in aesthetics, because it may be valuable to assess a whole suite of paintings, or a small detail of a picture, rather than a single and complete work.

[4] Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, pp. 64-66.

[5] For modern Anglo-American philosophers, "rightness" refers to how a situation arose (e.g., whether moral rights were respected), whereas "goodness" describes a state of affairs (e.g., whether people are happy). These are useful distinctions in their contexts, but they don't apply in ordinary language. Normally, "good" is very much like "just" and "right"—it is a mark of overall moral approval.

[6] Virgil denies that "*ciascun amore in sé laudabil cosa*" (Inferno, xviii, 36). Like Dante's Virgil, I happen to believe that we have the capacity to control the emotion of love, but that is a psychological claim that is not important to my overall argument. Even if love is not in our control, adulterous love is still bad.

[7] Cf. Brad Hooker, "Moral Particularism: Wrong and Bad," in Brad Hooker and Margaret Little, eds., *Moral Particularism* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 7-8. Hooker argues that if pleasure doesn't have a consistent moral valence, then we must "start making distinctions." "Nonsadistic pleasure is always a moral plus. Sadistic pleasure, even where a self-interested plus, is always a moral minus. To be sure, these moral pluses and minuses can be outweighed by other considerations. Thus, all things considered, an act can be permissible even though it gives someone sadistic pleasure. Nevertheless, the moral polarity of sadistic and nonsadistic pleasures never changes."

[8] Cf. David McNaughton and Piers Rawling, "Unprincipled Ethics," in Hooker and Little, , p. 268

[9] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 1985), pp. 129-130.

[10] Yeats, *A Vision* (New York, 1966), p. 35.

[11] John McDowell says he is skeptical "about whether, corresponding to any value concept, one can always isolate a genuine feature of the world, … a feature that is there anyway, independently of anyone's value experience being as it is." "Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following" in Holtzman and Leich, p. 144 {check original}

[12] Cf. Margaret Little, "Moral Generalities Revisited," in Hooker and Little (p. 282): "The fact that the category of cruelty has no shape at the natural level does not mean that it has no objective shape: it has the shape, precisely, of cruelty. Likewise, the proper measure of consistency is that one calls 'cruel' those things, and only those things, that are cruel."

[13] Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 56 (check page).

[14] I generally believe in egalitarian deliberation. My embrace of equality is not a consequence of particularism; it is a separate moral commitment. I would interpret it as a well-grounded *pro tanto* moral principle. We have good reasons (which I don't have room to itemize here) to think that equality contributes to the goodness of deliberations, although it may be outweighed by other factors in some cases. For example, in science, it is normally better for experts to deliberate.

[15] Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers* II (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), pp. 474-5; 480-96, especially 480-1. (The original texts are "The Human Agent" [1966-7] and "University Lectures, no. 18" [1968].)

[16] J.L Mackie, "Causes and Conditions," *American Philosophical Quarterly,* vol. 2, (1965) p. 245. Here I am following David Luban, *Legal Modernism* (University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 36

[17] Christopher Kutz, *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. ?

[18] Kutz, p. 140: Accountability "is based on the teleological rather than causal relations between the group members' intentions and the collective act."

[19] There are exceptions. For example, no one dies suddenly until the short last chapter of *To the Lighthouse*. But when most of the book's characters are quickly killed in diverse ways, we retrospectively decide that

the fragility of their lives was a hidden theme of the earlier chapters. Woolf's unusual handling of the death theme in this novel depends on our conventional expectation that themes are repeating motifs.

[20] Roger Seamon, "The Story of the Moral: The Function of Thematizing in Literary Criticism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* vol. 47, no. 3 (summer 1989), p. 232.

[21] Arendt, "A Reply" to Eric Voegelin, *The Review of* Politics (January, 1953), p. 78, quoted in Samantha Power, "The Lesson of Hannah Arendt," *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 51, no. 7 (April 29, 2004), p. 34.