

VIRTUE AND PARTICULARITY

I—CONSTANTINE SANDIS

VIRTUE ETHICS AND PARTICULARISM

Moral particularism is often conceived as the view that there are no moral principles. However, its most fêted accounts focus almost exclusively on rules regarding actions and their features. Such action-centred particularism is, I argue, compatible with generalism at the level of character traits. The resulting view is a form of particularist virtue ethics. This endorses directives of the form ‘Be X’ but rejects any implication that the relevant X-ness must therefore always count in favour of an action.

One little murder and all of a sudden I’m Jack the Ripper.
—Owen Lift, *Throw Momma from the Train*

Andrew: Do you lie a lot?
Sam: What do you consider a lot?
Andrew: Enough to call you a liar.
—*Garden State*

The biggest lie he ever told was the most honest thing he ever did.
—Mark Germino, ‘Felix Tucker’s Biggest Lie’

I

Prologue. Why is it that smoking a couple of cigarettes throughout my lifetime does not make me a smoker, but one lousy murder would be enough to label me a murderer? This is the kind of question that Aristotle was interested in. The riddle sheds light on the interrelations between character traits, action and moral principles. In particular, it helps us to better understand the connection between substantial imperatives that are ostensibly concerned with character—such as ‘Be truthful’ or ‘Don’t be obsequious’—and ones that are explicitly directed at actions, such as ‘Always do the kind thing’ or ‘Never perform confidence tricks’.¹ I shall try to show that the former are not reducible to the latter.

¹ For six distinctions relevant to the classification of rules, see [Chappell \(2014, p. 78\)](#).

A corollary of this last claim is that a generalist virtue ethic about character traits (understood as reliable dispositions to feel, act and perceive the world in certain ways)² is compatible with moral particularism concerning actions and reasons. Particularists are right to insist that morality cannot be reduced to a code specifying which kinds of *actions* are forbidden, obligatory or permissible, but wrong to infer from this that it is not shaped by general principles of *any* kind. I refer to the resulting view as Particularist Virtue Ethics (PVE), distinguishing my version of it from *prima facie* similar views advanced under the same name.

Imperatives such as ‘Be kind’ may be understood, *inter alia*, as instructing us to have the character trait of kindness. There is no question of ‘sometimes’ or ‘always’ here, for while we may come to acquire or lose such traits over time, their possession is not something that switches on and off. Rather, there are times when we should act *from* some particular trait and times when we should not. These latter pronouncements concern action, or at least the conjunction of disposition and act. So understood, ‘Be kind’ at most implies that one’s overall behaviour should not be in conflict with the cultivation of kindness. It does not follow from this that one should not always *be* kind in the sense of having the virtue of kindness. Nor, for that matter, does having the virtue of kindness require one to *always* act in a kind way; the virtue is even compatible with the existence of situations (such as that of being assaulted) in which acting kindly would be inappropriate, inadvisable, or simply downright bizarre.

Conversely, one can do what kindness happens to require without *being* a kind person. It is for such reasons that Michel de Montaigne warns, in his essay on cruelty, that ‘when we judge a particular action, we should consider many circumstances and the whole person who performed it, before we give the action a name’ (Montaigne 1580–95, vol. II, ch. XI, p. 126; my translation).³

‘Be kind’ can, of course, also be taken as an instruction to always act *kindly*, that is to say in a kind *way*, regardless of whether one’s resulting deed was ‘the kind thing to do’. In a recent Oreo social

² Compare Annas (2011, pp. 8 ff.). For how psychological dispositions differ from purely physical ones, see Alvarez (2017).

³ He continues: ‘I have sometimes seen my friends call prudence in me what was fortune; and consider as an advantage of courage and patience what was an advantage of judgement and opinion; and attribute to me one title for another, sometimes to my gain, sometimes to my loss’ (Montaigne 1580–95, vol. II, ch. XI, p. 126; my translation).

media campaign, customers are enticed to win free cookies by posting a photograph of themselves ‘being kind’. Whatever kind deed any earnest competitors may be doing for the cameras, they are not being kind, in so far as their actions are motivated by the competition’s promise. A more sinister example would be that of the rake who gives money to a beggar with the sole intention of impressing a potential ‘conquest’. The point generalizes to one about rightness: if in a certain situation the right thing to do is to vote for candidate X, and I do this because I would personally benefit if they were in power, then I have not acted rightly, even though voting for them was the right thing to do (namely, that which is in keeping with acting well).⁴

The extent, if any, to which virtue ethics might be action-guiding is bound up with the above concerns. While an imperative such as ‘Be virtuous’ may be understood to include an instruction to behave (alongside think, feel and perceive) virtuously, it is never reducible to a multi-action directive to always do whatever the virtuous person would (advise one to) do,⁵ or even what such an agent ‘would have done if he had been corrupt like me’ (Mehta 1971, p. 70). As Robert Audi puts it, ‘if one could specify the types of actions a virtuous agent should in general perform, practical wisdom and a virtuous disposition would be required for applying the relevant rules in particular cases’ (Audi 1995, p. 468).

Such considerations lead me to resist Rosalind Hursthouse’s attempt to mould virtue ethics into a normative theory according to which right action is tied to counterfactuals of virtue.⁶ To the extent that PVE can guide us at all, it is not by telling us how to act, but through the more diffuse means of showing what a better version of oneself might look like. PVE may thus be defended against both the charge that particularism cannot shed any light on why morality has a certain kind of shape and the charge that virtue ethics is insufficiently action-guiding.

⁴ Compare Hanser (2008) and Hursthouse (2008). None of this is to deny that there are many situations in which there is no single course of action that is the right one (see Winch 1987); scenarios in which no course of action would be *wrong* are much harder to come by, but still within the reaches of philosophical imagination. Both possibilities should be distinguished from that of agent-relativism about right action. A version of the latter is defended by Winch (1965), but his argument conflates acting rightly with doing the right thing.

⁵ Compare Hursthouse (1999) and Smith (2004, pp. 18–20).

⁶ For an Anscombean criticism of Hursthouse’s wider position, see Sandis (forthcoming). The view that Aristotle was ‘far too rooted in the specifics of the *polis* to be interested in such abstractions’ (Aronoff 2007) is put forward in Taylor (2006).

With this in place, let me briefly return to cigarettes and murder. A *prima facie* plausible *explicans* of why people only inherit the names of *some* of the actions they perform is that certain kinds of action leave a moral stain on the agent such that they remain polluted with it throughout their lives. The promulgation of the ancient Greek notion of pollution [μύιασμα] is most commonly associated with Bernard Williams, though Williams's discussion (1993, p. 189 n.23) is heavily indebted to that of his teacher E. R. Dodds (1951, pp. 35–7; 1966, pp. 183–4), who had in turn borrowed the central idea from Maurice Bowra (1944, pp. 168–70),⁷ his one-time rival for the Regius Professorship of Greek at Oxford. The hypothesis is good as far as it goes, but falls short of providing the understanding sought. If I were to accidentally kill someone through no fault of my own, I (and perhaps also the family of the deceased) might intelligibly go through the rest of life thinking of myself as a 'killer', but this would not render me one any more than someone who felt polluted for having smoked a single cigarette would thereby count as a smoker.⁸ The same holds for deeds we look upon more favourably. No matter how well one swims, one sole swim does not a swimmer make,⁹ though we may nonetheless call someone a 'natural swimmer' on the basis of an impressive first go.¹⁰ A single act of heroism, by contrast, is sufficient to warrant the label 'hero', if only for a limited period of time.

The precise relation between people's infractions and accomplishments and our labels for *kinds of doers* is at least in part a product of the normative status of the deeds in question within any given society. This would explain why a single murder is enough to make you a murderer, whereas a dozen cigarettes across a lifetime will not render you a smoker, unless you live in a land where tobacco is a

⁷ Williams also borrows his example of the morally unlucky motorist (1976, p. 124) from the same sources. For differences between Dodds's and Williams's approaches, see Knox (1993).

⁸ Compare Crisp (2017). What of an unlucky motorist who ends up killing repeatedly, even though it is proven beyond doubt that they were not at fault on any occasion? Here the notion of being cursed would seem more apt than that of being polluted.

⁹ At least not typically, though philosophers share the comic novelist's knack for coming up with logically possible yet utterly absurd scenarios, such as that of a person's one and only swim in life winning them an Olympic gold medal.

¹⁰ The implicature that someone we can truthfully describe as a 'natural swimmer' qualifies as a swimmer *tout court* is cancellable.

crime against the gods.¹¹ Individual labels may peel off over time but, notwithstanding discussions about the right to be forgotten, they tend to leave a trace. We thus talk of former heroes just as there are former footballers, movie stars, smokers, meat-eaters, burglars, convicts, millionaires, adulterers, and even assassins. In the case of murder, one can be rehabilitated, but the label tends to stick (for better or worse).¹² The more taboo the action kind, the more likely it is for its agent to be described in terms inherited from the infraction.

Our forms of life and practices thus give rise to the relative thinness and thickness of different concepts, encapsulating the rightness and wrongness of certain action types in our linguistic usage. I quote, possibly in excess, from Aristotle:

[N]ot every action or feeling admits of a mean; some are directly, by their very name, filed under ‘badness’ [ἐνια γὰρεὺθὺς ὠνόμαστα συνειλημμένα μετὰ τῆς φαυλότητος],¹³ such as malice, shamelessness, and envy, and among actions adultery, theft, and murder. All these, and more like them, are themselves said to be bad; not their excesses or deficiencies. In doing these things, then, it is impossible to be right; one is always wrong. Nor does acting rightly or wrongly in such cases depend upon circumstances such as whether a man commits adultery with the right woman or at the right time or in the right way, because to do any of them is simply to go wrong. One might as well claim that there can be a mean, excess, or deficiency even in unjust or cowardly or intemperate actions; for at that rate there would be a mean of excess and of deficiency, an excess of excess, and a deficiency of deficiency. But there is no excess and deficiency of temperance and courage because what is intermediate is, in a sense, an extreme; so too there is no mean or any excess and deficiency of the vicious actions we have mentioned, but however they are done they are wrong. For, in general, there is neither a mean of excess and deficiency, nor excess and deficiency of a mean. (Aristotle 1894, EN 1107a9–27, my translation)¹⁴

¹¹ Guy Longworth has suggested to me, as an additional *explanans*, the specific relation between act and character, such as whether one is the kind of person who can take or leave a smoke (an ambivalence which is harder to imagine in the case of murder).

¹² That said, it is disheartening to see just how many of Phil Spector’s tributes and obituaries referred to him as a ‘troubled genius’ as opposed to a convicted murderer.

¹³ It is, perhaps, ambiguous whether Aristotle is primarily stating that we do not, say, call a killing ‘murder’ unless we think it wrong (Irwin 1999, p. 119), or that we infer that some killings are wrong from the fact that they are given this name (Broadie and Rowe 2002, p. 306). These are two sides of the same coin, but we can debate which one is being emphasized more.

¹⁴ Compare EE 1221b, esp. 19–24 (Aristotle 1991).

Does it thereby become tautologous that, say, murder is always wrong? Anthony Price argues that it does not, for the plausible reason that to claim that all acts of some specific kind are wrong is not to state a tautology and that homicide only counts as murder when the act is of the relevant kind (Price 2006, §III). Whatever the answer, we should not imagine that *all* of the Greek words that Aristotle uses here retain the same connotations in their closest contemporary English translations (see Sherman 1989, p. 3). In fact, some contemporary English terms (for example, ‘patience’) may be used to signify both (a) the mean, and (b) the general sphere of feeling or action of which (a) is predicated. Such inter-linguistic discrepancies in conflation and separation appear to allow for truths that can be uttered in Ancient Greek but not, say, English (and vice versa).¹⁵ Whether such linguistic gaps are ever *conceptually* unbridgeable can only be decided on a case by case basis.

It is tempting to think that all appellations lie on a spectrum with regard to evaluative thinness and thickness.¹⁶ But there is also a distinction of kind at play. Appellations such as ‘swimmer’, ‘smoker’, ‘liar’, ‘adulterer’ and ‘killer’ place behaviour in the foreground, though they can (at least at times) allow us to infer something about the personality of the person in question. In the case of more evaluative appellations such as ‘bodacious’, ‘equable’, ‘cowardly’ and ‘carnaptious’, by contrast, it is character that is placed in the foreground, with any behavioural patterns indicated indirectly. These naming practices reflect the fact that the two sets of terms differ in their causal direction. Unless one has reached the point of habit or addiction, it is not being a swimmer that causes one to swim, but rather one’s acts of swimming that render one a swimmer. The cowardly person, on the other hand, is one who is disposed to cowardly behaviour. While a person’s deeds may elicit the label ‘coward’, they are not causes of the cowardice, but exemplifications of it, if not quite as consistent as those we find in the stock characters of Theophrastus and Menander.

¹⁵ At least not without the introduction of technical vocabulary, though in the case of dead languages this would be tricky without a time machine.

¹⁶ While some ethical concepts (like that of honesty) are undoubtedly thick, and others (like that of running) merely descriptive, this difference in kind is compatible with an additional difference of degree within each kind based on how much or how little any given concept has of the thing that gives it the property of being thick (see Dancy 2013, p. 47). Chappell (2013) puts forward a powerful case against the very existence of thin *ethical* concepts; I save our disagreement on this for another occasion.

Does this all mean that Aristotle was wrong to think that we can become better people by acting well, or worse by acting badly? Not at all, for what he has in mind is not a direct causal relation but a process of holistic habituation. It does, however, challenge the thought that there is a straightforward relation between being a good person, acting well and doing a good deed.¹⁷ Perhaps, like Rosemary in Bob Dylan's song 'Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts' or Darth Vader in *Return of the Jedi*, one can redeem oneself with 'just one good deed' before one dies. However, no single act—no matter how pure its motive or great its consequences—can magically render one a good person.¹⁸ As Betty Powell puts it, 'One dishonest act does not make a dishonest man, and one generous act does not make a generous man' (Powell 1959, p. 507; compare Mabbott 1956, p. 289).¹⁹ Montaigne makes a similar point, situating it within a wider argument regarding constancy:

[T]he strangeness of our condition leads to our often being driven by vice itself to do good, were good-doing not judged solely by intention. So one courageous deed does not prove a person valiant; one who does it truly, would do it always, and on all occasions. If it were a habit of virtue, and not an outburst, it would render a person similarly resolute in any eventuality ... (Montaigne 1580–95, vol. II, ch. I, p. 20; my translation)

We should not conclude from this that the honest person is one who *always* acts in an honest way; they act *from* honesty, as and when the situation requires it, though never from dishonesty (not even when they lie) (see also Audi 1995).

My observations thus far do not establish PVE; they merely lay the groundwork for its development by introducing the possibility of a wedge between having a certain character trait and performing actions of a certain kind. In exploring this possibility, I consider, *inter alia*, different conceptions of what a particularist virtue ethic might amount to. I defend a version of PVE which seeks to combine

¹⁷ Compare *EE* 1215a24–5, 1219b8–11 (Aristotle 1991). For the relation between being and doing in Plato, see Burnyeat (1971).

¹⁸ There is no deed so good that only a virtuous person could do it, but some particular doings involve one's acting from virtue (see Audi 1995).

¹⁹ Hume goes further, arguing that we are only responsible for actions that proceed 'from some cause in the character and disposition of the person' (*Treatise* 2.3.2.6; Hume 1738/1978, p. 411). For discussion, see Sandis (2019a, pp. 77–81).

generalism with regard to dispositions and antinomianism at the level of action.

II

Virtue and Variety. The pattern-recognition abilities of humans and other animals render us naturally better at detecting similarities than we are at noticing differences (see [Sutherland 1968](#)). As a matter of course, we create apophenic narratives and are all-too-easily impressed by coincidence (see [van Elk, Friston and Bekkering 2016](#)). Writing over a century ago, Rabindranath Tagore warns of the educational perils of this disposition:

The tendency of the mind is economical: it loves to form habits and move in groove which save it the trouble of thinking anew at each of its steps. Ideals once formed, make the mind lazy. It becomes afraid to risk its acquisitions in fresh endeavors. It tries to enjoy complete security by shutting up its belongings behind fortifications of habits. But this is really shutting oneself up ... The living ideals must not lose touch with the growing and changing life. ([Tagore 1917](#), pp. 2–3)

In philosophy, the tendency manifests itself in the search for theories and uniformities. We strive to bring together seemingly disparate cases under unifying accounts. Moral philosophy does so by offering competing accounts of what makes an action right. The resulting normative theories (consequentialism, deontology, and so on) present us with one or more general moral rules regarding right and wrong action. Such principles are designed to guide our decision-making, paving the way for ‘applied ethics’ (the subfield in which one’s favoured moral theory is churned to produce answers to practical questions, from the everyday to the trolley case variety).

A number of philosophers inspired by Aristotle, Wittgenstein, Anscombe, Winch and Murdoch have in recent years emphasized that mainstream moral philosophy fails to do justice to ethical reality. Sophie-Grace Chappell has been arguing against the systematization of moral theory on such grounds but stops short of embracing moral particularism, or at least the version of it made popular by Jonathan Dancy (see, for example, [Chappell 2006, 2009, 2014](#)). On Dancy’s view, morality does not depend on the provision of general moral principles. As Margaret Little puts it, ‘the enemy its objections

target is not generalization, but codification' (Little 2000, p. 304). This is not to say that general moral statements such as 'Torturing innocent babies is morally wrong' are false.²⁰ Appeals to them (such as that of Chappell 2014) are thus not in themselves a counterexample to particularism. But something has gone seriously wrong with the person whose actions need to be guided by such principles. Practical reasoning need not and should not proceed by appeal to rules.²¹ Indeed, such appeals can warp our moral perception:

Particularists think that moral judgement can get on perfectly well without any appeal to principles, indeed that there is no essential link between being a full moral agent and having principles . . . There is no reason whatever to suppose that morality stands or falls with a supply of principles capable of doing the job required of them. I suggest that morality can get along perfectly well without principles, and that the imposition of principles on an area that doesn't need them is likely to lead to some sort of distortion. (Dancy 2004, pp. 1–2)

Chappell embraces Dancy's suggestion that some given feature which counts in favour of an action in one situation may count against it in another, but resists the inference from this holism about reasons to a wholesale moral particularism.²² This is because she takes holism to be compatible with the existence of 'rules which (a) determine and (b) explain the moral status of *most* actions, (c) are learnable, and (d) can function as guides to action in *some* (but not all) new cases' (Chappell 2005). It is unclear to me why we should think of moral rules as having the power to either determine or explain why an action is wrong unless they are simply being appealed to as instances of how we use terms like 'right' and 'wrong'. Such teaching does not seem to me to interfere with a form of PVE which maintains a strict particularism at the level of action but not of character traits.

²⁰ Compare Chappell (2014, p. 77; 2020, §VI). *Realist* moral particularists, such as Dancy, leave space for the possibility of 'true' moral generalizations. By contrast, I follow Wittgenstein (1953, §402) in thinking that both realism and anti-realism (in any domain) conflate the normal *form* of an expression with an assertion to be defended or attacked (see Sandis 2019b, §3; compare Smeyers 1992 and Arrington 2002). If we accordingly understand moral generalizations to be hinges of some local or global kind (see Pleasants 2008 and 2009; O'Hara 2018), then it is a mistake to conceive of them as facts that may count for or against any given action.

²¹ Compare Wiggins (1980), Nussbaum (1986, pp. 51–88), Price (2006), Millgram (2002), and Westphal (2012).

²² A similar position is held by McKeever and Ridge (2006).

An important aspect of Dancy's account which to my knowledge has gone unnoticed is its complete action-centredness: all of the arguments and examples that Dancy uses to advance particularism concern judgements about which actions are favoured (or disfavoured) by the features at play. This is surprising, because his thesis stems from a more general reasons holism that expands to aesthetic judgement and linguistic meaning (see [Dancy 2004](#), pp. 75–6 and 193–8 respectively). We might accordingly also expect Dancy's particularism to include reasons for belief, emotion and perception, as well as reasons for action. Though there may be relevant corollaries with regard to such domains, it is not, I think, an accident that Dancy focuses on action. His arguments about the particularity of reasons for action may cover acts of attempting to acquire some psychological disposition, but they are crucially silent about principles concerning what sort of person one ought to *be*. In fact, Dancy's brand of particularism seems compatible with a generalism about dispositions. Within the boundaries of this latter domain, I am in sympathy with [Chappell's \(2014\)](#) view that rules can be constitutive of virtue, and would not even balk at the prospect of codification.

Moral thought is both hindered by principles concerning which actions we should perform ('Don't lie') and aided by ones regarding what character traits we ought to possess ('Be honest').²³ To be sure, one could offer a stipulative definition according to which being honest is incompatible with lying *on* any occasion, but this would go against the standard notion of virtue as a disposition to do or feel the right thing at the right time, to the right extent, and for the right reason (see, for example, [Annas 2011](#), pp. 8–9 ff.), which is no obstacle to the thought that an honest person may—and perhaps sometimes even *must*—tell a lie. If a glass does not break when dropped onto a pillow, we do not take this to prove that it is not fragile. Similarly, the member of the resistance who lies to the Nazi officer knocking at the door cannot (on just that basis) be accused of having a dishonest character.

That a particular linguistic act might be *all the better* for being an instance of lying is thus not incompatible with the thought that honesty is a virtue. This should not be surprising, for one's behaviour can manifest deficiency or excess with regard to *any* sphere of action,

²³ Whether we can infer from this that we ought to act in such a way so as to acquire them is a moot point.

including truth-telling. To some ears, the Mark Germino quotation at the head of this essay may sound like a glib paradox. But if one can dishonestly tell the truth then perhaps, like Robin Hood, one can also act from the motive of honesty when lying to (and stealing from) the unjust (see also [Powell 1959](#), p. 497).²⁴

The combination of particularism and virtue ethics I have been sketching can hold on to reasons holism (the view that a feature that makes a moral difference in one situation may make no difference at all, or even make the opposite kind of difference in another situation) so long as it restricts its nihilism about moral principles to the domain of action.²⁵ This would render the truth of particularism compatible with morality having a general shape and structure as, for example, one in which being a lie tends to count against an action (see [Dancy 1993](#), p. 60; compare [Swanton 2003](#), p. 243).²⁶ A world in which everyone possessed the virtue of honesty could not be a world that abounds with lies.

Such stability also allows the particularist to answer objections concerning moral education, for the particularist can proceed by teaching children to be honest, kind, just, courageous, and so forth (see [Simpson 1989](#); C. [Winch 1991](#); [Smeyers 1992](#); [Audi 1995](#), p. 470; and [Bakhurst 2005](#); compare [Westphal 2012](#)). One could go further in this respect and maintain, as Mark Lance and Margaret Little do, that we should be antinomians with regard to non-defeasible moral principles but generalists about defeasible ones ([Lance and Little 2004, 2008](#); compare [Stangl 2006](#)). Allowing that this works for action-centred imperatives such as ‘Don’t lie’, we need to see whether it applies equally to agent-centred ones, especially ones like ‘Be honest’, which employ thick concepts. Might only the former kind of principle be defeasible? Dancy writes:

Lewdness, we might say, is generally not desirable, and when it is desirable, this is always because the circumstances are unusual in one way or another. Very many thick concepts are like this. Think of the courageous, the honest, the amusing, the light-hearted—and so on. I might

²⁴ It helps that the concept of honesty is a much broader one than that of truthfulness. In addition, ‘Act honestly’ is ambiguous between ‘Always do the honest thing’ and ‘Act in accordance with a disposition to be honest to the right degree, at the right time, from the right motive, and for the right reasons’.

²⁵ For example, reasons for refraining, feeling, and other phenomena whose reasons cannot be deduced from principles concerning character traits.

²⁶ I return to some bizarre exceptions further below.

be able to find a sort of case in which something, or someone, is the worse for being amusing, but this will only be because something in the situation interferes to prevent things from being the way one would expect. I don't have any trouble with this suggestion. (Dancy 2013, p. 45)

The examples are apposite in so far as we think of being amusing, courageous, honest, light-hearted, and so on as descriptions of the agent's manner of acting in the particular situation, not of their character. While there are situations in which the property of being a lie may count against some action, or of being lewd in favour of it, honesty itself always remains a virtue and lewdness a vice (or sub-part thereof). A weak version of PVE might accordingly combine defeasible principles regarding action with non-defeasible ones concerning character. To complicate things, it seems *prima facie* possible to go meta-particularist by being particularist about which situations call for particularism and which for an appeal to general rules, though the latter would admittedly only exemplify a contextualist (and not a universal) generalism. We can presumably also go meta-meta-particularist, and so on.²⁷

We might add to the above the doctrine of the unity of the virtues, according to which all of the virtues mutually imply one another.²⁸ On such a doctrine, in a case in which the kind thing to do would be to tell a lie (for example, because telling the truth would be inescapably cruel), the person acting out of kindness could not be said to be acting dishonestly. If, on the other hand, no such unity exists, the possibility for a far more radical particularism (one which allows for agent-relative virtues) becomes live. It may seem plausible, for instance, that Richard Pryor's comedic virtues were inseparable from some of his personal vices. This opens up the question of

²⁷ I owe this vertiginous thought to Elijah Millgram. Its conceivability hangs on how finely or coarsely we choose to individuate virtues. Situationists such as John Doris and Gilbert Harman, who are sceptical about stable character traits, individuate traits at the situational level of 'kind-when-you-have-found-a-dime' but not 'kind-when-you've-lost-a-fiver' (Harman 1999; Doris 2002). But the fact that most of us are more likely to exemplify whatever virtues we partially possess in some situations over others only goes to show that we are not as virtuous as we could be (see Athanassoulis 2000 and 2012, §7; Webber 2006, 2007; Kristjánsson 2008). Compare Montaigne (1580–95, vol. II, ch. XI, p. 126).

²⁸ For a recent defence, see Annas (2011, pp. 83–99). Montaigne sensibly maintains that the unity of the virtues is only plausible to the extent that we can conceive of a similar unity of the vices, but he is unduly optimistic about the impossibility of the latter (Montaigne 1580–95, vol. II, ch. XI, p. 129).

whether the removal of some vices or possession of certain virtues could make a person worse overall (compare [Slote 1983](#)), a possibility which threatens to undermine PVE. Other theoretical options one could explore here include a psychological holism, according to which a character trait that is a virtue in one person may not be so in another, and a contextualist virtue ethic inspired by the meta-particularism.

Part of what is problematic about certain kinds of military training is that some of the character traits that prove beneficial in a war zone are not otherwise conducive to eudemonia, as evidenced by the tragic phenomenon of moral injury. We should not assume, then, that the former are virtues proper as opposed to traits that render one constitutionally lucky in certain situations. Extreme contexts can give certain vices the disguise of virtue, but any associated good fortune would fall short of eudemonia. Brutes may benefit in hostile environments, but this doesn't entail contextualism about the virtues.

Such musings provide particularist challenges to the purported unity of the virtues thesis, but it takes much more than that to completely undermine it. For one, it is an open question whether some aspects of a person's character that we might ordinarily refer to as 'virtues' (for example, punctuality) are really virtues in the same sense as magnificence, friendliness and wittiness are. Moreover, such examples only demonstrate that vice is often intimately bound up with things we value. This is not in itself an objection to the unity thesis per se, but only to some anti-holistic version of it that is analogous to the preposterous aesthetic thought that pasting together the best parts of a dozen beautiful images must result in an image that is even more beautiful than any of them.²⁹ If I actually *liked* raisins, I would here agree with Wittgenstein that 'raisins may be the best part of a cake; but a bag of raisins is not better than a cake' ([1998](#), 76e). I will have more to say about raisins in §IV, but first I wish to compare various forms which a particularist virtue ethic might take. I begin with some suggestions by Christine Swanton, before exploring a critical response by Rebecca Stangl.

²⁹ For amusing results in aesthetics that stem from such principles, see the paintings in [Wypijewski \(1997\)](#).

III

Principles and Particulars. In a chapter presenting her account of right action, Swanton writes:

How is overall virtuousness determined? Like Jonathan Dancy, I wish to highlight the holism of right-making features of action ... We cannot claim that certain features always contribute positively (or negatively) to the overall virtuousness of an act, even if those kinds of feature characteristically contribute positively (or negatively) ... [E]ven virtue-based reasons can function holistically. (Swanton 2003, p. 242; see also Swanton 2001)³⁰

Later in the same passage, Swanton embraces what she refers to as a ‘weaker’ particularism which allows for the existence of a ‘few’ moral principles.³¹ She proceeds to identify two cases intended to illustrate how ‘virtue-based reasons function holistically in the assessment of actions as overall virtuous’ (Swanton 2003, p. 243). Swanton’s first example is one in which ‘the kindness of the act contributes negatively to the overall virtuousness of the act’ (2003, p. 244). The second is of a just intervention ‘that is a wrong-making feature of the situation’ because ‘the intervention is in this context expressive of the obsessive, weak quality of my behaviour’ (2003, p. 244).

Swanton’s examples are intended to show that ‘the virtuousness of an act in a given respect’ (for instance, its friendliness, justice, or kindness) can be wrong-making (that is, contribute negatively to the rightness of an act)’ (2003, p. 244). But why conclude that they demonstrate that the *virtuousness* counts against the action? Would it not make equal sense to maintain that these instances of friendliness, justice, or kindness of the action are not cases of virtue at all? At the very least, the particularist virtue ethicist has a choice here: either

³⁰ The essay you are reading has been completed prior to the publication of Swanton (2021), in which she promises to deliver a ‘particularist but codifiable virtue ethics’ that ‘is opposed to the natural goodness model for virtue ethics’. I’m in sympathy with both goals, but fall shy of defending a target-centred account of right action, for the simple reason that I am against the very idea of providing an account of right action (see Sandis 2020 and forthcoming).

³¹ How strong or weak a form of particularism is cannot depend on the *number* of principles it allows for (act-utilitarianism has but one principle, but that hardly makes it a form of particularism). What matters is whether or not the principles in question play any significant role. Hence Dancy’s allowing for the possibility of moral principles, so long as the possibility of moral thought doesn’t depend on them (Dancy 2004, p. 7).

(a) virtues sometimes count against an action, or (b) properties that are typically virtues but are not *always* so. Which way to go?

The particularist is already committed to claiming an act's being just, kind, and so on, can in certain circumstances count against it. The question is whether we should, in such cases, continue to think of these properties as virtuous. Swanton thinks we should. My worry with this outlook is that it seems to favour a contingent relation (between being, say, kind and being virtuous) over a definitional one (between being virtuous and being good). This can be denied, but only on pain of having to paradoxically allow that something may count against an action whilst remaining a good feature of it. We saw in the Prologue that some terms may be used to denote both the sphere of action and emotion *and* the virtuous mean in relation to it. Might the impasse be merely semantic, then? To some extent, perhaps. But there is much more at stake here than mere terminology. What is being debated is our very understanding of what it is to exemplify a virtue. A just person may choose to do what is kind over what is just without failing to exemplify justice. Conversely, an unjust person may choose to do what is just over what is kind yet fail to exemplify justice (as when they are acting self-righteously).

Swanton's emphasis, like Dancy's, remains thoroughly action-centred. In her examples it is always the virtuousness of the *act*—and never of the agent—that is supposed to be wrong-making. In fact, the examples suggest that the problem with specific instances of alleged virtuousness is precisely that they are manifestations of an agential *vice*: 'The justice of the intervention is in this context expressive of the obsessive, weak quality of my behaviour' (Swanton 2003, p. 244). This sounds like a case of doing the just thing from a bad motive (compare Powell 1959, pp. 499 ff.). But given that we may distinguish what one does from *the doing of it* from a certain motive (see Ross 1930, pp. 6–7; compare Hornsby 1993, p. 56; Wiggins 1998; Wiggins 2006, p. 97 n.8; Dancy 1998, p. 282; and Sandis 2017), not all cases of doing the just thing are cases of acting justly. After all, one can do the thing that happens to be just without regard for justice.³² That Swanton does not subscribe to the distinction between the rightness or wrongness of the things we do and that of our doing such things is evident from passages such as the following:

³² I explore the distinction between doing and deed in normative ethics in Sandis (2017).

[I]t may be objected that my account of rightness is too agent-centred. Rightness, it may be claimed, has nothing to do with an agent's motives or reasons, but has exactly to do with success in the external realm ... My problem with consequentialism is that it has too narrow a conception of modes of moral acknowledgment or response that are relevant to rightness. It seems possible ... that a non-virtuous agent could perform an act describable as, say, uncaring, even though it is an act which a virtuous agent would perform, and which would therefore be right on a qualified agent account of rightness. (Swanton 2003, p. 245)

Someone who does the just thing from a bad motive cannot be said to be acting *justly*. What the particularist virtue ethicist needs is a case in which the act done is all the worse for *being* just or kind. If I am buying an impromptu gift for a beloved friend, for example, it would be vicious of me to seek to ensure that my doing so would preserve justice across my behaviour towards all friends (compare Dancy 2004, pp. 119–21). In the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11–32), as I read it, the older son complains to the father that it is unjust for him to celebrate the return of the younger son (who has squandered everything) with a large feast, having never offered such treatment to him, who had never transgressed. By way of reply, the father does not try to defend his actions as being just, but instead suggests that the situation calls for a celebration because the younger son, unlike the older one, had been lost and is now found again.

Nietzsche writes that 'whatever is done out of love takes place beyond good and evil' (Nietzsche 1886, pt. 4, §153, p. 70). Perhaps it also takes place beyond justice. This does not warrant our allowing the concerns of love to trample over those of justice, as does Joe Roberts in Bruce Springsteen's song 'Highway Patrolman' (Roberts looks the other way whenever his brother Franky strays, on the grounds that a 'man who turns his back on his family ... just ain't no good'). It means only that there are cases, such as that of Sophie's choice, in which the very consideration of justice is an insult to love. Conversely, there are cases (such as those relating to court sentences) where it would be unjust for someone to do the kindest thing possible (as opposed to the kindest thing *within* the constraints of justice), not because the virtues themselves are not unified, but because the particular situation does not call for such kindness.

IV

Thick and Thin. Many of Dancy's own examples challenge the thought that various properties captured by 'thick' concepts, such as 'truthfulness', 'kindness', and so on, are always right-making (see, for example, [Dancy 1995](#) and [2004](#), p. 121). Rebecca Stangl has coined the term 'thick particularism' to refer to Dancy's resulting position, which she also attributes to Swanton ([Stangl 2008](#), p. 667 n.7; see also [Stangl 2006](#)). She then proceeds to raise the following worry:

Given thick particularism, it is the *virtue itself* which can lead one to do the wrong thing in the situation . . . For the thick particularist, there are situations in which the fact that an action is virtuous in some respect is not only outweighed, but actually counts against performing the action. ([Stangl 2008](#), pp. 672–3)

This analysis leads her to the following worry:

[V]irtue theorists are in the business of encouraging people to develop the virtues. If thick particularism is true, the wisdom of this policy is put into question. ([Stangl 2008](#), p. 670)

This is a troubling one for theories—such as Swanton's—which claim that there are situations in which the virtuousness of a specific action counts against it. The thick particularist would do better, I think, to defend a different form of PVE that allows for the variable valence of thick properties without identifying them with virtues. Dancy himself never describes such properties as retaining their virtuousness, and John McDowell, for his part, makes the connection between right action and virtue explicit, stating that the latter is 'a single complex sensitivity' to 'recognize requirements that situations impose on one's behaviour' ([McDowell 1979](#), p. 53). To this, he adds:

Occasion by occasion, one knows what to do, if one does, not by applying universal principles but by being a certain kind of person: one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way. ([McDowell 1979](#), p. 73)

It need not follow from any of this that justice, courage, kindness, and so on are not virtues, nor even that they are not *always* so. This becomes apparent once we distinguish the virtue of kindness from

individual acts of kindness (cases of acting kindly or doing the kind thing). To the extent that there are reasons to deny that kindness is a virtue in a certain person or context, these arise independently of thick particularism. If an act is all the worse for being just, this is not because justice has temporarily ceased to be a virtue (or turns out to have never been one), any more than the raisins which would have improved my cake cease to be good raisins simply because I chose to put them on my pizza instead. The pizza may be all the worse for having raisins on it, but it is not the goodness of the raisins that makes it worse. Likewise, it is not the virtuousness of the justice that renders it inappropriate in certain contexts. The just person is not some sort of justice utility machine that promotes justice at all times. Rather, she performs just actions as and when the situation calls for them. Stangl is agreeable to this way of seeing things when she writes:

The possession of virtue must necessarily have *some* link with performing actions of the kind on question: someone who never had any motivation to act courageously could hardly be said to possess the virtue of courage. But a particularist virtue theorist might deny that it implies a disposition to perform courageous actions *whenever* the opportunity arises. (Stangl 2008, p. 673, emphasis in the original)

This seems to me a decent route for the particularist virtue theorist to go down. Moreover, as Stangl proceeds to demonstrate, Dancy's (1995) endorsement of thick ethical concepts allows for the attitudes associated with them to be 'both variable and flexible' (Stangl 2008, p. 674). All this entails is that 'a competent user of the concept knows which attitudes are appropriate at which times . . . when it is right-making, when it is wrong-making, and when it is, deontologically speaking, irrelevant' (Stangl 2008, p. 674; see also Dancy 1995 and 2004, p. 121). *Mutatis mutandis*, 'the person with the virtue of courage is motivated to perform a courageous action when its courageousness is right-making' (Stangl 2008, p. 674). Stangl writes of her account that while it implies 'that when the courage of an action is wrong-making, a courageous person has a stable disposition not to perform courageous actions', the thick particularist should not balk at its paradoxical feel any more than she does at the claim that 'an action can be made worse in virtue of its courageousness' (2008, p. 675). The latter claim only sounds paradoxical if we presume that the courageousness of an action is a virtue; this begs the question

against more plausible versions of thick particularist virtue ethics according to which the default positive value of courage does nothing to prevent some actions from being all the worse for being courageous when the situation does not call for such behaviour. What of the former claim? As stated, it is somewhat misleading as a characterization of what the particularist is committed to here. The psychological disposition in question is merely that of performing courageous actions as and when it is appropriate. It would be a mistake, then, to think that the justness or courageousness of an *act* is itself always a mean between excess and deficiency.³³

Stangl suggests that there is a bigger issue at stake concerning the unity of the virtues. Her worry stems from noting that a particularist form of virtue ethics would have to commit to the view that an action that is ‘overall virtuous’ can never fail to be right. She next argues that in order to know, for example, ‘when the justice of an action is wrong-making, we must know when this action’s failure to conform to the demands of some other virtue affects the deontic status of its justice’, for ‘only by knowing this can we be said to know when justice is wrong-making, and therefore possess a disposition to perform just actions only when they are right-making, and a disposition not to perform just actions only when they are wrong-making’ (Stangl 2008, p. 675). From this, Stangl infers that ‘[p]ossession of one virtue ... seems to require at least some sensitivity to the demands of other virtues’ (2008, p. 675). While we are both sympathetic to a weak unity of this kind, Stangl presents her argument for it in terms of relatively explicit knowledge whereas I am drawn to the thought that ‘there is nothing that one brings to the new situation other than the contentless ability to discern what matters where it matters’ (Dancy 1993, p. 50).³⁴ Understood in this light, the unity of the virtues (whatever its strength) is not inferential but counterfactual.

I proposed in §II that we have reason to dismiss an assumption that is implicit in the middle premiss, namely, that the particularist is committed to saying that the virtue of any particular action can be

³³ We saw in the Prologue that Aristotle sometimes speaks this way, and that—at least to this extent—he is no particularist. While he can allow that in some situations the correct level of concern for justice will be zero, Aristotle would not refer to any concern which exceeds this level as ‘just’ (see Price 2006).

³⁴ I take ‘contentless’ to indicate that this is a form of know-how that does not reduce to knowledge-that. Possession of the ability in question does not protect one from the need for further reasoning.

wrong-making as opposed to merely denying that an action property which shares the same name as a virtuous disposition (for example, ‘being magnanimous’) must itself be a virtue. A particularist about principles relating to action need not be a particularist about principles relating to character traits. She can accept, after all, that one should ‘be honest’ if the directive is understood as ‘possess the virtue of honesty’, and this virtue amounts to the psychological disposition to tell the truth to the right degree (for instance, without being boastful), from the right motive and for the right reason, as and when the situation calls for it.

I have tried to resist the thought that PVE is committed to the view that an act can be all the worse for instantiating a certain virtue. The argument for this has been partly linguistic: it makes no sense to refer to action properties such as those of justice, courage, honesty, and so on, as ‘virtues’ in cases where they count against an action. A virtuous feature of something is by definition a positive property. This is not mere preciousness about language. If the virtues are psychological dispositions to act well, then how can their successful exercise ever be identical to acting viciously? If justice is the disposition to act in a just manner as and when the situation requires, the person who does the just thing when this is not called for does not exemplify the virtue in question. We thereby lose the sense in which the justness counting against the act can be described as a ‘virtue’.

There are many different ways in which to be a particularist virtue ethicist depending on both one’s account of the virtues and the strength and stretch of one’s particularism. The form of PVE I have highlighted can account for both the generality of morality’s shape and the messiness of its particular details. It does so by distinguishing between principles about psychological dispositions and ones regarding action, dividing the latter further into the things people do are their acts of doing them.

I have been trying to show that the best version of particularism is one that combines with virtue ethics in a certain way, and, in like manner, the best version of virtue ethics is one that similarly combines with particularism. In doing so, I hope to have shown PVE to be a plausible alternative to normative theories of right action. This is not because it possesses a better account of right action, but because PVE is not—and *should not* be—in the business of prescribing actions at all. If I am right about this, then virtue ethicists should have never responded to the objection that their accounts were

overly agent-centred by morphing them into action-centred views (see Sandis 2020 and forthcoming; compare Chappell 2014, p. 76). PVE provides nothing more and nothing less than a framework for what sort of people we should be. While not directly action-guiding, it can combine with a sketch of the virtues to steer us towards becoming better people who can think for themselves and act for others without lapsing into either nomism or casuistry.

V

Epilogue. This essay has largely focused on particularism at the level of action. But there also exists an outlook championed by Iris Murdoch (1970), Nancy Sherman (1989), Lawrence Blum (1994), Sophie-Grace Chappell (2014, 2020) and others which focuses on the particular at the level of perception.³⁵ Sherman, for example, writes:

It is not merely that the detail of situations is often lost in the retreat to coarser-grained principles. It is that our judgement of particular cases and our knowledge of how to ‘compose the morally salient’ features of a situation is part of the moral response. Discerning the morally salient features of a situation is part of expressing virtue and part of the morally appropriate response. Pursuing the ends of virtue does not begin with making choices, but with recognizing the circumstances relevant to specific ends. In this sense, character is expressed in what one *sees* as much as what one *does*. Knowing how to discern the particulars, Aristotle stresses, is a mark of virtue. (Sherman 1989, p. 3)

There is more to the relevant sensibilities than the identification of reasons for action that McDowell and Dancy focus on. In Blum’s words:

The collapsing of the significance of moral perception into judgment of right action—and a consequent masking of its full value—is particularly striking in John McDowell’s influential article ‘Virtue and Reason’ . . . As McDowell develops his argument, . . . the notions of perception, salience, and sensitivity become defined solely in terms of the generating of right actions. What is to be perceived becomes, for

³⁵ An underexplored aspect of moral perception is that of contemplation. In recent works, Chappell defends the view that ‘good agency in the truest and fullest sense presupposes contemplation’ (Chappell 2014, p. 300).

McDowell, that consideration in a situation the acting of which will produce right action. (Blum 1994, pp. 43–4 n.21)

Reason for action is but *one* of the things perceived by the φρόνιμος. I have focused on the relation between virtue and action, but would agree with Blum that character traits can equally dispose us to see and to feel things in certain ways that do not directly involve action or the perception of reasons for it; salience and sensitivity should not be *defined* in terms of reason-generation. Nonetheless, they are not entirely detachable from our propensities to act in certain ways

In §IV, I quoted approvingly from a passage from McDowell in which he describes the virtuous agent as ‘a certain kind of person ... who sees situations in a certain distinctive way’ (McDowell 1979, p. 73). Chappell refers to the passage above as an example of the ‘lofty refusal to tell us anything much about right and wrong, beyond saying that they are whatever superior men (or, occasionally, women) tell us they are’ (Chappell 2006, p. 145). Be that as it may, I hope that PVE’s elucidation of the relation of right and wrong action to character traits cannot be accused of a similar quietism.

McDowell and Dancy both focus on reasons for action, but particularism is also persuasive at the level of emotion and perception even when these cannot be cashed out in terms of virtuous action; collectively, the three domains still do not add up to particularism about character traits. Practical wisdom unites one’s dispositions to perceive, feel and act well. While formal principles such as ‘Be practically intelligent’ or ‘Be virtuous’ are almost contentless, they present a suitable parking space for competing accounts of the virtues to fight over. These may be fleshed out without attention to which acts would be virtuous in which situations. Indeed, no set of rules prescribing what our psychological dispositions should result in seems capable of capturing them. For pragmatic purposes, I have centred my discussion on virtue and action, but I would agree that there are no rules for composing the morally salient features of a situation.³⁶

³⁶ I presented much earlier versions of this talk at the ‘Practical Reasons for Particularism’ conference, Duisberg-Essen University (14 June 2013) and The Pnyx, as part of the World Congress of Philosophy in Athens, Greece (10–15 July 2016). Many thanks to participants at both events, especially Tobias Gutmann (who was my respondent in 2013). For extremely helpful feedback and discussions, I would also like to thank Peter Aronoff, Nafsika Athanassoulis, Louise Chapman, Sophie-Grace Chappell, Jonathan Dancy, Simon Kirchin, Andreas Lind, Guy Longworth, Elijah Millgram, and Neil Roughley.

Department of Philosophy
 University of Hertfordshire
 De Havilland Campus
 Hatfield
 Hertfordshire AL10 9EU
 UK
 c.sandis@herts.ac.uk

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