

ON PARTICULARISM AND PECULIARITIES WITHIN

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Abstract

This paper aims at examining the meta-ethical doctrine of particularism in light of its constant tension with ethical absolutism; ultimately concluding that absolute moral rules are not really useful while making particular ethical decisions and that if they are used at all, they no more remain absolute. This standpoint, though seems to be on board with particularism, does not fully accept its claim that there is nothing like an absolute principle. I try to establish that there are absolute moral principles; it's just that they are not used in the manner they are supposed to be used. Through this analysis, this paper aims at two things: (i) to show that, at times, immorality is needed to perpetuate morality and (ii) to try and bring in the concept of "morality bank" where I am able to measure my graph of moral/immoral acts via the analysis of previous acts.

The discipline of ethics aspires to establish a system where there would be no perplexity at the time of making a judgement, moral in nature. My paper presupposes two things: (i) Morality aims to keep the world 'ordered' without bringing in external laws. This idea points towards the ideal and 'difficult to establish' situation of *agreed morality*. (ii) In a social setup, morality is not spontaneously born. It is a continuous sense of evolution. Before getting into the main idea of the paper it is

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important to first understand what is meant by these two presuppositions and how they positively strengthen the case at hand.

When I say that morality aims to keep the world ordered without bringing in externally binding laws, this indirectly points towards the fact that, all that morality looks forward to is the existence of 'order'. Now, ideally, things are better if there is an absence of external control, but the kind of diversity individual beings and their acts exhibit, it is impossible to expect order without the above mentioned binding control. For instance, whether it is the ethical theory of Kant or Mill, we see that they have the common aim of having a well ordered social structure. They could not trust human nature enough to let things be free.

The second point emphasizes that morality is not that much of a creation as it is a construction. There is no denying that different cultures own different sets of ethical beliefs and values, and it is the same value that gets perpetuated from one generation to another. Now, of course, the tradition changes and so does the value system. For instance, sati was once a part of the Indian culture which had no ethical strings attached to it until it became a subject of human rights, cruelty towards the fairer sex, and ethics in particular.

So together these two points attempt to set the stage for the main argument of the paper, i.e. absolute moral rules are not really useful while making particular ethical decisions and that if they are used at all, they no more remain absolute. The existence and application of absolute moral principles could have been easier if there was uniformity in the morally relevant feature of the world, but unfortunately the case is just the opposite. Because there are no uniformly relevant features of the world, making an 'absolute' and 'uncompromising' ethical judgement seems impossible. Zeroing down the entire ethical discourse to a handful of moral principles is not easy because the things to which these principles apply are, for the most part, human actions. No one looks for ethical accountability in the actions of, say, robots. This statement establishes that, as far as this paper is concerned, the object of examination would be human actions- actions committed by rational and fully aware mind. Now, the peculiarity of such actions is that they are not merely a series of objective events but are also the ones with a great deal of subjective considerations.

Consider the following two cases.

1. I know for sure that my friend is framed and wrongly charged for the crime he/she did not commit. To prove the innocence of my friend, all I have to do is to

¹ Landau, Russ Shafer, *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 750.

"steal" the evidences. The evidence which I already have is incomplete without the one which I should steal in order to save my friend. What should I do?

2. I am standing on the balcony on the third floor with little kids playing near-by and by accident, drop my father's extremely expensive cell phone. Now what do I do? I know that I can escape the charge by stealthily moving away from there and playing innocent when asked about it, or, I stay there. Now if I stay there and admit to my carelessness, I might get punished but will be tagged ethical for sure. The peculiarity comes into picture when I plan to run away. If I chose to run, did I do it after carefully processing every detail of the consequences of the 'running away' act or was this impulse already there, subconsciously in me, and which just got implemented?

In the first case, if I stoop to stealing, my act is, not, wholly, morally condemnable because had the circumstances not been so, I would never had to steal in the first place. Such instances go on to show that even though there are many absolute moral principles floating in the air, we do not really use them in the way they are supposed to be used.

What I propose to do in the paper is to defend 'ethical particularism' in the light of objections raised against it in the work 'Ethical Theory: An Anthology'² The thesis of my paper, then, is that there is really no use of absolute moral rules or laws while making judgments and if it is absolutely necessary that they be used then it is their "manipulated version" that is used. Particular acts call for particular treatment. An overseered application of the absolute moral principles leading to absolute moral duties might be in the mind of the subject but it is actually the phenomenal application of the principles (absolute principles manipulated by circumstances) that is used. For instance, I am fully aware of Immanuel Kant's intention behind his law that 'Stealing is wrong' or 'Lying is wrong' or 'Murder is wrong' and I totally respect his intentions; but I still choose to steal because if I don't steal there would be wreckage of other major laws- that of the sanctity of human life, that of justice, that of truth. Now just because I stole the evidences, doesn't mean that I am a thief (in the regular usage of the term) and I am going to go about breaking into houses at night and steal. And the reason which I give to justify my stealing is that 'it was necessary in that particular circumstance'. Another point of focus in the paper would be the reason that we give to justify our acts in such moral dilemmas. Gaining insights from Jonathan Dancy³ I wish to emphasize that since reason is

² Landau, Russ Shafer (ed), *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, Part XII, Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

³ Jonathan Dancy, *An Unprincipled Morality* (chapter 74) in Russ Shafer Landau (ed) *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

sensitive to context, particularism prevails and that even if there are moral reasons, there are no moral principles. My aim in this paper is two-fold:

1. To show that, at times, immorality is needed to perpetuate morality (which would also justify why exceptional cases could allow for rule breaking <immorality> in order to restore the morality in day to day practice)
2. To try and bring in the concept of "morality bank" where I am able to measure my graph of moral/immoral acts via the analysis of previous acts and try to balance the morality of my future act in advance.

The second point is an extension of the point that particular situations are not isolated; rather it is part of the running score. In short, *my sense of morality is a score of what I've done.*

Landau begins the introduction to part XII, which discusses Prima Facie Duties and Particularism, with the statement 'A moral rule is absolute just in case it may never be permissibly broken. Are there any such rules?'⁴ This question does an amazing thing. It gives the reader a *joint authorship* to contribute to the discussion, because if there is nothing absolute about the rules then this clearly shows that there is room for valid particular contributions.

To begin with, then, ethical particularism is the 'most extreme rejection of the idea that morality must be structured by reference to a set of moral rules. Particularists deny that there are any useful moral rules.'⁵ The word 'particularism' has two senses. First, particularism is the view that limits moral concerns to a particular group, class, society or nation, with the implicit rejection of universalism, the view that moral concerns in principle extend to the whole of the human race. Tribalism is a kind of particularism.⁶ But apart from this, the word has also been used in an entirely different sense, for the view that the particular feature of a situation, and not some general principle or rule, determine what conduct is morally right. The details make all the difference. So particularism or situation ethics (as it is sometimes called) does not accept universal rules of conduct as strictly binding. In other words, the particularists base their viewpoint on the fact that there is no uniformity in the moral features of the world, and therefore, each act to be ethically scrutinized must be done taking into account particular peculiarities of 'that particular case'. W.D. Ross is one philosopher who claims that moral rules are, in fact, not absolute, but rather of prima facie relevance. In *The Right and the Good* he writes:

⁴ Russ Shafer Landau, *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishing (2007), 749.

⁵ *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, 750.

⁶ Thomas Mautner (ed), *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*; Penguin Reference, 2000, 412.

"...what I am speaking of is an objective fact involved in the nature of a situation, or more strictly in an element of its nature, though not, as duty proper does, arising from its whole nature."⁷ Now the reason why we are discussing Ross's account of prima facie duties is that it consists of a vast range of arguments which the particularist uses to strengthen its stand. Ross's prima duties suggest that there are few exceptional cases where if we abide by the absolute principles, it would yield disastrous results. He takes the example of promise. If I have promised my sister that I'll take her to the theater today, then it becomes my absolute duty to take her to theater (by virtue of the fact that I have promised her). Now suppose the moment I reach half way I happen to witness an accident where the victim urgently needed to be taken to the doctor. What ought I do? The moral absolutists would argue that I should be get going to my sister because if I don't go then I breach the sanctity of promise. Ross, on the other hand, would argue that though it is my duty to attend to my sister, there is still a greater duty which requires that I take this person to doctor because "it is the duty which is in the circumstances more of a duty."⁸

Ross goes on to give a list of prima facie duties which is widely criticized for being arbitrary, having lack of balance, and invoking the problem of knowing how to deal the cases where there is a conflict of prima facie duties. Without getting into the objections now, it would suffice to keep in mind that Ross's prima facie duties explain to a large extent what ethical aims for. Ross made it very clear in the beginning of his paper that what he would be dealing with is not the regular acts which is either black or white (acts where the intention of the doer is crystal clear which makes it easier to label the act as ethical/unethical) but rather with acts of grey shades (exceptional acts in which abiding by a moral rule leads to disastrous results). It is these 'particular' duties with further peculiarities that call for, not absolute, but prima facie ones.

It is interesting to see further that the particularists are not at all supportive of this whole business just mentioned above. For the particularists, not only are there no absolute moral rules; there are no prima facie ones either. Now the important thing to note here is that for the particularists, 'duty' is not something which is an absolute necessity if one genuinely strives to establish his moral being. And it goes without saying that the place of duty is taken up by my understanding of the situation which

⁷ William David Ross, *The Right and the Good*, Philip Stratton-Lake (ed); Oxford University Press, 2002, 20.

⁸ William David Ross, *What Makes Right Acts Right?*; (chapter 72) in Russ Shafer Landau (ed.) *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 753.

makes me act in a particular way, ultimately ensuring my 'self preservation'. This is really how the world functions, for the most part.

What I want to show through this point is the everyday morality that takes place without disrupting the ethical balance. There is truly no harm in being immoral once in a while provided that it doesn't outdo the general standards. Let us take an example. Suppose there is a very sincere student who is known in his school as being the one who always prepares for the class and truly does so. The teacher who teaches is also aware of his practice and appreciated him for that. Suppose further that one day, he could not read the text either because he could not find his book or for some other similar reasons, and comes to the class unprepared. The teacher asks, as always, as to who all have read and come. Now what should the student do? There are two things he can do. Either he tells the teacher that he hasn't read the book or he raises his hands and takes a chance. Now the absolutists would say that he should not raise his hands. But what is wrong if he does that? If I do not raise my hand, I am putting my sincerity to question. Though there is a huge probability that the teacher would not ask questions from me (by virtue of the fact that I always answer whenever I am asked to answer), there is still a chance that she'll ask me. What am I to do if she asks me the questions? I can always tell her that though I've read the text I could not understand it, which is a second lie again. Through this example I only intend to show that though lying is something bad as a principle, it can be, or say, it is, used to smoothen the conversation and to avoid ugly surprises. The reason I give for justifying myself is that *I at least read and come. A whole lot of students don't even do that. So if I miss my reading ones, it is okay. I did my reading for the whole ten times except for the sixth time. But since it does not affect my sincerity in the long run and doesn't afflict any negativity in my teachers and fellow students, it's okay to do it once.*

Now this is the 'reason' that I am giving to justify myself. If we free our self of all the pressure to preach morality and come down to basic common sense reality then this is exactly what we do. Dancy's paper *An Unprincipled Morality*⁹ tries to do just this. He insists that there are cases where moral principles do not exist but moral reasons do. It is really difficult to say what 'moral principles' or 'moral reasons' really are or who is to decide what should consist of them. So grave is the difficulty to even beginning talking about them. But then, the fact that society exists and is not that a bad place to live in clearly shows that though there might be principles (absolute in nature) ultimately man uses his own set of pre-decided course of actions. Now this takes us to a stage where we see how ethical decisions are not

⁹ Jonathan Dancy, "An Unprincipled Morality" in Russ Shafer Landau (ed), *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, Chapter 74.

made arbitrarily in particular cases but is, instead, a well thought off decision (even though it looks impulsive). I propose that when we lie it is not that we are not thinking that we are lying. It is actually the other way round. When we lie, we think of it indirectly all the time. We think of it in stages: the pre-stage, the event, and the post-stage. For instance, suppose I do not want to go to work today. It's is not something unnatural, we all need break. I try and think of the reasons before calling up my supervisor. I know I am going to lie. Now this is what is called the 'pre stage'. Here I tell myself that it is only better that I don't go to work because weighing the pros and the cons of going , I came to the conclusion that it's be better that I do not go. Because if I go then I'll not give my 100% to the job at hand, I will develop a grudge feeling towards my boss that he didn't let me take an off, I will not get the much needed break. Then comes the event of lying. I call him and tell him that I am not feeling well and so would not be coming today. Next in line is the post-lying stage. Even if I am granted the leave I don't stop thinking about it. I do it indirectly all the time. I think how would it be if the boss found out about my lying, how far would this jeopardize my sincerity in his eyes and so on. This 'break' and the 'event of lying' give me time to think whether I want to do it again! And if even in one case also it works then this would prove two things: (i) at times, immorality perpetuates morality and (ii) what use is that morality which does not perpetuate morality?

What if my confession to a crime gets me killed, when I really truly want to change? If I am able to preserve myself then I might be able to perpetuate morality. Though this notion of self perseverance is not too welcomed in ethics and is considered purely animalistic but no matter how bitter this truth is, it remains a fact that ultimately, we all works towards the end of self preservation, or the fact that 'it at least works for me'. Now this does not mean that all actions can be ethically justified solely on the grounds that "well! It works for me!" Had this been the case then a sadist would be able to justify his acts rationally. It is the nature of human species to rationalize their acts. What is focused here are those exceptional cases where breaching of the absolute moral rules is good. But then the question can be asked as to *what gives a man the license to bend the rules?* If a particularist was to answer this question, he would deny the question itself as being a wrong question. Because for him, there is nothing called a 'rule' that has been bent. For him, each situation is different, people involved in the situation are different and also, the same situation is perceived differently by different people. So, as Mr. Kant, in order to prove the forcefulness of his theory went to the extent of saying that even if a murderer asks about the whereabouts of the innocent victim, you ought to tell him, because you ought to speak the truth no matter what; it is not always true and moreover, not true of each individual. If I keep myself at the place of the victim would I want my whereabouts to be told to the murderer?

But no matter how morally complicated it looks, there is still something that needs to be addressed. The fact that, since ethics is not like physical science which is governed by laws and principles, it evolves. Now, of course, physical sciences also evolved and they continue to be so. For instance, till a remarkable amount of centuries back it was believed by the best minds in the world that the earth was flat or the animals are the smallest things until people opened their minds, became receptive to many innovative ideas that things changed to the present. And still today, no one is so remarkably arrogant to claim that 'this is it' there is nothing more to discover now. Similar is the case with human nature and their relation to judging the moral acts. Where nothing remains static even for a moment, how can we be daring enough to propose principles which demand absoluteness as their essence?

So what I propose is that instead of there being externally governing absolute principles of morality, we can cultivate the same 'order' by leaving things to the conviction of the person in question. How easy things would become if there we could open an account in what I call "morality bank". Though absolute goodness is what is actually expected of a rationally competent human being, but this is not expectation, it is rather unreal-expectation. How do you really expect a man to be absolutely moral when there are no such criteria to define what absolute moral rules are? There is no denying the fact that there are some things which are inherently bad, and which can never be agreed upon. Murder, for instance. Imagine a place where murdering someone is not that big an issue: neither legally nor morally bound. Can you, in such a situation, go to work with complete sanity when you know that your son is at home, alone? All that you'd want is to ensure the preservation of yourself and your son. And if under ugly circumstances, you had to kill someone while saving your son, how much wrong would it be?

Imagine another situation. Suppose I need a thousand buck very urgently. If I need it to buy a life saving medicine, there is a higher probability that, I'll not hesitate to murder/rob the person who has that amount. In this case I need the money for my preservation. But if I need the money to pay off goons who are behind my life (because I lost in gamble and didn't pay them back) then this is also a case of self preservation, but of a lesser kind. The intention behind these examples was to show that 'self preservation' is the ultimate reason for doing an action the way it is done. Many might not agree with this stand but if you keep reducing an act to its last bit, you'll see that a person did it because it saved it from a lot of unwanted and unnecessary hassles.

Because we always try to rationalize our acts, particularism gives us that space to do it. It is our nature to walk away with a little debit on our side. But this really does

not mean that we can justify all our acts by virtue of the fact that 'this situation demanded me to do this'. The present paper only aimed to show that the absolute rules, absolute laws, and absolute principles that we talk about are not really helpful in making decisions in some particular circumstances. No matter how much I read about the absolutist ethics, at the end of the day, I'll do what suits me (keeping in mind that my act doesn't go the extreme of getting attention). There are times when I compromise only because I think that the other party in question has not really been lucky dealing with me. So what I really did in the paper was not so much as to examine what ought to be right/ethical, who determines that 'what ought to be', why is this course right or wrong et cetera. All I have done is to show how things really work, and will continue to work unless there is a major paradigmatic shift in the basic human nature. Because there is truth in the fact that each individual has an individuality, that he has basic yet different sets of belief, that for him even two similar acts mean different things; this also shows that must be element of truth in the fact that there is nothing inherently absolute about even the most stern principles of murder, rape, lying, et cetera. There always exists some exceptional case where the breaching of absolute principle would be moral. And the presence of even one such act would show that there is always room for more such particular duties with yet different set of peculiarities.

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