who have lives worth not living than to add individuals who have lives worth living (but just below \(v\)). Broome seems prepared to accept this conclusion (p. 213), but—to me at least—it seems worse than the standard version of the repugnant conclusion, where \(v=0\). After all, the worst-off individuals referred to in the sadistic conclusion can truly say that they have lives that are much worse for them than zero lives (I would add that their lives are much worse for them than non-existence, but Broome is sceptical with respect to the importance of this claim), whereas the better-off individuals can truly say that they have good lives (lives worth living)—perhaps very good lives, depending on the exact location of \(v\). In the standard version of the repugnant conclusion, on the other hand, the worse-off individuals all have lives worth living and we can see how the goodness of their lives might add up to an outcome that is better than the less populated outcome. (Broome also suggests that the vagueness of the neutral level may render both the repugnant and the sadistic conclusion seem less disturbing, but points out that we then again have the problem that adding individuals in the neutral range can cancel out the badness of people being harmed, p. 214). While Broome may not have solved the problems of population ethics, he has certainly improved our understanding of them.

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The doctrine called moral particularism poses a serious challenge to traditional conceptions of moral philosophy—and maybe even to the self-understanding of ordinary moral agents. According to traditional conceptions, moral principles (such as ‘It is wrong to murder an innocent person’) are not only a possible and desirable but even a constitutive feature of morality. The common assumption is ‘that a moral person is a person of principle, that one should make decisions by relating one’s principles to the facts of the case before one, and that an action can only be right if there is a principle that somehow says so’ (p. 1). Defenders of particularism think all this is wrong—so there seems to be a lot of convincing for them to do.

Together with David McNaughton (see his *Moral Vision* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1988], especially Ch. 13), Jonathan Dancy has done most of this work to establish particularism as a substantial alternative in moral philosophy. In one of his first contributions he introduced particularism as the view that moral principles are nonexistent and that ethical decisions are made case by case since it is impossible to specify features of a situation as having general moral relevance (‘Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties’, *Mind* 92 [1983], pp. 530-47). In his first book on the topic (*Moral Reasons* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1993], especially Ch. 4 ‘Why Particularism?’) Dancy argued that holism in the theory of reasons is the leading thought behind particularism: whether something is a reason in a new case cannot be predicted from observing other cases. That an action causes pleasure can be a reason in favour of doing it, but it can also be no reason at all or even a reason against it—depending on the context, i.e. on the other features of the situation.
That reality itself should be seen as practical was just the next step in the argument: the reasons we have for doing one thing rather than another stem from how things are (and not from what we believe or want); they consist in aspects of the situation (Practical Reality [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000]). The best short and up-to-date exposition of the view is Jonathan Dancy, ‘Moral Particularism’, in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Dancy’s most recent book Ethics Without Principles is the complex attempt to give a systematic—according to the publisher even ‘the definitive’—statement of particularism and to defend it against various alternatives and criticisms (some of which are collected in Brad Hooker and Margaret Little (eds.), Moral Particularism [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000]). Dancy’s initial definition of particularism is, however, surprisingly weak. He takes the particularist to claim that ‘the possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles’ (p. 7). Of course, Dancy’s subsequent efforts show that what is at stake is not the mere possibility of particularism. Rather, particularism claims that we get our moral practices fundamentally wrong if we conceive of them as prominently involving moral principles.

Offering counter-examples to proposed moral principles clearly is not enough since everybody knows that there is an exception to every rule—and the friends of principle will be happy to go through the tiring exercise of producing ever more complex formulations of their principles. Naturally, with increasing complexity comes decreasing usefulness but neither the generalist nor the particularist can say in advance where exactly one turns into the other. In line with his earlier work Dancy therefore looks for backing in the theory of reasons where he introduces a whole series of new family members—all standing for different roles ‘contributory reasons’ can play: they can be ‘favourers’, ‘enablers’, ‘disfavourers’, ‘disablers’, ‘intensifiers’ or ‘attenuators’. These are just so many different ways of being relevant, of being a feature whose presence makes a difference for how one ought to judge the situation and act. Dancy’s claim is that only the particularist approach can account for this contributory aspect of reasons.

It is, however, not entirely clear if there is a direct route from holism to particularism. If holism is true and there is only variable relevance this should also hold for moral reasons. They, too, are context-dependent: a feature that makes one action better (e.g. that I promised to do something) can make another worse. Now principles seem to attempt to specify features with invariable relevance, features that have a certain significance independent from context (e.g. ‘this is causing unnecessary pain’). However, principles do not have to be understood this way—they can be formulated in a way that is not only compatible with holism but presupposes it (see also Michael Ridge and Sean McKeever, ‘What Does Holism have to do with Moral Particularism?’, Ratio 18 [2005], pp. 93-103). And even Dancy seems to admit that therefore particularism cannot be derived from holism. What he claims, however, is that on a holistic account the provision of principles does not seem required (Ch. 5.2). The question, then, is not whether generalism or particularism are possible or impossible but which option makes better sense of our moral practices.

Particularism claims that moral judgments have the form ‘this is x (cruel, …) and therefore wrong’ and do not involve principles or even inferences. The judgment is about the reasons present in the case at hand, the particular features of the situation that are morally salient. This is not a matter of knowing and applying the right