

# Moral particularism and the charge of intuitionism

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“You can't just turn on creativity like a faucet. You have to be in the right mood.

- *What mood is that?*

Last-minute panic.”

— Bill Watterson

“Am I a good person? Deep down, do I even really want to be a good person, or do I only want to seem like a good person so that people (including myself) will approve of me? Is there a difference? How do I ever actually know whether I'm bullshitting myself, morally speaking?”

— David Foster Wallace

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## Introduction

Morality is complicated. Certainly, there are easy cases, and these easy cases seem to have easy answers. Is it a good thing to show compassion towards those who, through no fault of their own, have fallen on hard times and are suffering tremendously? It probably is. Is it permissible to torture a baby, just because you're having a rough day at the office? Probably not. But, like life itself, morality is not always as straightforward as we would like it to be. Difficult moral questions usually cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. They require (much) thought and even that might not be enough to determine what the correct answer is. If anything, we tend to disagree a lot when we deal with complicated moral issues. That does, or should, not say anything about our capacity to make moral judgements. Some moral cases really are extremely complex. Consider the following thought experiment given by Michael Patton.

“On Twin Earth, a brain in a vat is at the wheel of a runaway trolley. There are only two options that the brain can take: the right side of the fork in the track or the left side of the fork. There is no way in sight of derailing or stopping the trolley and the brain is aware of this, for the brain *knows* trolleys. The brain is causally hooked up to the trolley such that the brain can determine the course which the trolley will take. On the right side of the track there is a single railroad worker, Jones, who will definitely be killed if the brain steers the trolley to the right. If the railman on the right lives, he will go on to kill five men for the sake of killing them, but in doing so will inadvertently save the lives of thirty orphans (one of the five men he will kill is planning to destroy a bridge that the orphan's bus will be crossing later that night) (...). If the brain in the vat chooses the left side of the track, the trolley will definitely hit and kill a railman on the left side of the track, "Leftie", and will hit and destroy ten beating hearts on the track that could (and would) have been transplanted into ten patients in the local hospital that will die without donor hearts. These are the only hearts available, and the brain is aware of this, for the brain *knows* hearts. If the railman on the left side of the track lives, he too will kill five men, in fact the same five that the railman on the right would kill. However, "Leftie" will kill the five as an unintended consequence of saving ten men: he will inadvertently kill the five men rushing the ten hearts to the local hospital for transplantation. A further result of "Leftie's" act would be that the busload of orphans will be spared (...).

Assume that the brain's choice, whatever it turns out to be, will serve as an example to other brains-in-vats and so the effects of his decision will be amplified. Also assume that if the brain chooses the right side of the fork, an unjust war free of war crimes will ensue, while if the brain chooses the left fork, a just war fraught with war crimes will result (...).

QUESTION: What should the brain do?”<sup>1</sup>

If this were a test question for first year philosophy students, all would probably flunk. In fact, most would tear up their exams and give up studying philosophy altogether. Luckily, the only thing Patton’s example shows is that moral conundrums can be made incredibly complex (and it hopefully proves that philosophers are not totally devoid of a sense of humour). It seems to me that there is no intelligible answer to the question above because of the enormous number of facts one has to be aware of if one wants to make an informed decision: the lives of the five men Jones is planning to kill, the busload of orphans, the ten men waiting for a heart transplant, a just war with or an unjust war without war crimes. They all have moral significance. No normal human can be expected to have an answer to this moral question, let alone if he or she only has a limited amount of time.

Though morality may never be as complicated as in Patton’s example, very complex moral issues do exist and people, as one would expect, tend to struggle in those situations. This struggle is the driving force behind this thesis. It is a thesis on our ability to make reliable moral judgements, to be good moral actors and to have intelligible moral discussions. How does morality function? How are people able to reliably and consistently make good moral judgements? If we encounter a really difficult moral case, how should we go about in finding answers?

I do not pretend that I will be able to give a definitive answer to any of the questions above. However, my goal is to shed some light on one important aspect of the nature of morality: the relationship between moral principles and moral judgements. It is often thought that moral principles fulfil a crucial role in our capacity to make moral judgements. This is called moral generalism. To justify a specific moral judgement one would need to be able to base it on an appropriate moral principle. If one were to say that it is wrong to kill five men just because you feel like it, that can only be correct if there is an appropriate principle. For example, a principle which dictates something along the lines of it always being wrong to take someone’s life if your own isn’t in danger. If one were to say that it is good to give money to the homeless, there would have to be a principle which is in accordance to that statement. At first glance, this seems to be obviously correct. For if we do not base our justification of moral judgements on a set of principles, on what grounds can we justify our moral judgements?

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<sup>1</sup> Michael F. Patton, “Can Bad Men Make Good Brains Do Bad Things?,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 61, no. 3 (1988): 555–56, doi:10.2307/3130236.

But there are those who think that moral principles do not (or should not) play such a pivotal role in our moral thinking. This is called moral particularism. Broadly speaking, a moral particularist does not believe that moral principles (should) have any significant role in our moral thinking. As Jonathan Dancy puts it, “particularists think that moral judgement can get along perfectly well without any appeal to principles, indeed that there is no essential link between being a full moral agent and having principles.”<sup>2</sup> The generalist, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of the relationship between moral principles and suitable moral judgements. The generalist sees the perfect moral judge as someone who has “a sufficient range of sound moral principles”<sup>3</sup> and who is capable of flawlessly applying said principles to individual cases. Moral particularism is most vigorously defended by Jonathan Dancy, but also finds support with David McNaughton<sup>4</sup> and possibly John McDowell.<sup>5</sup> Generalism, on the other hand, is accepted by most philosophers. “Philosophers otherwise as diverse as Plato, Aquinas, Kant, Mill, Sidgwick, Moore, Ross, Hare, and Rawls (...) agree that whatever the morally right thing to do may be, it can be captured in general principles.”<sup>6</sup> Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge<sup>7</sup> are the most prominent contemporary defenders of generalism and have written an extensive defence of the theory.

Though most of the discussion regarding this debate focuses on the metaphysical aspect of moral particularism, this thesis is aimed at shedding more light on of the practical implications of particularism. This practical aspect can be found in an argument given by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong in his article *Some Varieties of Particularism*. In it, he claims that moral particularism is untenable, arguing that even the weakest, most defensible version of moral particularism cannot be maintained. His main point is that particularism entails intuitionism, and that intuitionism is so objectionable, one ought to reject moral particularism as well. As Russ Shafer-Landau defines it, “ethical intuitionism is the view that there are non-inferentially justified moral beliefs. A belief is non-inferentially justified provided that its justification does not depend on a believer’s ability to infer it from another belief.”<sup>8</sup> Intuitionism has long had a bad name in moral philosophy. Julia

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Dancy, “Moral Particularism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2013, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/moral-particularism/>.

<sup>4</sup> David McNaughton, *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> John McDowell, “Values and Secondary Qualities,” in *Morality and Objectivity*, ed. Ted Honderich (Routledge, 1985), 110–129.

<sup>6</sup> Pëkka Vayrynen, “Moral Particularism,” in *Continuum Companion to Ethics*, by Christian Miller (London: Continuum Press, 2011), 2, <http://www.personal.leeds.ac.uk/~phlpv/papers/moralparticularism.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge, *Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Russ Shafer-Landau, “Defending Ethical Intuitionism,” in *Moral Psychology, Volume 2: The Cognitive Science of Morality: Intuition and Diversity*, by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 83.

Hermann notes that it “was highly unpopular in the second half of the 20th century,”<sup>9</sup> while Roeser calls it “one of the more controversial theories in moral philosophy.”<sup>10</sup>

I intend to critically examine Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument. In the first chapter, I summarize his paper and explain the different versions of moral particularism. In the second chapter, I show why there are certain core ideas that the particularist is committed to and why Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument packs a strong punch against the particularist project. In the third chapter, I explain what intuitionism is in more detail and examine whether Sinnott-Armstrong is correct in claiming that particularists necessarily need to be intuitionist. Finally, I investigate whether intuitionism really is as objectionable as Sinnott-Armstrong makes it out to be. Doing this enables me to answer the question whether Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument against moral particularism is successful.

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<sup>9</sup> Julia Hermann, “Californian Wine and Moral Beliefs. What’s Wrong with Sinnott- Armstrong’s Argument against Moral Intuitionism,” 2015, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Sabine Roeser, *Moral Emotions and Intuitions*, 2010 edition (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 4.

## 1. Four types of particularism

As Walter Sinnott-Armstrong notes, moral particularism is popular.<sup>11</sup> In his paper *Some Varieties of Particularism* he distinguishes between four ways of understanding particularism: analytic, metaphysical, epistemological and methodological. In what follows I explain how Sinnott-Armstrong understands these forms of particularism and why he objects to them.

### 1.1 Analytic particularism

The first type of particularism Sinnott-Armstrong is concerned with is called analytic particularism. Analytic particularism is the claim that all moral judgements are about particular actions.<sup>12</sup> This seems like an implausibly strong, and somewhat odd, form of particularism to defend. We clearly see this, for example, when we realize that Dancy considers the most trenchant form of particularism to be “the claim that there are no defensible moral principles, that moral thought does not consist in the application of moral principles to cases, and that the morally perfect person should not be conceived as the person of principle.”<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, the claim of analytic particularism seems to go beyond this, since it says that we do not even refer to moral principles to begin with. On the other, it says nothing about the supposed existence or practicality of moral principles, and as such, is a rather peculiar form of particularism.

It is also clear, so says Sinnott-Armstrong, that we have no reason whatsoever to accept this claim. He points out that “action sentences have to be analyzed with quantifiers, and (...) deontic logic falls into paradoxes unless judgments about obligations and what ought to be done are analyzed with operators quantified on action sentences.”<sup>14</sup> Suppose that there is a very specific moral judgement – Jay has promised his neighbour Tom to clean his carpets (after spilling a drink on it) next Sunday at noon, and thus, there is some obligation Jay has towards Tom. Even under such specific circumstances, what Jay ought to do is not one particular act as the cleaning of the carpet can be done in a number of ways. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that this applies to all moral judgements and that all moral obligations can be fulfilled in multiple ways. Therefore, “no moral judgment is basically about only one particular act.”<sup>15</sup> The same goes for past-tense moral judgements (Jay cleaning Tom’s carpet last Sunday at noon was morally required), because even though they refer to one particular act, this obligation could have been fulfilled in a (slightly) different way. There is nothing in a past-tense moral judgement preventing this from being a possibility. Thus, moral judgements “are implicitly universal, and so can be seen

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Some Varieties of Particularism,” *Metaphilosophy* 30, no. 1&2 (1999): 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Dancy, “Moral Particularism.”

<sup>14</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “Some Varieties of Particularism,” 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

as implying a principle in a minimal way. Action theory and deontic logic alone are enough to refute any variety of particularism that claims otherwise.”<sup>16</sup>

## 1.2 Metaphysical particularism

I do not think that the particularist should be worried about rejecting analytic particularism, as no particularist is (nor should he be) committed to the thesis that our moral judgements are really about particular acts. No particularist makes a claim about the logical form of moral judgements, for the particularist is concerned about the possible existence and value of moral principles. Sinnott-Armstrong realizes this as well and so he moves on to metaphysical particularism – the claim that moral judgements are made true not by general principles, as the generalist thinks, but by the non-moral facts which apply to the particular acts in question. For example, Jay has an obligation towards Tom. That obligation (a moral property) is the result of a non-moral property: namely, the property of Jay living up to his earlier made promise. The generalist argues that *this relation of resultant* leads to moral principles, if the property involved in Jay’s case would have the same effect, i.e. would result in the same type of moral obligation, in every other case. The particularist denies this and argues that this relationship of *resultance* can change between different contexts.

So, if the metaphysical particularist denies the existence of moral principles, why and how does he do it? I take the work of Dancy, by some described as the arch-particularist,<sup>17</sup> to be indicative of the particularist line of thought. Before moving on, let us take a look at what a principle is for Dancy. In *Ethics without Principles*, he gives a list of conditions a principle must meet if it is to count as a genuine, moral principle:

1. “Coverage: The moral status of every action must be determined by the principles, in one way or another. (Otherwise the principles would fail to cover the ground.)
2. Reasons: Of each action that has a moral status, the principles must somehow tell us why it has that status. (...)
3. Epistemology: We must be able to learn the principles, either from experience in some way or from each other, e.g., by testimony.
4. Applicability: The principles must be capable of functioning as a guide to action in a new case; having learnt them, one must be able to follow them or apply them.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> McKeever and Ridge, *Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 116–17.

Schwind, I think rightly, notes that this is asking a whole lot, and quite possibly too much, from principled ethicists. Condition 2 dictates that principles have explanatory value, and as such can be described as principles *qua standards*. Condition 4, on the other hand, dictates that principles have a practical element and can be used to help an agent decide on what the morally right thing to do is. This condition makes it a principle *qua guide*. These two conditions are in tension with each other: “a principle *qua guide* might contain simplifications of an overly complicated reality or rules of thumbs necessary for its practical purpose, leading to false implications in some cases and therefore not offering truth-conditions, while a principle *qua standard* might be too complicated to serve as a guide in everyday moral deliberation.”<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, the problem here is that there is a worry that those principles which are principles *qua standards* are not qualified to be principles *qua guides* (*and vice versa*). This means that Dancy has made the requirements for something to be a principle so strict, that no principle can survive.

Dancy notes that there are two types of principles: absolute and contributory. If moral principles are absolute, a principle would be “a universal claim to the effect that all actions of a certain type are overall wrong (or right or permitted).”<sup>20</sup> Suppose there is a principle stating “stealing is wrong”. This means that in each and every case that something is being stolen, whatever the circumstances might be, this makes the action wholly wrong.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not there are redeeming features to be found in the act, e.g. a loaf of bread being stolen by a father for a starving family, does not matter. Dancy notes that the problem is that under the idea of absolute principles, we cannot make sense of a conflict between reasons, which seems to be an important part of our moral lives. Such conflict cannot take place “if all reasons are specified in absolute principles, because if the reasons conflicted the principles specifying them would conflict, and this would just show that one of the principles was a fraud.”<sup>22</sup> One way of replying, the only way, so says Dancy, would be to say that there is just one absolute principle which governs our morality. Value monism would exclude the problem of conflict, but for Dancy this is not a sufficient answer, simply because value monism “is false; there is more than one sort of relevant property, or more than one way in which features can get to be morally relevant.”<sup>23</sup>

Contributory principles, on the other hand, are a step in the right direction for Dancy, as they allow for moral conflict. Let us suppose that we deal with the wrongness of breaking a promise. A contributory principle still maintains that whenever a promise is being broken, that feature of the act counts against it. It does not necessarily make the action wholly wrong, but the

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<sup>19</sup> Philipp Schwind, “A Critical Discussion of Jonathan Dancy’s Moral Particularism” (St. Andrews, 2006), 53.

<sup>20</sup> Dancy, “Moral Particularism.”

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

“action is the worse for being a promise-breaking.”<sup>24</sup> However, there might be other features (involving other principles) that apply to the action, something not possible under the absolute conception of principles. Now, what the generalist claims is that these contributory principles specify how “a feature that makes a difference in one case will make the same sort of difference in every case.”<sup>25</sup> This invariance of features is what the particularist objects to.

One way to object to this position is by providing counter-examples to supposed invariant principles. W.D. Ross’ theory of *prima facie duties* is Dancy’s intended target here: “Ross supposes, for instance, in accordance with long tradition, that the fact that one has promised to do something is always some reason to do it. A counter-example to this claim would be a case where, for peculiar reasons no doubt, the fact that one has promised to do something is either no reason to do it or even a reason not to do it. Suppose, for instance, that I have promised not to keep my next three promises; what then?”<sup>26</sup> Another way of criticizing Ross’ position relies on the truth of holism about reasons. Holism about reasons is the thesis that “a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another.”<sup>27</sup> If holism is true, Ross, or any generalist sympathetic to his theory, cannot merely assume that a feature makes the same type of impact (in other words, has the same polarity) in different situations, since this is exactly what holism denies.<sup>28</sup> Opposed to holism stands atomism, the thesis that “a feature that is a reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity, in any other.”<sup>29</sup>

Dancy’s argument in favour of holism is long and complicated, and deserves more attention than I can give here, but it relies on his characterization of what a reason is. For something to be a reason for action is to say that it stands “in a certain relation to action, and the relation at issue is one of favouring.”<sup>30</sup> He makes a crucial distinction between favourers and enablers. The example he uses to drive the point home goes as follows:

1. “I promised to do it.
2. My promise was not given under duress.
3. I am able to do it.
4. There is no greater reason not to do it.
5. So: I do it.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Schwind, “A Critical Discussion of Jonathan Dancy’s Moral Particularism,” 37–38.

<sup>29</sup> Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 39.

Dancy claims that only the first premise is a favourer and that the rest, numbers 2, 3 and 4, are enablers.<sup>32</sup> There is a difference between favourers and enablers and that difference is crucial. Enablers are those features which allows the favourer to favour (while disablers prevent it from favouring), but it is the favourer which does the heavy lifting.<sup>33</sup> Favourers, for Dancy, are reasons, and vice versa, and anything that is not a favourer is not part of the reason.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, Dancy, or the metaphysical particularist, separates a reason from its enablers (and disablers or defeaters). There are plenty of reason defeaters to consider: Tom might decide that he does not want his carpet cleaned after all, he might have dropped a burning cigarette on it, setting it on fire, or Jay could break his hand and thus be physically unable to clean the carpet. Whatever the defeater may be, the particularist argues that they are not part of the reason. The reason for Jay to clean Tom's carpet was his promise to do so. From this promise the obligation follows. The fact that he broke his hand undermines that reason, and justifies Jay in not cleaning the carpet, but it is merely a background condition.<sup>35</sup> This goes against the idea of there being exceptionless principles – if a principle is exceptionless and applies to a certain situation, surely it must be the case that if we judge an action to be right in one case, we must judge relevantly similar actions to be right as well. For the particularist, an action is relevantly similar to another if both actions share the right making reasons. In the example of Jay and Tom, however, the reason stays the same (namely, the promise), but the rightness of the action is influenced by the context (namely, the possible defeaters).<sup>36</sup>

The particularist holds that actions can differ in terms of background conditions, while remaining relevantly similar. “Background conditions do not count as reasons any more than they count as causes. Just as the absence of water is not a cause of a match lighting,”<sup>37</sup> so Jay breaking his hand is not a reason not to clean the carpet. The generalist must deny this and has, as I see it, two choices. Either he holds that background conditions (enablers and defeaters) are part of the reason or, like Sinnott-Armstrong does, he must argue that reason defeaters ought to be considered in determining whether actions are relevantly similar to each other. This move is attractive because it allows the generalist to save exceptionless principles while also

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Raz, “The Trouble with Particularism (Dancy’s Version),” *Mind* 115, no. 457 (2006): 103.

<sup>34</sup> As Raz notes, “(4) is clearly not part of the reason, and if I was right about ability neither is (3)” (Raz 2006, 103), but can we also say the same thing about (2)? Is it really true that what constitutes a favourer is not just the first premise, but the second one as well? Is my promising in and of itself a favourer, regardless of whether that promise was made freely? Dancy seems to think so: “For I don’t myself accept the idea that the real favourer is that I freely promised rather than that I promised, so that it is a mistake to think that promises only give a reason if they are freely made. I stick to the view that what favours my doing the action is that I engaged myself to do so. But it is hard to know how to tell whether this is correct or not. One clue is that those who recognize that their promise was deceitfully extracted from them often feel some compunction on not doing what they promised” (Dancy 2004, 39).

<sup>35</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “Some Varieties of Particularism,” 5–6.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

acknowledging the importance of context sensitivity. These qualified principles “are fully compatible with Dancy’s contextualism, since they allow the existence and force of reasons to vary with the context, which includes defeaters.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, the generalist has a way of answering the particularist worries: by incorporating reason defeaters, he can explain how two similar situations of promise-keeping may still differ in their moral requirements.

But perhaps the complaint of the metaphysical particularist is not that it is impossible to come up with context-sensitive and exceptionless principles, but that there is an issue of incompleteness.<sup>39</sup> That is to say, we might never come up with a full set of defeaters and enablers and no matter how many we already know, there is no reason to think that there might not be more lurking around the corner. As such, a codified morality is impossible and we cannot really speak of exceptionless principles if we have to be wary of them being vulnerable to the “to the vagaries of future situations.”<sup>40</sup> But, Sinnott-Armstrong argues, this complaint does not hold under scrutiny. For this, it helps to distinguish between completeness in principle and completeness in practice. No argument by Dancy prevents the generalist from continuously adding enablers and defeaters when he becomes aware of them, and as such there is no reason to think that completeness in principle is impossible. Incompleteness in practice, on the other hand, really does not help the metaphysical particularist at all. Our inability to completely codify morality should not be too much of a worry, as it does not say anything about what morality looks like or how it works. It would only say something about the nature of morality if you would think “that there can be no more to morality than what everyone knows already.”<sup>41</sup> As such, there seems to be little reason to think that metaphysical particularism is true.

### 1.3 Epistemological particularism

It might very well be the case that metaphysical generalist is correct and there really are moral principles. Still, incompleteness in practice might have implications for our moral epistemology. Suppose I want to justify my belief in a certain (complex) moral judgement. How am I to achieve that if the list of relevant features is incomplete? If we are incapable of completely codifying morality, we might not at all times have a truly exceptionless principle at hand to justify our moral

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 7–8.

<sup>40</sup> Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 92.

<sup>41</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “Some Varieties of Particularism,” 8.

beliefs. And so, the epistemological particularist holds that we should justify our moral beliefs by looking at the particular acts, rather than looking at moral principles.<sup>42</sup>

Even if true, incompleteness merely shows us that there is a certain level of epistemic uncertainty. Our justification has some conditionality in it, that is to say, I am justified in thinking that a certain act is morally wrong, as long as there are no relevant defeaters I am unaware of. Incompleteness in practice shows us that we cannot be sure that there are no defeaters and hence, we cannot be certain about our moral beliefs, but we should not be unduly worried about that. It signifies our fallibility and to a certain degree, the same uncertainty can be found in the natural sciences as well.<sup>43</sup> This does not mean that we should give up on moral thinking all together, because we “can still use a theory with a well-worked-out list of defeaters to get some justification for our moral beliefs.”<sup>44</sup> Though Dancy does not say much about the epistemology of particularism in *Ethics without Principles*, he does seem to echo Sinnott-Armstrong’s sentiment. For instance, justifying your moral beliefs and being a competent moral judge seem complicated if there is an “ever-widening circle of enablers and disablers, enablers for enablers, enablers for disablers, disablers for enablers for disablers, and so on.”<sup>45</sup>

If the network of enablers is infinite and incompleteness in practice really is true, that means that, for the particularist just as much as for the generalist, a threat of scepticism about moral knowledge is lurking (as we must seriously doubt our capacity to justify our moral judgements). Very reasonably, the generalist solves it by lowering its standard for justification from certainty to *certain enough*. The particularist has the same option at his disposal: to be justified in your moral belief and to be a competent moral judge does not require you to be aware of all the enablers and disablers that might apply. The ability to make reasonable moral judgements does not depend on having all the information available to you, any more than the ability of a chess player to make a reasonable move “needs to be aware of all the indefinitely ramifying contributions of the different aspects of the different positions in front of her.”<sup>46</sup> We can be sufficiently justified in our belief that a particular moral judgement is correct, without us having to be all-knowing and/or infallible. As such, there does not seem to be a good reason for us to adopt epistemological particularism, nor is there a good reason to reject. However, as I will discuss in the following section, methodological particularism has epistemological implications.

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<sup>42</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong does not think that this is necessary, because the epistemological implications of incompleteness in practice are not insurmountable for the generalist. It merely means that we cannot be completely certain about whether we are justified in holding our moral beliefs.

<sup>43</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “Some Varieties of Particularism,” 9.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

<sup>45</sup> Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 158.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

## 1.4 Methodological particularism

Methodological particularism seems to be the weakest form of particularism and is characterized by Sinnott-Armstrong “as a piece of practical advice in living our everyday moral lives.”<sup>47</sup> It is a form of particularism that says nothing about the logical structure, metaphysical status or epistemological nature of moral judgements, but merely claims that we would do better morally if we gave up our attempts of using moral principles to justify our moral beliefs. This seems to be aimed at what McKeever and Ridge call ‘Principle Abstinence Particularism’, the idea that we ought not to rely upon moral principles.<sup>48</sup>

David McNaughton defends this form of particularism, when he argues that it means “that moral principles are at best useless, and at worst a hindrance, in trying to find out which is the right action.”<sup>49</sup> There is no need for the methodological particularist to deny the existence of moral principles, but only their usefulness in moral deliberation. As Dancy echoes the sentiment of McNaughton: “moral principles are at best crutches that a morally sensitive person would not require, and indeed the use of such crutches might even lead us into moral error.”<sup>50</sup> In fact, there is good reason to think that Dancy’s particularism is only methodological (or, at the very least does not make huge metaphysical claims). To show why, we need to look at his definition of particularism in *Ethics without Principles*. In it, he characterizes particularism as follows: “the possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles.”<sup>51</sup> This is a very weak version of particularism as it only states “that moral thought and judgement at least do not presuppose moral principles,”<sup>52</sup> especially when we compare it to his earlier formulation of the thesis in *Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties*. As Dancy puts it there, “this paper is about the non-existence of moral principles. Its conclusion is a thorough particularism, according to which our ethical decisions are made case by case, without the comforting support or awkward demands of moral principles.”<sup>53</sup>

In *Moral Reasons*, he argues that “if there is a holism of reasons, as the particularist supposes, the prospects for substantial moral principles look bleak.”<sup>54</sup> So what has happened here? Why is Dancy no longer committed to denying that moral principles exist? The reason is that Dancy, convinced by an argument from McKeever and Ridge, no longer thinks that holism about reasons entails particularism. “On occasions, I have been rash enough to claim that, given

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<sup>47</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “Some Varieties of Particularism,” 9.

<sup>48</sup> McKeever and Ridge, *Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal*, 17.

<sup>49</sup> McNaughton, *Moral Vision*, 190.

<sup>50</sup> Dancy, “Moral Particularism.”

<sup>51</sup> Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 7.

<sup>52</sup> McKeever and Ridge, *Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> Jonathan Dancy, “Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties,” *Mind* 92, no. 368 (1983): 530.

<sup>54</sup> Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, 1st edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 66.

holism, moral principles are impossible.”<sup>55</sup> He now thinks “that a principled ethic can accept and indeed stress the truth of holism (...) [and] that one cannot argue from holism directly to the conclusion that moral principles are impossible.”<sup>56</sup> If holism functions as an argument in favour of metaphysical particularism, an extra step is required.<sup>57</sup>

However, Dancy still seems committed to the thesis that we would be better off if we stop searching for a justification of our moral beliefs on the basis of general principles. It is certainly possible to search for that kind of justification, according to the methodological particularist, but there is no reason for us to want it. In Sinnott-Armstrong words, it means that “we might do better morally if we quit looking for a complete theory and just look carefully at each particular decision as it arises.”<sup>58</sup>

The methodological particularist presents us with three reasons why we should be wary of this type of justification. First, if it obvious that a certain moral judgement is correct (e.g. that it would be morally wrong to needlessly set babies on fire, just for the fun of it), a moral principle does not and should not play a role in our confidence that we are justified in holding it. If we need a principle to convince ourselves that such things are bad, that only shows that we should doubt whether we even are morally competent to begin with. Second, universal generalizations are always less likely to be true than the particular cases they are built on.<sup>59</sup> Third, and finally, incompleteness in practice seems to mean that we deal with incomplete theories on a (more or less) regular basis. The consequence of justifying our moral beliefs with such incomplete theories might be that we overlook relevant features in a particular situation. “Just as too much aesthetic theory can blind a viewer to the aesthetic quality of a painting, poem, or song, so too much moral theory can blind an agent to the moral quality of an act.”<sup>60</sup> However, Sinnott-Armstrong contends, if we cannot justify our moral judgements on the basis of moral principles, where then should we find justification of our moral judgements? It seems that the particularist can only rely on some form of intuition.<sup>61</sup>

Especially in a moral discussion, this poses a problem and seems to directly contradict the claim of the particularist that we are better off without moral principles. Let us suppose that

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<sup>55</sup> Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 80–81.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 81–82.

<sup>57</sup> Dancy thinks that such a step is possible. Moral principles and invariant reasons might be possible under holism, but that does not imply that “there are enough principles to cover the ground so that all of ethics is principled” (Schwind 2006, 75). One of the main issues Dancy has with a principled system of morality is that it assumes that morality can be codified in exceptionless principles. Dancy argues that “it would be a sort of cosmic accident if it were to turn out that a morality could be captured in a set of holistic contributory principles” like the ones McKeever and Ridge have come up with (Dancy 2004, 82). McKeever and Ridge have merely shown that it is theoretically possible that our morality is codified, but there is no reason for us to think that it actually is (Schwind 2006, 75).

<sup>58</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “Some Varieties of Particularism,” 9.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.

moral particularism is true. Consider, for example, that Jay and Tom live in the 1900s and are having a lively discussion on the morality of allowing women to vote. Jay thinks that women should not be allowed to vote. Tom vehemently disagrees. Who is better equipped to persuade the other of his position? If Tom calls out Jay on his horribly antiquated stance, how can he try to convince Jay that he needs to rethink his position on this issue? He might say *just think about it again and be honest with yourself* or *I know you think you are right, but if you were a bit more sensitive to the situation you would see things otherwise*. Even if these arguments are convincing, though they probably will not be, Jay could return the favour anytime and ask the same questions. The only consequence will be that Tom finds his beliefs questioned and possibly see some doubt enter into his mind.<sup>62</sup>

There is no principle that Tom could invoke in trying to get Jay to see his side of the story. So then what? Dancy argues that Tom “can perfectly well point to how things are in another perhaps simpler case, and suggest that this reveals something about how they are in the present more difficult one. There need be no generalist suggestion that since this feature made a certain difference there, it must make the same difference here. (...) What we learn is not how things must be here, but how they might very well be.”<sup>63</sup> Tom could argue, for instance, that we consider men and women equal in terms of their right to free speech, or their right to life, or any other equally shared right. Jay might even agree with this. Tom could then say that we also accord the right to vote to men, and since men and women do not differ in any morally relevant capacity, women ought to have this right as well. Men and women having the right to vote are sufficiently similar cases and so this can give Jay some indication as to why women should have voting rights. Jay, however, can simply deny this. For whatever reason he conceives, he might say that the property of being a woman has certain significance (and polarity!) in this particular case, without it having to have the same significance in any other case.<sup>64</sup> Arguments from analogies require moral principles if one wants them to have some force, so those are off the table as well.<sup>65</sup>

What about reliability then? Tom might indicate that he has always been good and reliable in making correct moral judgements, by pointing towards his excellent track record with regard to moral judgements. But how is he to prove that to Jay? If Tom cannot show that he is right in this case, how can he convince Jay that he was right in any of the previous cases, especially those that are sufficiently relevant to the moral debate they are having. Tom might very well be reliable, but if there is no way for him to show that he actually is, what good does it do for him?<sup>66</sup> This is

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>63</sup> Dancy, “Moral Particularism.”

<sup>64</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “Some Varieties of Particularism,” 10.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 11.

exactly, Sinnott-Armstrong contends, what generalism could add, for if he could cite a moral principle or draw an analogy, “then he would have some way to check his own intuition and to show others that he is reliable.”<sup>67</sup> The point here is not that, under generalism, Tom is now suddenly able to persuade Jay (or anyone, for that matter) with ease, but at the very least he is able to provide a reason why he might be right. The particularist claim that we would do better morally seems difficult to defend if all we can offer in our moral deliberation is bare intuition.<sup>68</sup>

However, as mentioned in this section, methodological particularism does pose three challenges to the methodological generalist. Suppose that the generalist cannot overcome these challenges and “that universal principles, analogies, and theories really cannot achieve these goals any better than particularism.”<sup>69</sup> Does that then vindicate (methodological) particularism? First of all, the burden of proof lies on the particularist, as all forms of particularism run into problems. Second of all, the particularist is committed to intuitionism. Since even the mildest form of particularism seems to imply intuitionism and because intuitionism is highly questionable, particularism is not defensible. If generalism really does fail, then we should adopt a position of moral skepticism rather than moral particularism.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

If successful, Sinnott-Armstrong’s arguments have shown that all forms of particularism have huge problems, even the weakest one. Especially his argument against methodological particularism is interesting, since it implies that a particularist is committed to a certain objectionable epistemology. In the following chapter, I explain why a defence of methodological particularism is crucial if the particularist project is to succeed and why methodological generalism has to be committed to methodological particularism.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

## **2. A commitment to the methodology**

Looking at the order in which Sinnott-Armstrong discusses the different versions of particularism, we can generally say that he goes from strong to weak. That is to say, analytical particularism makes a stronger claim than metaphysical particularism, which is stronger than epistemological particularism, which is a stronger version than methodological particularism. Since no particularist defends the analytical version, nor does any particularist need to, I choose to leave that version out of the rest of this thesis, but enough interesting questions with regard to the other three versions remain.

In what follows, I attempt to show that the different versions of particularism do not implicate each other. As such, we cannot by dismissing methodological particularism also show that metaphysical and epistemological particularism are false. Instead, I wish to suggest that if one wants to be part of the particularist project, there is a commitment to the methodological version, such that one cannot be a particularist without at the very least maintaining that we would be better off morally if we stop justifying our moral beliefs on the basis of moral principles. This would mean that the particularist project cannot succeed without at least some form of methodological particularism. That implies that if Sinnott-Armstrong is correct and methodological particularism really does entail intuitionism, a defensible form of intuitionism has to be a part of any form of particularism.

### **2.1 Metaphysical generalism and methodological particularism**

To show that there really is no relation of implication between the different versions of particularism, it is best to focus our attention on the relationship between metaphysical and methodological particularism. Now, if the truth of metaphysical particularism and the truth of methodological particularism are somehow linked, this could take two forms. Either one implies the other or they imply each other. The first option is likelier than the second, so let me start by testing whether methodological particularism implies metaphysical particularism.

I have already mentioned in section 1.4 that Dancy no longer believes that holism about reasons implies that moral principles do not exist. In fact, there is nothing in Dancy's definition of particularism ("the possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles"<sup>70</sup>) that explicitly claims that metaphysical particularism is false. As McKeever and Ridge argue, Dancy promotes a very cautious version of

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<sup>70</sup> Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 7.

particularism, which they call ‘Anti-Transcendental Particularism’, as it merely states “that moral thought and judgement at least do not presuppose moral principles.”<sup>71</sup>

This conception of particularism is compatible with the idea that morality can and should be completely codified. In fact, the idea that moral thought does not presuppose a suitable stock of moral principles does not mean “that such a stock is unavailable nor does it entail that articulating such principles would not be desirable from both a practical and theoretical point of view.”<sup>72</sup> Now, it is immediately clear that there is a problem, for this interpretation of particularism reduces it to something that is “ill-suited to provide the radical challenge to the possibility of moral theory particularists sometimes envisage.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, one could wonder whether Dancy’s particularism might actually be weaker than the methodological version. I think this might very well be the case, so for present purposes, let me say that I take McNaughton’s definition of particularism (“that moral principles are at best useless, and at worst a hindrance, in trying to find out which is the right action”)<sup>74</sup> to be indicative of methodological particularism. Note that some epistemological claim here is made as well. Therefore, the divide between epistemological and methodological particularism is not as clear as Sinnott-Armstrong makes it out to be. However, this does not change much for the rest of my story. It only means that methodological particularism has an epistemological element to it.

This, obviously, does not answer the question whether methodological particularism implies metaphysical particularism. In other words, if one is a methodological particularist, must one then also be a metaphysical particularist? The answer to this is a clear ‘no’. A methodological particularist merely needs to say that moral principles are so incredibly complex and that we can never be sure about whether we know about all the relevant features that they are unsuitable for our practical moral deliberation. The methodological particularist, in other words, needs to emphasize that there might be moral principles, but they are more like principles *qua standards* (a generalization that provides “the truth-conditions of a moral judgement by referring to sufficient features which justify the application of the moral concept in question”)<sup>75</sup> and less like principles *qua guides* (“helpful devices for the agent in finding out the morally right action.”)<sup>76</sup> We would be better off not justifying our moral judgements on the basis of moral principles, because of the very limited practical value of such moral principles.

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<sup>71</sup> McKeever and Ridge, *Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal*, 19.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–20.

<sup>74</sup> McNaughton, *Moral Vision*, 190.

<sup>75</sup> Schwind, “A Critical Discussion of Jonathan Dancy’s Moral Particularism,” 52.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

## 2.2 Metaphysical particularism and methodological generalism

So, as expected, methodological particularism does not imply metaphysical particularism. Does metaphysical particularism then imply methodological particularism? Let me rephrase the question in the same way as in the previous section: if one is a metaphysical particularist, must one then also be a methodological particularist? I think, again, that the answer has to be no. We can reject methodological particularism without rejecting metaphysical particularism. I may argue that we would be better off morally if we justify our moral judgements on the basis of moral principles, but that does not mean that I cannot also deny that moral principles exist. The problem, however (and the reason why Sinnott-Armstrong's argument against methodological particularism should not be neglected), is that one cannot be a methodological generalist and a metaphysical particularist while still being part of the particularist project.

To make clear why, let us suppose that methodological generalism and metaphysical particularism are true. This means that we would be better off morally if we attempt to search for justification of our moral judgements on the basis of universal moral principles, even though there are no such things as universal moral principles. But if that is the case, how can we then still feel confident about our capacity to attain moral knowledge? If moral judgements are correct not in virtue of there being a principle making them correct, but in virtue of the non-moral facts of each particular case, and our moral deliberation is aimed at justifying our moral judgements on the basis of moral principles that do not exist, then it seems to be that we are consistently missing the mark. In other words, we would then think that we would be better off morally if we justify our judgements on the basis of things that do not exist.

I am not suggesting that it is impossible to hold such a position, for that would mean that metaphysical particularism implies methodological particularism, but I do think that under such circumstances we cannot say that it is possible to be a competent moral judge or that genuine moral deliberation is possible. Under such circumstances, we must be very sceptic towards our capacity to make correct moral judgements. Now, we need to distinguish between the different versions of particularism that Sinnott-Armstrong has presented us with and the particularist project. One of the claims of the particularist project, whether it is a strong or a weak version, is that we could do without moral principles. But the debate between the generalists and particularists has always taken place against a "background assumption that nontrivial moral knowledge is possible and indeed that we have quite a bit of it."<sup>77</sup> Dancy notes as well that

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<sup>77</sup> McKeever and Ridge, *Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal*, 14.

particularism is not a sceptical theory, or at the very least, that it is not more vulnerable to the sceptical challenge than other theories.<sup>78</sup>

The idea that it is possible to have moral knowledge, to engage in genuine moral deliberation and to be a competent moral judge is part of the core theory of any version of particularism.<sup>79</sup> It is an assumption that the particularist has to make to be considered a particularist. If I hold that metaphysical particularism and methodological generalism are both true, what I am propagating, in a sense, is an error theory of sorts – something akin to Joyce’s moral projectivism. I would be a metaphysical particularist arguing that it would be more useful to pretend as if there are true moral principles. It seems highly unlikely that such a position can ever be considered compatible with particularist thinking.

As such, we can see why the particularist has to face the argument of Sinnott-Armstrong against methodological particularism head on. If the particularist is convinced by Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument against methodological particularism, he has to choose between accepting metaphysical particularism and ending up with a sceptical (or error) theory or rejecting metaphysical particularism and becoming a generalist. If he does not reject methodological particularism, he has to accept intuitionism as its accompanying epistemology. Intuitionism, in and of itself, is so objectionable, Sinnott-Armstrong claims, that he should still become a sceptic. The threat of scepticism really is looming.

### **2.3 A possible objection**

One might argue that I am going a bit too fast when I argue that one cannot be a methodological generalist and a metaphysical particularist, while still being part of the particularist project. An analogy might explain why. Suppose for the moment that God does not exist. We are also aware of the fact God does not exist. Still, we might be morally better off if we live in accordance to God’s commands and if we justify our judgements in accordance to God’s laws. Could the same not apply to particularism and generalism? We would be morally better off when we justify our moral judgements according to moral principles, even if these principles do not exist.

It is certainly not unthinkable that this could be the case, but I am not convinced by this line of reasoning, though I am not wholly sure on why this is. It seems to me that this has something to do with the background assumption of moral knowledge being readily available and

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<sup>78</sup> Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 155.

<sup>79</sup> Amelia Hicks, “Particularism Doesn’t Flatten,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, November 7, 2014, 10–11. “Finally, although minimal particularism is, in and of itself, silent on the nature of moral competence and proper moral deliberation, minimal particularism will have consequences for competence and deliberation when combined with other assumptions. For instance, (...) if a minimal particularist thinks good moral deliberation is possible, then they must think that good moral deliberation need not involve the use of true moral principles.”

commonplace. If I would justify my moral judgement on the basis of a moral principle, while knowing that there is no such thing as a moral principle, something is lacking, for I base my justification on something that does not exist. As such, the source for my justification seems to be missing. Suppose that it is correct that a combination of methodological generalism and metaphysical particularism could lead to a situation where many people have a decent amount of justified moral beliefs. It might even be the case that it means that we would be morally better off: one could argue that people are much friendlier and more generous when living in accordance with God's commandments than they would be if they did not. Still, this is not a position that belongs to the particularist project since it neglects the background assumption of moral knowledge. After all, having a justified belief is not the same as knowing something. I fail to see how this situation moral knowledge could be as commonplace as the particularist (and the generalist) would argue it to be, under methodological generalism and metaphysical particularism. Thus, it seems to me that this is not a particularist position.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

I have attempted to show that a particularist is committed to methodological particularism. This is not because any of the other forms of particularisms imply the methodological version, but because one cannot be a methodological generalist and still be considered part of the particularist project. Underlying the particularist project, and broadly speaking, underlying the discussion between generalism and particularism, is the assumption that moral knowledge is possible and commonplace. It is not possible to combine this assumption, central to particularist thinking, with a rejection of methodological particularism. One would end up either a generalist or a sceptic. It seems therefore that Sinnott-Armstrong's argument against particularism is, in one important sense, successful. The particularist now has two choices to salvage what's left: he must either show that particularism is not committed to intuitionism or he must show that there is good reason to prefer intuitionism over scepticism. I discuss both strategies in the following two chapters.

### 3. Particularism and intuitionism

Sinnott-Armstrong's argument against particularism relies heavily on its supposed entailment of intuitionism.<sup>80</sup> His argument is that (1) it is not the case that there is merely a dichotomy between generalism and particularism, as that would exclude the possibility of skepticism; (2) the argument from the particularist is a negative one, that is to say, it might give us convincing reasons against generalism but not in favour of particularism; (3) assuming this particularist critique to be correct, this means that the (methodological) particularist is also necessarily an intuitionist; and finally (4), we should reject intuitionism, as it is a very questionable epistemological theory.

Now, there seem to be at least two ways of attacking this line of reasoning: we can attack 3 and argue that the particularist is not necessarily committed to intuitionism, or we can attack 4 by saying that intuitionism is not as objectionable as Sinnott-Armstrong makes it out to be. In this chapter, I focus on the first. Suppose that the argument from the previous chapter is correct: for any theory to be considered particularist, it needs to have at least a particularist moral methodology. One cannot be considered part of any particularist line of thinking, without at least affirming that we “do better morally if we quit looking for a complete theory and just look carefully at each particular decision as it arises.”<sup>81</sup> Is Sinnott-Armstrong correct when he argues that any particularist must also be an intuitionist? Before I can answer this question, I give a brief explanation of what intuitionism is.

#### 3.1 What is intuitionism?

As Shafer-Landau defines it, “ethical intuitionism is the view that there are non-inferentially justified moral beliefs. A belief is non-inferentially justified provided that its justification does not depend on a believer's ability to infer it from another belief.”<sup>82</sup> Generally speaking, intuitionism does not have a great name, certainly not in moral philosophy. Julia Hermann notes that it “was highly unpopular in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>83</sup> Sabine Roeser calls it “one of the more controversial theories in moral philosophy.”<sup>84</sup> Broadly speaking, every intuitionist theory has two elements: an epistemological aspect (namely, that moral propositions are self-evident) and an ontological aspect, (that moral properties are non-natural (or, *sui generis*)).

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<sup>80</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “Some Varieties of Particularism,” 11.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> Shafer-Landau, “Defending Ethical Intuitionism,” 83.

<sup>83</sup> Hermann, “Californian Wine and Moral Beliefs. What's Wrong with Sinnott-Armstrong's Argument against Moral Intuitionism,” 1.

<sup>84</sup> Roeser, *Moral Emotions and Intuitions*, 4.

Roeser defines intuitionism as an epistemology and ontology consisting of three features: cognitivism, foundationalism, and non-reductive realism.<sup>85</sup> Intuitionists take a common sense approach to morality and “assert that our moral beliefs are not very different from our ordinary perceptual or rational judgments.”<sup>86</sup> Whenever we make a moral judgement, we really make a claim about something actually being right or wrong, and its rightness or wrongness is independent of our own attitudes. This makes intuitionism a cognitivist theory, as there are truth-claims involved. Over and above the naturalist realist, the intuitionist also argues that such claims aim at a moral reality which cannot be reduced to naturalist terms. That makes it a nonreductive realist theory, as it references a non-natural moral reality. The intuitionist claims that moral properties are non-natural. They are irreducible to natural facts and of their own kind, but they are just as much facts as empirical facts.

We can compare our moral beliefs, at least some of them, to beliefs we get from sense perception. If I look around my room and see all these scattered books and unwashed dishes, I have the belief that there are currently scattered books and unwashed dishes in my room. The belief here is not justified by any other belief. If someone were to ask me *why* I would think that my room has all these scattered books and unwashed dishes, I could only answer them that this is what I perceive. This is all the justification I can and need to give – delving deeper into the matter would not allow me to give some better justification for my holding the belief. The intuitionist would hold that the same applies to certain some moral beliefs. Such beliefs are basic beliefs (or self-evident beliefs).

This is called foundationalism. Foundationalism claims “that all knowledge and justified belief rest ultimately on a foundation of non-inferential knowledge or justified belief.”<sup>87</sup> Almost all intuitionists are foundationalists.<sup>88</sup> Dancy, however, denies that foundationalism is an essential

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<sup>85</sup> One interesting thing to note is that I think Roeser incorrect in her assessment of what nonreductive realist theories are. Or, to put it differently, she seems mistaken in arguing which realist theories are reductionist. Specifically, I am thinking here of Cornell realism. Roeser argues that naturalist realists identify moral properties with natural properties, such as psychological facts or, as she argues the Cornell realists do, sociological or physical facts. In a way, she is not wrong, for a Cornell realist like David Brink would argue there is a strong link between physical facts and moral facts (Brink 1989, 34-80). But Brink notes that naturalists, such as himself and the rest of the Cornell realists, argue that moral facts supervene on natural facts. “Ethical naturalists often claim that moral facts and properties *supervene* on natural facts and properties. (...) One consequence of supervenience is that two things cannot differ in their supervening properties without differing their base properties” (Brink 1989, 160). This does not mean that supervenience implies naturalism, but they are certainly compatible. Roeser then argues that “a supervenience-account of moral properties is an Aristotelean form of moral realism, a form of nonreductive naturalism” (Roeser 2011, 41). It is therefore odd that she would classify the Cornell realists as reductionist realists, since they are not, even on her own terms.

<sup>86</sup> Roeser, *Moral Emotions and Intuitions*, 5.

<sup>87</sup> Ali Hasan and Richard Fumerton, “Foundationalist Theories of Epistemic Justification,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/justep-foundational/>.

<sup>88</sup> Roeser, *Moral Emotions and Intuitions*, 4.

part of intuitionism.<sup>89</sup> Instead, he seems to stress that ethical pluralism is a necessary element of moral intuitionism.<sup>90</sup> Ethical pluralism, also called value pluralism, stands opposed to ethical monism. The monist argues that there is only value, such as happiness or pleasure, of actual importance. There might be other values, but they are subservient to that one value. A pluralist argues that we cannot reduce all the different values to one ultimate value. There really are different values, which all have importance. Sometimes these values clash with each other, but that does not mean that there is a hierarchy between values.<sup>91</sup> Most intuitionists are also ethical pluralists, but some are not, such as Sidgwick.<sup>92</sup>

### 3.2 Does particularism entail intuitionism?

The main question, however, is whether Sinnott-Armstrong is right when he argues that anyone who defends methodological particularism (and thus by extension any particularist, if the argument made in the second chapter is successful) must also defend some form of intuitionism. It seems to me that Sinnott-Armstrong is correct, and there are two indications for it. First of all, it is difficult to see how the particularist can use anything but intuitions to justify his moral judgements. This seems quite obvious to me, since there is no way for the particularist to generalize in such a manner that what counts in situation A also counts in situation B. Moral analogies are off the table: for them to be suitable for justifying our moral beliefs they would need a moral principle. Generalizations with force require the use of moral principles. But this is what the particularist explicitly rejects.

The particularist argues that moral knowledge is possible and commonplace. Some of our moral beliefs are justified. But the fact that some of our moral beliefs are justified means that some of that justification must be non-inferential. Let me explain why I think this is the case. Suppose I am a normal moral agent who is considering the following moral judgement: it is a good thing that our government uses some of the money we spend on taxes to help out needy children in Africa. I will refer to this judgement as A. I hold certain moral beliefs that are related to this judgement, one of them being that I believe it be a good thing to help out the less fortunate. Let's call this belief B. Based on belief B, I consider A to be justified. The justification here is inferential: I infer A from B. However, for A to be justified by B, I have to have some

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<sup>89</sup> Hermann, "Californian Wine and Moral Beliefs. What's Wrong with Sinnott-Armstrong's Argument against Moral Intuitionism," 2.

<sup>90</sup> Roeser, *Moral Emotions and Intuitions*, 1.

<sup>91</sup> Elinor Mason, "Value Pluralism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2015 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2015), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/value-pluralism/>.

<sup>92</sup> Henry Sidgwick, *The Method of Ethics*, 7th edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1874), 441–42.

reason for believing B to be justified as well. Either there is an additional belief that justifies B (which would continue the inferential chain), which does not help in this scenario, or B must be justified some other way. But where would that justification of B come from if I cannot use moral principles? B cannot be justified because it is relevantly similar to other cases, since that would mean that the justification comes from an analogy. If no inferential justification is possible and we cannot base the justification of the moral belief on a principle, while still maintaining that the belief is justified, the justification must be non-inferential. There being non-inferential justified moral beliefs is a trademark characteristic of moral intuitionism. It seems to me that the particularist is committed to this notion of non-inferential justification, and therefore, committed to intuitionism.

The second indication why Sinnott-Armstrong is correct is that most important particularists are intuitionists.<sup>93</sup> He names David McNaughton, John McDowell and Jonathan Dancy as examples of authors who, at least to some degree, belong to the particularist line of thinking.<sup>94</sup> McNaughton explicitly defends intuitionism in his contribution to *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*.<sup>95</sup> He argues that a “slightly modified version of Ross's” intuitionism is defensible and calls it, in certain areas, “the best moral theory around.”<sup>96</sup> Though not as explicit as McNaughton,<sup>97</sup> McDowell seems to argue in favour of some form of intuitionism in *Values and Secondary Qualities*.<sup>98</sup> Whether Dancy is an intuitionist is not immediately clear. His last book *Ethics Without Principles* says nothing about the epistemology of particularism, but there are indications that he does favour some form of intuitionism. For instance, although Roeser discounts Dancy as an intuitionist, since he does not endorse foundationalism, Dancy himself is, according to Stratton-Lake, “happy to be labelled [an] intuitionist.”<sup>99</sup> Dancy seems to defend intuitionism in his contribution to Peter Singer’s *A Companion to Ethics*.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, he calls his book *Moral Reasons* “a recognizable successor to the intuitionistic tradition,”<sup>101</sup> but it is not immediately clear

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<sup>93</sup> Philip Stratton-Lake, “Intuitionism in Ethics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2014, 2014, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/intuitionism-ethics/>.

<sup>94</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “Some Varieties of Particularism,” 1.

<sup>95</sup> David McNaughton, “Intuitionism,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1999), 268–87.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>97</sup> Jonathan Dancy, “McDowell, Williams, and Intuitionism,” in *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams*, by Ulrike Heuer and Gerald R Lang (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2012), 269–90.

Though McDowell himself has some objections to being labelled an intuitionist, Dancy has shown that his line of thinking hits pretty much all the marks of intuitionist thinking. Especially pages 286 – 288 are relevant here.

<sup>98</sup> McDowell, “Values and Secondary Qualities.”

<sup>99</sup> Stratton-Lake, “Intuitionism in Ethics.”

<sup>100</sup> Jonathan Dancy, “Intuitionism,” in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 411–20.

<sup>101</sup> Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, ix.

if that means that he rejects intuitionism or that he wants to save it. I find that the latter is most probably correct, for two reasons.

First, it seems significant to me that he uses the word *recognizable* in describing how his theory relates to intuitionism. When he refers to the ‘intuitionistic tradition’, he is talking about the ‘old forms’ of intuitionism, as put forward by Ross and Pritchard. In Dancy’s words: “[t]he story had been that intuitionism, in the persons of W.D. Ross and H.A. Pritchard, was effectively eclipsed by emotivism and the crude hands of A.J. Ayer and the far more subtle ones of C.L. Stevenson. But the arguments against intuitionism began to seem to have depended on features of Ross’s position which could be excised without loss.”<sup>102</sup> Though not his only goal with *Moral Reasons*, as I see it, the book is his attempt to come up with a way to save intuitionism from itself: to put forward a theory that does not fall prey to emotivist criticism while still being *recognizable* as an intuitionistic theory. Secondly, he defends the works of W.D. Ross to a great extent and calls his theory “the best form of generalism.”<sup>103</sup> The problem with Ross, Dancy argues, is not that his theory is intuitionist, it is that he remains loyal to generalism.<sup>104</sup> Dancy embraces Ross’s intuitionism, but rejects his generalism. Now, whether his version of intuitionism is defensible or can rightly be considered to be intuitionist is a different question, outside of the scope of this thesis.

That particularists are intuitionists by itself does not show whether the argument from Sinnott-Armstrong is correct. But it does lend support to his position, when combined with my first argument. In fact, it does a little more than that. It is not only an indication that Sinnott-Armstrong is correct in linking particularism and intuitionism to each other, it also seems to show that they are not at all concerned about this entailment. For if they were (if they agreed with Sinnott-Armstrong that one should reject intuitionism), they would have at least tried to show that particularism is not stuck to some form of intuitionism. Particularists have, as far as I am aware, not tried to do so and so must think that intuitionism is defensible.

### 3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I hope to have shown that Sinnott-Armstrong is correct in his assessment that particularism entails intuitionism, by arguing that particularists are committed to non-inferentially justified moral beliefs. Furthermore, support for Sinnott-Armstrong’s claims can be found in the fact that, as far as I am aware, most (if not all) particularists are intuitionists. At the same time it

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Dancy, “Moral Particularism.”

<sup>104</sup> Schwind, “A Critical Discussion of Jonathan Dancy’s Moral Particularism,” 30.

seems that the particularist is not that concerned about it. The next chapter discusses in greater detail why that is.

## 4. The case for and against intuitionism

I have tried to show in the previous chapter that the particularist is in fact committed to intuitionism. Now, I focus on this second way of attacking Sinnott-Armstrong's conclusion. Is intuitionism really as objectionable as Sinnott-Armstrong makes it out to be? There is not enough space for a full-fledged defence of intuitionism in this thesis, but I discuss four of the most well-known points of criticism against intuitionism: the problem of the moral faculty, the strange ontology of intuitionism, widespread disagreement and the unreliable nature of intuitions. I spend most of my time on the last criticism, as this is what Sinnott-Armstrong most explicitly brings up as an argument against intuitionism. However, I will try to show that all of these arguments do not necessarily provide definitive evidence against intuitionism, so as to argue, much like Roeser does, that intuitionism cannot be as easily dismissed as Sinnott-Armstrong argues.

### 4.1 Mysterious nature of the moral faculty

One of the most persistent forms of critique against intuitionism, especially against its epistemology, has to do with its supposed insistence on the existence of a moral faculty. It is clear that Roeser is talking about this line of criticism when she mentions that her intention is “to do away with objections that are based on misrepresentations of intuitionism. These misrepresentations are not so much incorrect readings of the works of intuitionists; rather they are the result of a stereotypical conception of intuitionism.”<sup>105</sup> The perceived mysterious nature of such a faculty has been used as easy criticism against intuitionism, by arguing that the moral faculty must be something like a special, moral sixth sense. It must be something special, the argument goes, if it is capable of picking up on moral facts, especially if those moral facts or non-natural facts.

As we do not have a sixth sense (apart from the occasional character in a Hollywood blockbuster), intuitionism must obviously be false. But this is without warrant, for “if we look at what the intuitionists mean by this notion, it turns out that it is much less suspect than many philosophers believe.”<sup>106</sup> For someone like Thomas Reid, for example, the moral faculty was nothing more than the “parts of our reason and emotion that are concerned with moral judgments.”<sup>107</sup> This is not controversial. A great number of philosophers think that we acquire our moral knowledge through the use of our reason and emotion. The moral faculty is not an actual organ we have yet to discover. The moral faculty can simply be explained in a very simple

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<sup>105</sup> Roeser, *Moral Emotions and Intuitions*, 3.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

manner: it is our capacity to make moral judgements is our moral faculty, and our moral faculty allows us to recognize moral properties and so there is nothing particularly mysterious about it.<sup>108</sup>

## 4.2 The ontological problem

It is not difficult to see why the ontology of moral intuitionism is anything but uncontroversial. It is one thing to say that, on its own terms, there is nothing mysterious about our moral faculty, for its functioning can be explained in uncontroversial terms. But if the existence of moral properties it is supposed to pick up on is questionable, the intuitionist still has a problem. The intuitionist claims that moral properties are non-natural. They are irreducible to natural facts and of their own kind, but they are just as much facts as empirical facts. Does this not contradict our modern scientific understanding of the world?

I do not think that this is necessarily a big problem for the intuitionists. A lot of criticism against moral intuitionism has been given with regard to the supposed problematic nature of non-natural moral facts, most famously put forward by J.L. Mackie with his argument from queerness. When discussing non-natural moral facts, he argues that “they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort.”<sup>109</sup> Mackie objects to the existence of any such objective non-natural moral values because they would have very peculiar features and would not fit into our ontology. But the fact that moral facts are non-natural does not mean that these facts are unlike any other facts. Dancy argues that there are three ways the intuitionist can show that these facts should be relatively uncontroversial.

First of all, one could deny that there are facts in the world to begin with. “The world does not contain facts; the facts are facts about the world, not in it.”<sup>110</sup> That would mean, as I understand it, that there is no ontological difference between natural and non-natural facts. Secondly, it could be said that moral facts are not your run-of-the-mill facts on which science has so much to say. They are not facts such as the amount of DNA in someone’s body or the length of the great barrier reef, but they are facts about actions and agents. These facts obviously exist, “even though physics does not say a great deal about them.”<sup>111</sup> Third, the intuitionist might argue that moral facts exist in virtue of non-moral facts. This is usually signified by the word *because*. That does not mean that they can be identified with non-moral facts. When I say that something is a tower, because it has very high walls, is taller than it is wide and has a bell on top, I say that those facts are what makes a tower. It is a tower in virtue of those non-tower facts. The same

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 11–12.

<sup>109</sup> J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin Books, 1991), 38.

<sup>110</sup> Dancy, “Intuitionism,” 414.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

would go for moral facts. An action might be good, because it is generous, considerate, friendly, benefits someone else, etc. The moral fact exists in virtue of these non-moral facts. That would mean that the existence of non-natural moral facts would not necessarily contradict with our scientific understanding of the world. Our world can be described by science, yet “it cannot be completely described that way; there remain other facts to mention, including moral facts, which are comprehensibly related to the basic physical facts from which they result.”<sup>112</sup> Though the debate on non-natural moral facts is still very much open, the intuitionist can at least provide some reasons why they should not immediately be dismissed as not in line with the modern scientific view of the world.

### 4.3 Widespread disagreement

Another argument against moral intuitionism might come from the lack of agreement to be found in morality. This criticism applies to all of moral realist thinking (for if there are such things as objective moral facts, why can we not find widespread agreement on them?), but is especially poignant when discussing moral intuitionism. The argument here, as given by Stratton-Lake, is that “if there were certain moral propositions that can be known if adequately understood, then, it is argued, people with an adequate understanding of them would believe them, and there would be universal assent amongst mature, comprehending people. But there is no such universal assent. So there are no self-evident moral propositions.”<sup>113</sup>

The intuitionists take this charge seriously and have tried to come up with ways to show that moral disagreement does not imply the non-existence of self-evident moral propositions. They might, for example, say that a lot of the moral disagreement is based on non-moral grounds. I might disagree with my neighbour on the morality of euthanasia, but our disagreement could very well stem from our differing conception of when life begins and not from a fundamental disagreement over the permissibility of taking a (potential) life. We might agree on the moral facts, without morally agreeing because of the non-moral features of the case.<sup>114</sup>

A different way intuitionists might explain the widespread and consistent nature of moral disagreement, is by pointing out that in many cases it is not a disagreement on what is morally relevant, but on how these different morally relevant features relate to each other. In the famous runaway trolley example, there might be moral disagreement even though both sides agree that it would be a bad thing for someone to die. That one presumably innocent man would die, because of flipping a switch to let a train switch tracks, would count against the act for both sides of the

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Stratton-Lake, “Intuitionism in Ethics.”

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

discussion. But for one side, this moral consideration is being outweighed by the prospect of saving five other people. “In such a case there is agreement about what is relevant, and how it is relevant, but disagreement about the weight of the competing moral considerations.”<sup>115</sup> It is also possible for the intuitionist to downplay how much of a problem it really is that there is such widespread moral disagreement. After all, morality is complex and people are fallible. We have the abovementioned ways to explain moral disagreement, but this disagreement might also just be the result of faulty reasoning and moral enlightenment might only come to those who are morally mature.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, it is not as if we can only find disagreement in morality. There is a considerable amount of disagreement in the sciences as well.<sup>117</sup>

#### 4.4 The empirical challenge

In *Some Varieties of Particularism* Sinnott-Armstrong does not really give an argument for his thesis that we ought to prefer skepticism over intuitionism, other than the following remark: “the failure of general theories does not show that particularism is defensible. If moral theory, analogy, and principle really get us nothing, then the conclusion should be moral skepticism, not moral particularism.”<sup>118</sup> However, his argument can be found in his other works, especially in his 2006 *Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology*<sup>119</sup> and his 2011 *An Empirical Challenge to Moral Intuitionism*.<sup>120</sup> In both articles, he notes that a lot of empirical studies have shown that emotions tend to cloud our moral judgements and that we are very susceptible to the effects of framing. Our intuitions are not reliable and thus we should reject moral intuitionism.

The moral intuitionism he sets his sights on “is the claim that some people are adequately epistemically justified in holding some moral beliefs independently of whether those people are able to infer those moral beliefs from any other beliefs.”<sup>121</sup> The intuitionists do this to stop the regress problem from occurring. Suppose I hold the belief that it is good to give money to the homeless. I have a reason to belief that belief is justified, only if that belief is based on premises

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> The intuitionist, however, would then have a hard time explaining why there is also much moral disagreement among moral philosophers and intuitionists. “These philosophers will have thought long and hard about the relevant propositions, and (we would hope) have a very clear understanding of them. One would, therefore, expect that if there were certain moral propositions the truth of which could be apprehended by intuition, then moral philosophers would converge on these truths.” (Stratton-Lake 2014) If moral disagreement is so persistent, even in these circles, should that not weaken our belief in self-evident moral propositions? I think it is fair to say that it could weaken our belief, but the argument, I feel, is not strong enough to reject the existence of self-evident moral propositions.

<sup>117</sup> Andrew Lugg, “Disagreement in Science,” *Zeitschrift Für Allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie / Journal for General Philosophy of Science* 9, no. 2 (1978): 276–92.

<sup>118</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “Some Varieties of Particularism,” 11.

<sup>119</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology,” in *Metaethics After Moore*, ed. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons (Oxford University Press, 2006), 339–65.

<sup>120</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “An Empirical Challenge to Moral Intuitionism,” in *The New Intuitionism*, by Jill Graper Hernandez (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), 11–28.

<sup>121</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology,” 341.

that I am also justified in believing. But the buck doesn't stop there, as those beliefs need justification in the same way. The intuitionist solution (through their foundationalism) is to simply stop this regress and claim that some beliefs are justified without them needing to be inferred from premises which need additional justification. As such, the moral intuitionist claims that some moral beliefs can be non-inferentially justified.<sup>122</sup>

Empirical studies have shown, Sinnott-Armstrong argues, that our moral judgements are distorted on such a widespread basis, by features which should not have any effect on our capacity to make correct moral judgements, that there is reason to think that a great number of our moral beliefs are false. Sinnott-Armstrong presents a number of factors:

- Partiality: we tend to let our self-interest influence our moral beliefs. Furthermore, we are very bad at telling when we are being partial.<sup>123</sup>
- Bias: cognitive illusions, framing effects or faulty heuristics might have influenced our moral belief. Suppose, for example, that you are presented with a text and asked to guess how many seven-letter words are in that have the form of \_ \_ \_ \_ I N \_ and how many seven-letter words have the form of \_ \_ \_ \_ I N G. Most people would say that more words have the second form than the first, since it is easier to come up with words ending with –ing than it is to add a g to in– and then come up with a word. But, upon reflection, it is also obvious that this heuristic is incorrect, as every word that has –ing in it must also have in– in it.<sup>124</sup>
- Emotions: brain studies have shown that “moral judgments result from emotions that cloud judgment.”<sup>125</sup>
- Disagreement: there is a lot of disagreement in morality, which also affects intuitions when there is no disagreement. We know, so claims Sinnott-Armstrong, that many of moral intuitions are unreliable, since in many cases the intuitions of people conflict. Thus, “we are not justified in trusting a particular moral intuition without some reason to believe that it is one of the reliable ones. If we know that everyone agrees with that particular moral intuition, then we might have reason to trust it. But that is just because the known agreement provides confirmation,”<sup>126</sup> and so the belief is not non-inferentially justified.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 340–41.

<sup>123</sup> Nathan Ballantyne and Joshua C. Thurow, “Moral Intuitionism Defeated?” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013): 412.

<sup>124</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology,” 345.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 350.

As such, our capacity to make correct moral judgement should be questioned, as there is a good chance that a great deal of our moral beliefs is incorrect. This means that even (what the intuitionist would describe as) a reliable moral judge has reason to doubt himself and to think that his moral judgement in a particular case is unreliable. This presumption of incorrectness means that there are two options: either there is reason to think that a moral belief is incorrect, or the moral agent must have “some special evidence for her belief.”<sup>127</sup> If that is the case, Sinnott-Armstrong contends, the agent might be justified in her holding a belief, but then this justification is not non-inferential anymore. Thus, there really is no reason for us to think that our moral intuitions can non-inferentially justify our moral beliefs, and as such, moral intuitionism is false.<sup>128</sup> There are, as I see it, three separate reasons why this argument from Sinnott-Armstrong is not necessarily successful.

The first one comes from Julia Hermann. She claims that not only does that the argument fail to show that intuitionism is untenable, his claim that our moral judgements are unreliable “*does not make sense.*”<sup>129</sup> First, Sinnott-Armstrong gives us a very counter-intuitive view of what a moral agent does when he relates to his beliefs. Suppose that we go to a shop in California to buy some wine. We know, because studies have shown, that around 60% of the wine sold in California is made in California. We don’t know anything else about the wine we are about to buy, as we have never drunk alcohol in our lives and it just so happens to be a store without labels. We can thus say that there is a probability of 0.6 that the bottle we are about to buy has been produced in California. This probability might change if we were to be confronted with additional evidence, such as someone in the store who is a wine expert and wants to help us determine where it comes from. But without such special evidence, it is reasonable for us to think that every bottle of wine falls in the same class, namely, that class which has a 60% chance of being produced in California. The same goes for our moral beliefs. Empirical studies have shown that, without special evidence, there is a good reason for us to place all of our moral beliefs in one particular class. Obviously, in some cases we do have special evidence and in these cases we are (more) justified in our beliefs.

But the idea that all of our moral beliefs are unreliable is odd and seems incoherent. In receiving a moral education, that is to say, when we gradually form our capacity to make moral judgements, moral beliefs play a critical role. We hold certain moral beliefs, some more crucial than others, and make moral judgements on the basis of these beliefs. These beliefs are not everlasting or free from critical evaluation: a great number of them we might reject or revise after

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<sup>127</sup> Hermann, “Californian Wine and Moral Beliefs. What’s Wrong with Sinnott Moral Intuitionism,” 6.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 4–6.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 7.

careful self-evaluation or external evidence has shown us the error in our ways. “Yet in order to be capable of questioning any of the beliefs the agent came to hold, he has to take some moral beliefs for granted.”<sup>130</sup> We simply cannot evaluate our moral beliefs without having some familiarity with the moral concepts they employ, and for us to have some familiarity with these concepts, some moral beliefs are required.

To think of our all moral judgement as being faulty and of all our moral beliefs as being unreliable “would amount to depriving ourselves of the standards for judging the correctness of these beliefs.”<sup>131</sup> It also presupposes that a moral agent is capable of distancing himself from all of his moral beliefs, but this seems difficult to swallow. We certainly seem to have the capacity to distance ourselves to some degree, but being a competent moral agent means that we are capable of critically evaluating our moral judgements, and to do that we must take a non-skeptical stance towards some of our moral beliefs. This means that the wine analogy does not work, as normal agents are morally competent. Inexperienced wine drinker might have sceptical attitude towards all sorts of wine, but regular, moral agents cannot have a sceptical attitude towards all of their moral beliefs. For if an agent would take such a sceptical stance, “he would be deprived of his standards for moral judgement.”<sup>132</sup>

Second of all, Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument, boiled down, is one of guilt by association: there is reason to think that a lot of moral intuitions are unreliable and we cannot decide which intuitions are reliable and which are unreliable, so in each and every case further justification is necessary. However, that means that there are no non-inferentially justified beliefs. But why is that so? Sometimes, our perceptions fail us as well. I might mishear someone calling my name, misidentify a colour on a wall, smell roses while standing in a dump, or eat filet mignon while experiencing the taste of chicken. The fact that our perceptions fail us at times does not give us reason to suddenly doubt the reliability of all our perceptions, much less tell us to seek for more justification for all our perceptions. Why would we?<sup>133</sup> So why does the unreliability of some of our intuitions lead to a full-blown skepticism towards of our intuitions, while the same does not happen with our perceptions?

Well, one reason might be that perceptions and intuitions are not relevantly similar. First, it might be said that it we understand why a certain perception was unreliable but cannot pinpoint why an intuition was unreliable. It may have been the case that I misidentified the colour of the wall because the lighting was bad, or I tasted chicken when eating filet mignon because I went for a smoke just before dinner. I concede that it is easier in the case of

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>133</sup> S. Matthew Liao, “A Defense of Intuitions,” *Philosophical Studies* 140, no. 2 (August 2008): 254.

perceptions than it is with intuitions, but that does not mean that we have no clue whatsoever on why some intuitions are unreliable. In fact, the above-mentioned list of Sinnott-Armstrong gives us a list of factors we can use to check if our intuitions might be unreliable. Much like bad lighting might lead us to a mistaken perception, so our partiality could lead us to a mistaken intuition. It may not be as easy, but it is certainly not impossible. Secondly, it might be claimed that intuitions are simply not as reliable as perceptions. However, the question is, should they really be? Do intuitions need to be as reliable as perceptions for them to no longer be inferentially justified? I think not. “After all, our memories are typically also not as reliable as our perceptions; but usually we are justified in using our memories without confirming them each time.”<sup>134</sup>

Third of all, Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument is that our moral beliefs are not reliably formed. Some of them might be, but many are not, so when looking at the entire class of moral beliefs, we have to say that the *entire class* of moral beliefs is not reliably formed. As such, none of our moral beliefs are non-inferentially justified. For every moral belief we have, we have a reason to believe that this belief is likely to be false. Thus, for each belief there is an *undercutting defeater*. Is it possible to find a defeater for the undercutting defeater – to find a reason why the moral belief is reliable? Yes: suppose I am staring into the distance and see a tower that is quite far away. I believe that this object is at least 300 meters high. Then I realize that my perception of height has always been less than stellar and therefore is unreliable. This undermines and defeats the belief I hold. Luckily, however, I can fix this, by either asking someone who is capable of correctly estimating heights or by simply walking towards the tower.<sup>135</sup> This intuitionist, however, cannot take such an approach.

Sinnott-Armstrong argues that you would have to find a positive and undefeated reason for believing that your moral belief is reliable. But, he claims, when we have a defeater for the defeater, one that shows that our moral belief belongs to a subclass of reliable moral beliefs, we are committing ourselves to a justificatory inferential structure. This is “a set of propositions where some propositions provide epistemic support for others. To be committed to such a structure is to accept or have a disposition to accept the supporting propositions in that structure or other propositions that entail or support the supporting propositions in that structure.”<sup>136</sup> This means that when we have this appropriate defeater, one that defeats the original defeater of our belief, we are in a position to infer our original belief from another belief: asking someone else or walking towards the tower confirms the reliability of our original belief and justifies it. But, though our belief would be justified, it would also mean that that justification is no longer non-

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>135</sup> Ballantyne and Thurow, “Moral Intuitionism Defeated?,” 411–412.

<sup>136</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, “An Empirical Challenge to Moral Intuitionism,” 13.

inferential. The same goes for moral beliefs: either our moral beliefs are unjustified, because they are unreliable, or they are reliable but not non-inferentially justified. Either way, moral intuitionism is in trouble.<sup>137</sup>

It is questionable whether this argument is successful. Sinnott-Armstrong's crucial point is that a defeater of a defeater should always show that our original belief was reliably and inferentially formed. Suppose I sit on a bench somewhere. I am again looking at a tower in the distance. This time around, I am not especially bad at correctly guessing heights from a distance. Two people join me and ask me what I am looking at. I tell them I am looking at the tower and let them know that I think the tower is at least 300 meters high. One of them tells me I am wrong: I cannot see it properly, because houses block my way, and the tower is located on a hill meaning that it is much shorter. The other person interjects and tells me I should not listen to his friend, for he is a trickster and likes to pull pranks on people.

Now, what has happened here is that I originally had a belief which was non-inferentially justified. I saw the tower and believed it to be at least 300 meters high. For a brief moment, my belief seemed to be defeated by the trickster, when he sold me the story of the hill. I had no reason to doubt his claim, so I doubted my original belief. Finally, the defeater was defeated by the trickster's friend, who undermined the story of the trickster. This justifies my original belief. Yet nowhere in this story can we find a place for Sinnott-Armstrong's coveted justificatory inferential structure. The defeater of the defeater does not imply that my guess of the tower's height was reliably formed, it only tells me that the defeater is not to be taken seriously, nor does it mean that my belief is now inferentially justified.<sup>138</sup> As such, it seems to be possible for beliefs to be non-inferentially justified. Thus, Sinnott-Armstrong's empirical argument against moral intuitionism does not seem to succeed.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

It has not been my intention to vindicate intuitionism: entire books can be written about this subject by philosophers who are much cleverer than I am. Knowledge, time and space limit me to a much less ambitious goal: to show that the intuitionist can defend himself. As such, this chapter discusses and criticizes the (which I consider) four most important lines of criticism against moral intuitionism. The moral faculty is not as mysterious as anti-intuitionists have made it out to be and the existence of non-natural moral facts does not need to be as problematic as it seems. Furthermore, widespread disagreement should not really concern the intuitionist and

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<sup>137</sup> Ballantyne and Thurow, "Moral Intuitionism Defeated?" 413.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 413–15.

lastly, that Sinnott-Armstrong is incorrect in arguing that empirical studies have shown that moral intuitionism fails. With these four arguments, I hope to have shown that moral intuitionism cannot be so easily dismissed as Sinnott-Armstrong makes it out to be *Some Varieties of Particularism*. In fact, intuitionism seems quite defensible. As a consequence, his criticism of methodological particularism is weakened, since it fundamentally depends on his argument that intuitionism is objectionable.

## 5. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this thesis has been to critically examine Sinnott-Armstrong's argument against moral particularism, specifically his argument against methodological particularism. This was done in four steps.

Chapter 1 discussed and summarized the argument from Sinnott-Armstrong as found in *Some Varieties of Particularism*. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that moral particularism can be understood in four different ways. Those are analytical particularism, metaphysical particularism, epistemological particularism and methodological particularism. He argues that all four forms have their own problems and cannot be defended. Special attention was given to methodological particularism, because this is the weakest form of particularism. If even methodological particularism cannot be defended, little hope remains for the particularist project. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that it is not possible to defend methodological particularism, because it entails an objectionable epistemology, namely moral intuitionism. The argument given by the methodological particularist is a negative one: it gives us reasons why we should reject moral generalism, but does not show why we should accept moral particularism. Sinnott-Armstrong's argument here is that the particularist is incorrect in assuming that it must be a choice between particularism and generalism. There is a third choice: scepticism. If the arguments of the particularist are correct, in such a way that generalism should be rejected, we should adopt scepticism rather than particularism, because scepticism does not come with such an objectionable epistemology.

In chapter 2 I have tried to show that a commitment to methodological particularism is required if one wants to be part of the particularist project. I argue that that is because there is an underlying assumption in the discussion between particularism and generalism. That assumption is that moral knowledge is possible and commonplace. It is, I think, impossible to reject methodological particularism on the one hand, accept that moral knowledge is possible and commonplace on the other hand, while still maintaining a position that is sufficiently particularist. As such, Sinnott-Armstrong's argument against methodological particularism gains in strength. If the particularist is not able to defend methodological particularism, it seems that it is difficult to defend moral particularism altogether.

Chapter 3 then deals with moral intuitionism, and, more specifically, Sinnott-Armstrong's claim that the particularist is committed to it. It seems to me that there are (at least) two reasons why he is correct. First, the particularist is committed to non-inferential justified moral beliefs. Second, most (if not all) particularists are intuitionists. This shows on the one hand that moral particularism indeed entails moral intuitionism, but on the other hand that the particularist is not really that worried about it.

In chapter 4, finally, I have tried to show that Sinnott-Armstrong's casual dismissal of moral intuitionism in *Some Varieties of Particularism* is unwarranted. Intuitionism, he argues there, is so objectionable that any theory associated with it should be dismissed as well. A detailed argument against intuitionism can be found in essays *Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology* and *An Empirical Challenge to Moral Intuitionism*. His empirical challenge put forward in those papers, together with the mysterious nature of the moral faculty, the ontological problem and the problem of widespread disagreement are some of the persistent forms of criticism against moral intuitionism. I have tried to show that the intuitionist can defend himself in all four cases.

With respect to the question at the start of this thesis, whether Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's argument against moral particularism is successful, the answer is both yes and no. On the one hand yes, his argument is successful in the sense that it is correct in claiming that the particularist is committed to intuitionism: his argument is valid but that does not mean that it is sound. Especially in *Some Varieties of Particularism*, Sinnott-Armstrong seems to think that merely mentioning intuitionism is enough ammunition to dismiss particularism. In it, he does not really seem to give an argument *why* intuitionism is so bad, only *that* it is really bad. Intuitionism is so objectionable, he seems to argue, that it taints all theories it associates itself with. In *An Empirical Challenge to Moral Intuitionism* and *Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology* he does come up with a sophisticated argument. However, I hope to have shown that this argument does not succeed. The other well-known arguments I discuss in chapter 4 also do not definitively prove that moral intuitionism is false. As such, I conclude that Sinnott-Armstrong is unwarranted in dismissing intuitionism and therefore unwarranted in dismissing moral particularism.

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