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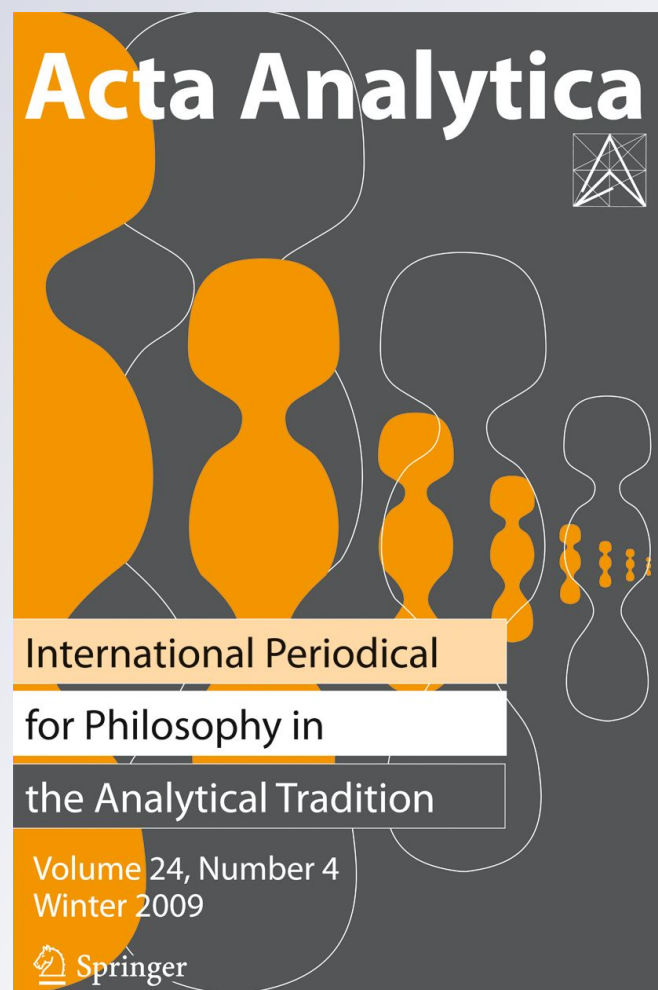
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Defending Particularism from Supervenience/Resultance Attack

Peter Shiu-Hwa Tsu

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Abstract I take the debate between the particularists and the principlists to be centered on the issue of whether there are true moral principles. One argument the principlists often appeal to in support of their claim that there are true moral principles is the argument from supervenience. Roughly, the argument is made up of the following three statements: (P1) If the thesis of moral supervenience holds, then there are true moral principles. (P2) The thesis of moral supervenience holds. (C) There are true moral principles, and hence particularism is false. In this paper, I argue that the above argument is not sound by attacking (P1). I hold that no general supervenient/resultance base has a robust enough configuration of contextual features as to ground the existence of true moral principles. If I am right about this, I think it would be indicative of a reason to be less confident about the truth of principlism and more confident about the truth of particularism.

Keywords Particularism · Principlism · Supervenience · Resultance · Jonathan Dancy

1

A common metaphysical picture of morality has it that morality is made up of a true and coherent set of moral principles. It follows from this picture that if one negates the existence of moral principles, one negates morality altogether. For without moral principles, it seems that there would be no standards against which the moral status of actions can be determined.

In pursuance with this common metaphysical picture of morality, one chief concern of normative ethics has been to formulate basic moral principles that govern the moral terrain. It is generally believed that in basic moral principles lies the ultimate source of moral truths. The *principlists*, though arguing among themselves over what the correct basic moral principles are and over the number of them, all

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tacitly agree that a major part of normative ethics is built upon the articulation of the basic moral principles and their application to practical moral issues.

While the heated debate is continuing about the correct formulation and application of the basic moral principle(s), the common metaphysical picture underlying it has not received proper attention—not until the appearance of the contemporary particularists.

Contrary to the principlists, the *particularists* argue that morality does not depend upon codification into a true and coherent set of moral principles. On this view, general principles fail to capture the complexity and uniqueness of particular circumstances (Nussbaum 1990, p. 69). Exceptions to principles are common, and exceptions to exceptions are not unusual (Davis 2004, p. 1). In other words, there are no exceptionless principles of the sort that the principlists have in mind. The particularists believe that the moral status of an action is not determined by moral principles; instead, it always relies on the particular configuration of its contextual features.¹

In this article, I will examine the debate between the principlists and the particularists with special focus on the question of whether there is any true moral principle.² In particular, I will examine the argument from supervenience the principlists often appeal to to establish their claim that there are true moral principles. I will argue that it is not sound. Although this would not refute principlism completely, as it may appeal to some other independent arguments for support, nevertheless, if I am right about this, it would be indicative of a reason for us to be less confident about the truth of principlism and more confident about the truth of particularism.

2

So what is the principlists' argument from supervenience? It actually comes in various versions as defended respectively by Richard Hare, Jonathan Bennett and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong.³ Although they differ in details, a common structure can be teased out as follows:

Argument from Supervenience

P1: The thesis of moral supervenience is true.

¹ The first four paragraphs in this section are an excerpt from my 2010 article, "Can Morality Be Codified." See Tsu (2010).

² It has to be noted here that the debate between principlism and particularism can be conducted entirely in terms of non-cognitivist language. If one holds to a non-cognitivist view about moral claims, i.e., the view that no moral claims have truth values, the issue still remains whether the moral claims about moral principles are *correct* or not. See Dancy (2004a, p. 140).

³ The most representative defender of the argument is probably Richard Hare. See his *Moral Thinking*, (1981), although in that book Hare uses the term 'universalizability' to mean what most people mean by 'supervenience,' as Jonathan Dancy correctly notes in his *Moral Reason* (1993, Appendix II). More recent defenders include Jonathan Bennett and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. See Bennett's *The Act Itself*, (1995, p. 19), where he says, 'Moral judgments supervene on non-moral facts; so if some particular act is wrong, it is made so by some of its non-moral properties and relations, ones that would suffice to make wrong any act that had them.' Dancy also quotes this passage in *Moral Reason*, p. 88; another moral theorist who implicitly subscribes to the argument from supervenience is Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. See his 'Some Varieties of Particularism' (1999, pp. 5–6), where he defends the view consisting of the following two claims: (i) if we judge one action right, we must judge any other relevantly similar action right. (ii) An action is relevantly similar if, roughly, it shares with the first action all the properties that were reasons why the first action was right, as well as all the underminers, reversers, excuses and overrides.

P2: If the thesis of moral supervenience is true, then there are true moral principles.

C: There are true moral principles. (Hence, particularism is false.)

I take P1 to be the claim that moral properties of an action supervene on its non-moral properties. What does this mean? Let me illustrate with an example. Suppose that action A has moral property M and non-moral property N, then P1 implies that if any action that is identical to action A with respect to N, it must be identical to action A with respect to M.

In this article, I will not take issue with P1 as I agree with Jackson et al. that rejecting the thesis of moral supervenience would constitute a heavy burden for the particularists, for it is a thesis that is widely accepted in moral philosophy (Jackson et al. 2000, pp. 84–88). Instead, I will argue that P2 is false or namely that *even if* supervenience holds, there are no true moral principles. Before I do so, however, there are some preliminaries to be taken note of.

First of all, let us note that in the literature, many particularists believe that even if the supervenience argument is sound, it will do no great harm to particularism (Little 2000, p. 286; Dancy 2004a, p. 87). They argue that the moral principles resulting from supervenience are useless in terms of guiding actions or providing explanations for their moral status. For the supervenience base of an action is so broad as to include all its non-moral properties such that it does not distinguish between its rightness-making and wrongness-making properties. Even though those moral principles established by supervenience may well be true, they lack the sort of explanatory power that most principlists expect moral principles to have—the power to explain why a particular action is right rather than wrong (or vice versa).

Although the above-mentioned particularist approach may well disarm the attack from *epistemological principlism*, I think that it leaves *metaphysical principlism* unscathed. The difference between these two versions of principlism lies in the fact that epistemological principlism is concerned to show, contra epistemological particularism, that moral principles are *useful* in guiding actions or providing explanations for their moral status, whereas metaphysical principlism is concerned to show, contra metaphysical particularism, that there are *true* moral principles.

The fact that moral principles are not useful does not entail the fact that they are not true. For it is not hard to imagine that the true moral principles are so complicated such that they are beyond the ken of human comprehension to be of any serviceable use at all. So it may well be the case that epistemological principlism is false, while metaphysical principlism is true. To refute metaphysical principlism, I think we need to run an independent argument against it. My strategy, as I have mentioned, is to mount an attack against P2. Before I give my reasons against P2, let me insert a note here about terminology. As the focus of this article is exclusively about the plausibility of metaphysical principlism, in what follows, I will just use ‘principlism’ and ‘principlists’ in short respectively for ‘metaphysical principlism’ and ‘metaphysical principlists.’ On the other hand, ‘particularism’ and ‘particularists’ always refer to ‘metaphysical particularism’ and ‘metaphysical particularists’ henceforth.

3

With the above preliminaries in place, we can now proceed with the examination of P2. Recall that my aim is to argue that *even if* supervenience holds, there are no true moral principles.

First of all, let me briefly explain why the principlists hold P2 as true. The reason can be roughly stated as follows. It is generally argued that the supervenience base includes all the non-moral properties of an action. If action A is wrong, then the thesis of supervenience implies that any action that is identical to action A in all of its non-moral properties must be identical to action A in all of its moral properties.⁴ Suppose that action A has non-moral properties N and moral properties M. The thesis of supervenience establishes the following claim: for any action, if it has N, it has M.

Namely, a moral principle of the following form ‘for all x if Nx then Mx’ can be established via supervenience. This is how most people in the literature construe the achievement of supervenience.⁵

But actually, I think it is disputable whether we can really get a moral *principle* out of the thesis of supervenience. For if the supervenient base of an action includes all the non-moral properties of an action, including both intrinsic and relational properties, then it is doubtful whether there is a second action that is identical to the first in all these aspects. A problem of individuation of actions will arise.

Such being the case, Dancy worries that we might end up with a non-repeatable principle for each case. In my view, Dancy is certainly right in pointing out that if such principles established by supervenience exist, they would not be very useful as they can only be applied once.⁶ However, Dancy’s claim does not suit my purpose here as what I want to show is that there exist no such moral principles at all, not that they are not very useful.

It seems to me that unless there is the possibility that N *could* be instantiated by more than one action, the statement ‘for all x, if Nx then Mx’ does not express a moral *principle*. How so? Suppose that N can be instantiated only by a particular action A, then the statement ‘for all x, if Nx then Mx’ merely amounts to the following claim: if Na then Ma, namely, if action A has non-moral properties N, then it has moral properties M. In this case, the above statement merely expresses a moral *verdict*. For surely no one regards a statement such as ‘action A (that has non-moral properties N) has moral properties M’ as a moral *principle*. As is commonly construed, a moral *principle* has to be a generalization about the moral status of an action *type* (e.g., ‘killing is wrong’), whereas a moral *verdict* in my construal is about the moral status of a singular action *token* (e.g., ‘this particular action of killing is wrong’).

⁴ This is what Jonathan Dancy takes the principlists to mean when they talk about moral supervenience. See Dancy (1993, p 77).

⁵ See for instance Smith (2004, chapter 11, p. 214).

⁶ See Dancy (2004a, p. 87), where Dancy claims that ‘[a] principle that has only one instance is worse than useless, for no such principle could ever be a guide for judgment.’

The principlists who wish to establish the existence of true moral principles via supervenience might of course argue that *two* actions can be exactly the same in terms of all their non-moral properties. If this claim can hold, then the principlists could argue that any action that has all of the non-moral properties of action A would have the same moral properties as those possessed by action A without worrying about whether it is numerically indistinguishable from action A and hence without worrying about whether what is established is merely a moral *verdict* rather than a moral *principle*. But it is hard to see how the principlists can cash out their claim here. So far, no principlists have produced convincing evidence that they can. And even if they can, it might still be subjected to the criticism in what follows.

4

The particularists may well argue that the supervenience base is cast too wide such that it does not satisfy the ‘in virtue of’ constraint. For the supervenient base, as the principlists construe it, might include not only the morally relevant properties, but also the morally irrelevant properties of an action. If an action is wrong, it is certainly not wrong *in virtue of* those morally irrelevant properties it has. Suppose that an action of killing is wrong, and that it happens to take place on Thursday morning at a quarter past nine, then it is certainly not wrong in virtue of the fact that it happens at this time.

However, I think the above line of reasoning is a bit too quick. For the principlists need not argue that the moral properties of an action supervene upon *all* the non-moral properties of the action. They need only to argue that they supervene upon the non-moral properties that are morally relevant. This strategy of narrowing the supervenient base, if it succeeds, can help the principlists kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, it can satisfy the ‘in virtue of’ requirement. On the other hand, the principlists can circumvent the problem of the individuation of actions mentioned in the last section. Under the current construal of the supervenient base, action x and action y need not be identical in all their non-moral aspects to be morally identical. They need only be identical in their morally relevant non-moral properties. They might well differ in their morally *irrelevant* non-moral properties. Hence, the problem of the individuation of actions will not arise.

Given this new construal of supervenience base, the principlists can thus happily claim that any action that has a supervenience base exactly the same as that of action x will have the same moral properties as those of action x without worrying about whether it is numerically indistinguishable from action x. That is, the principlists would not have to worry that it is a moral *verdict* instead of a moral *principle* that they have established via supervenience.

But it might be objected that the supervenience base is still cast too wide. For the morally relevant properties of an action may cover not just those properties in virtue of which those actions are right, but also those morally relevant properties in virtue of which the action is not right (Little 2000, pp. 286–287). For instance, in a standard Trolley case where an action of killing one and saving five takes place, the action cannot be right in virtue of the fact that it has the property of killing the one. If

the action is right, what grounds its rightness is the fact that it has the property of saving the five lives.

But again, the principlists need not cast the supervenience base this wide. They can limit the supervenience base to just those properties in virtue of which the moral properties of the actions result (Bennett 1995, p. 19). Dancy seems to be fully aware of this possibility, borrowing the term 'resultance' from W.D. Ross. Here is what I take 'resultance' to mean:

Resultance: The resultance base of an action covers all the non-moral properties in virtue of having which its moral properties result.

Now, the idea of resultance is to be distinguished from the idea of supervenience we had been operating with. To illustrate with the Trolley case, if the action of killing one and saving five is right, then its rightness does not result from the fact it has the non-moral property of killing the one, but rather from the fact that it has the non-moral property of saving the five. The resultance base of the action is just the non-moral property of saving the five. By contrast, the supervenience base of the action, as we had construed it earlier, includes not only the non-moral property of saving the five, but also the non-moral property of killing the one. However, as we have argued, the supervenient base is cast too wide to satisfy the 'in virtue of' requirement. With the machinery of 'resultance,' it seems that the principlists can circumvent this problem encountered by 'supervenience.'

To further clarify the distinction between supervenience and resultance, let me illustrate with an actual/possible world formulation⁷:

Supervenience: if action a has non-moral property N and moral property M in the actual world, then in all possible worlds where action x has N, it has M. (N is restricted to those non-moral properties that are morally relevant.)

Resultance: if action a has non-moral property N and moral property M in the actual world, then in all possible worlds where action x has N, it has M. (N is restricted to those non-moral properties *in virtue of* which M results.)

So with the above construal of resultance, what can the particularists say in reply here? I think the particularists may well contend that the thesis of resultance construed as above cannot establish the existence of a true moral principle. Namely, if we judge action A to be right for having non-moral properties ABC, the particularists would deny that any action that has non-moral properties ABC would have the same moral properties as those of action A's. That is, they would deny the thesis of resultance as construed above. For it is not difficult to imagine that action B has a further non-moral property D whose tendency to make the action right would either *override* or *undermine* any tendency that ABC had to make the action wrong (Dancy 1993, p. 77). To illustrate, suppose that an action is wrong in virtue of its property of killing. Then a particularist argues that a second action that is identical to the first *in that aspect* is not necessarily wrong. As we have seen in the Trolley case, the action may have a further property of saving lives, which either outweighs or undermines the tendency the property of killing possesses to make the action wrong.

⁷ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for his/her helpful suggestion here.

A natural strategy for the principlists to adopt here is this: if we could expand the resultance base a little bit to include both the right-making properties and the wrong-making properties of an action so as to prevent the occurrence of any *overrides* or *underminers*, then we could argue that any action that has non-moral properties exactly the same as those included in action A's resultance base would have the same moral properties as those of action A's.

This strategy has the advantage of being immune to the Trolley case counterexample mentioned two paragraphs above, for the action in the Trolley case does not have the resultance base of the first action as the first action's resultance base involves no right-making properties, whereas the second action does. The principlists merely claim that any action that has the first action's resultance base would have the same moral properties, but this is not incompatible with the claim that an action that does not have first action's resultance base could have different moral properties.

At this juncture, there are two questions the particularists may raise with this strategy. First, can we expand the resultance base in such a way as to include both the right-making properties and the wrong-making properties of an action? Second, even if it can be thus expanded, does it establish the existence of a true moral principle? I will deal with these two questions in what follows.

5

To begin with, it seems that if we do expand the resultance base of an action in the way the principlists suggest, we would violate the 'in virtue of' requirement. As we mentioned earlier, if an action is right, then its rightness does not result in virtue of having wrong-making properties. It would seem somewhat strained for us to say that the rightness of the action results not only partly from its right-making properties, but also partly from its wrong-making properties, for no right action's rightness could ever result in virtue of wrong-making properties, not even in part.

But the principlists may come back and argue that this is wrong. To illustrate with the Trolley case, the principlists may argue that it is not as implausible as it firstly appeared to claim that the rightness of the action results in virtue of both its property of saving five persons and its property of killing one person. The reason is that if the action did not have the property of killing one person, it would have been more right. This somehow suggests that the exact degree of rightness depends not only on the property of saving five persons, but also on the killing of one person.

So whence comes the oddity I mentioned earlier in saying that the rightness of the action in the Trolley case results not only from the property of saving five lives, but also in part from the property of killing one person as well?

I suspect that the oddity is purely epistemic-cum-practical rather than metaphysical. To illustrate with the Trolley case, appealing to the wrong-making property of killing one person does not help to illuminate why the action is right instead of wrong. Hence, in the epistemic sense of 'in virtue of,' it would be awkward to claim that the rightness of the action results partly in virtue of the wrong-making property of killing. We do not judge the action to be right because it has a property of killing one person, not even *partly* because. The action is right in virtue of having its right-making properties, *despite* its wrong-making properties.

But in the metaphysical sense of ‘in virtue of’ we just mentioned, there is nothing that bars us from regarding the moral properties the action has as resulting in virtue of its right-making properties as well as wrong-making properties. We cannot subtract the property of killing from the resultant base without making the action more right than it is now. To explain the exact degree of rightness of the action in the metaphysical sense, we would have to appeal to the property of killing.⁸

But Dancy (1993, p. 65) points out that the general rationale behind this thought of the principlists is that a non-moral property plays a role in the determination of the moral properties of the action if the action would be made more right or less so with its addition or removal. Against this general rationale, Zangwill (2008) argues that if it were adopted, then one would have to claim that an action is right not just in virtue of its right-making properties, but also in virtue of the fact that it does not have any weightier wrong-making properties.⁹ And this seems quite counterintuitive. Indeed, is an action of donating to charities right partly because it does not have the properties of killing, stealing, raping and insulting? This does not sound right. If not, then the general rationale behind the principlists’ thought ought to be rejected. And it would be illegitimate for the principlists to claim that the rightness of the action could result in part from its lack of wrong-making properties.

But again, if we bear in mind the distinction between the two senses of ‘in virtue of’ I just mentioned, one could certainly claim that the rightness of the action results partly in virtue of its lack of wrong-making properties under the metaphysical sense of ‘in virtue of’ while acknowledging that it would be odd to make the same statement under the epistemic-cum-practical sense of ‘in virtue of.’ For without the lack of wrong-making properties, the action would have been less right than it is now.

Having said this, I don’t think the principlists’ strategy of thus expanding the resultant base could work to establish the existence of true moral principles, even if it is conceded to the principlists that the notion of a resultant base when thus expanded could satisfy the ‘in virtue of’ requirement.

6

In the last section, we have seen that there is indeed a sense of ‘in virtue of’ in which the principlists might say that the moral properties of an action result in virtue of both its right-making and wrong-making properties. Hence, it is not illegitimate for the principlists to claim that the resultant base of an action includes both its right-making and wrong-making properties. But the principlists want to make the further claim that if action A is right in virtue of its right-making and wrong-making properties, let’s say, XYZ, then we are bound by the thesis of resultantism to say that

⁸ Brad Hooker has a similar view that the features of context should be included inside the full specification of the reason. See Hooker (2000, p.14); it is also worth noting here that Raz (2006, p. 110) points out, although somewhat implicitly, that two senses of ‘in virtue of’ have to be distinguished, namely, that there is a distinction between facts that make the actions right and the fact statement of which will provide an adequate explanation in context.

⁹ Zangwill (2008, pp. 109–127) argues that if an action is right, only the right-making properties are *responsible* for its moral status but the lack of wrong-making properties is not.

any action that has XYZ is right. But the particularists reject this further claim of the principlists and argue instead that even if they admit that action A is right in virtue of both its right-making and wrong-making properties XYZ, this does not commit them to saying that there is a moral principle which says that any action that has XYZ is right. How could this be?

It might now be appropriate to introduce the notion of an *enabler*. According to Dancy (2000, p. 153), an enabler is a feature that cannot be included in the resultance base of the action, yet nevertheless plays an 'enabling role' in the determination of an action's moral properties. To illustrate with an example Dancy gave, suppose that 'ought implies can.' The fact that you can do A is not among the reasons why you ought to do A. It merely enables those non-moral properties in the resultance base to be the reasons they are, viz. the reasons why you ought to do A.

If what is said here is plausible, we can make sense of the particularists' claim that a second action that has XYZ may not have the same moral properties as those of the first. For it may well be the case that the second lacks the enablers required for it to have the same moral properties as those of the first. Hence, even if it has non-moral properties XYZ, it might still have moral properties that are different from those of the first.

But as I mentioned earlier, there is a need to distinguish between two senses of 'in virtue of.' The principlists may well concede that when we use the practical-cum-epistemic sense of 'in virtue of,' it is not legitimate to include the enablers into the non-moral properties in the resultance base in virtue of which the moral properties of an action results. But nevertheless, they could maintain that when we use the metaphysical sense of 'in virtue of,' there is nothing wrong with saying that the moral properties of an action result partly in virtue of the enablers, since without the enablers, the action would not have the moral properties as it does.

Hence, a natural strategy for the principlists to employ is to expand the resultance base of an action still wider such that it includes not only the right-making and wrong-making properties, but also the enablers and the disablers (or the absence of enablers, as it were) as well. If this strategy works, then the principlists could argue that if action A is right in virtue of its right-making and wrong-making properties XYZ and its enablers E and disablers D, then any action that has XYZED would have the same moral properties as those of action A. Namely, we get a moral principle that claims that any action that has XYZED is right. But still the particularists claim that even if it could be conceded that the resultance base of an action could be expanded this wide, still not every action that has XYZED is right. How could this be?

Dancy (2004b, p. 231) argues that there might be enablers for enablers, or features that make it possible for the enablers to enable the right-making features to favor an action. But again, there is no reason why the principlists could not expand the resultance base still wider so as to include enablers for enablers or disablers for enablers and so on. There is only one constraint the principlists need to follow when expanding the resultance base at the metaphysical level. That is, it cannot be so wide as to include all the non-moral properties of an action. If it did, then it would be subjected to the problem of individuation of actions I mentioned in the first section. And if the problem of individuation cannot be satisfactorily settled, then it might well be the case that it is a moral *verdict* rather than a moral *principle* that the

principlists have established. And this certainly does not touch the claim of particularism that there are no true moral principles.

In accordance with this constraint mentioned above, Sinott-Armstrong (1999, p. 6) argues on behalf of the principlists that there is a resultance base that is not as broad as a supervenience base that includes all the non-moral properties of an action and yet its configuration of non-moral properties is robust enough such that any action that has this resultance base would have the same moral properties. That is, the principlists may well argue that there is a true moral principle that claims that any action that has this resultance base has certain moral properties.

According to Dancy (2004b, p. 231), the resultance base, if it is to have the required effect that any action that shares the same resultance base will have the same moral properties, must include ‘not only the right-making features, but also the unsuccessfully wrong-making features, and all enabling conditions, as well as any further features that could, in any circumstances whatever, make some difference to the overall moral properties of an action. It must include the absence of any features that if present would disable the right-making features, as well as the presence of any features required for enablers to enable the right makers (enablers for enablers, as it were), and so on and on.’ But Dancy (1981, p. 379) argues that it may still be the case that the second action, despite its exact similiarity to the first in all non-moral respects relevant to the moral properties of the first, is still so specially circumstanced such that in its case those properties do no suffice to make it have the same moral properties. How could this be? To see this, look at an example discussed by Dancy (1981, p. 379):

	S1	S2
Features	ABC not D not E not F	ABC not D E and F ^a

^aSlight variations in symbols have been made to the example, but the example is still true to the one employed by Dancy.

For the sake of the argument, let’s first of all stipulate that if ABC and the absence of D are the morally relevant features of S1 and S2, they exhaust all the possible morally relevant features there can be such that no possible further enablers or disenablers could arise.

And let’s further stipulate that ABC and the absence of D are indeed the morally relevant features of S1, as their presence or absence would make a difference to the moral properties of S1. Namely, S1 would have a different moral property if it lacked features A, B or C, or if it had feature D. In contrast, neither the absence of E nor the absence of F is a morally relevant feature of S1, as neither of them in itself would change the moral property of S1. To determine whether a feature is morally relevant is to determine whether its presence or absence would make a difference to the moral properties of an action.

So now it seems that S1 and S2 are identical in terms of all their morally relevant properties. And I take it to be a conceptual truth that the moral property of an action is determined jointly by all of its morally relevant features.¹⁰ So it seems to follow

¹⁰ Non-cognitivists will have no objection to this claim as they typically see our moral judgments as constrained by the morally relevant features of an action.

naturally that S1 and S2 have the same moral properties. For how could it be the case two actions identical in their morally relevant features could differ in their moral properties?

Dancy (1981, pp. 379–380) notes that there is a real possibility this could be so. For it may well be the case that while the presence of E or its absence in itself wouldn't make a difference to the moral properties of an action and hence wouldn't qualify as a morally relevant feature, its presence together with the presence of F would make a difference to the moral properties of an action. And hence, two actions that are exactly the same in terms of all their morally relevant aspects might still differ in their moral properties.

But how plausible is Dancy's response? Why can't we claim that the combination of E and F is a conjunct morally relevant property? Dancy wants to claim that if neither not E nor not F is morally relevant, then neither E nor F is morally relevant either. This is certainly right. But this does not prevent us from claiming that the co-presence of E and F would make a difference. If we do want to make a claim that E and F would make a difference, the most plausible way of seeing the matter is to regard the co-presence of E and F as a conjunct morally relevant feature. For without the co-presence of E and F, the action wouldn't have the moral properties that it does.

Hence, Dancy's reply cannot work. The principlists merely claim that any action that has the same resultance base would have the same moral properties. This claim is compatible with the claim that two actions that have different resultance bases could have different moral properties. Since S1 and S2 have different resultance bases, the principlists' claim that there are true moral principles is not affected by Dancy's reply.

Now, the real issue lies in whether there is a resultance base that is robust enough such that it would be impervious to the changes of the contexts and that any action that has it would have the same moral properties.

7

Indeed, it seems to be a conceptual truth that the moral properties of an action are determined jointly by all of its morally relevant non-moral properties. And we can derive from this that for any two actions, if their morally relevant non-moral properties are *exactly* the same, then they would have the same moral properties. How do we translate this into the talk of resultance base? To achieve the purpose of the principlists, they would have to argue that the resultance base of an action, which includes all of its morally relevant properties, must exhaustively include all the morally relevant features there can be such that the change of the context would not produce further morally relevant features, say, further enablers/disenablers or the right-making and wrong-making features. Namely, the configuration of the morally relevant features in the resultance base must be robust enough such that the moral properties that result from it are impervious to the addition of other features in all contexts. Is there any general resultance base that has such a robust configuration? In my opinion, that seems quite unlikely.

In fact, I hold that moral principles grounded by a robust resultance base are much harder to come by than the principlists can imagine in their philosophy. For instance, let's think about

Moral Principle A: 'Torturing an innocent person merely for fun is wrong.'

Indeed, it might seem fair to say that no morally sane person could deny the truth of this principle. And it is generally taken for granted by the principlists to be an example to illustrate their claim that there exist some sets of non-moral properties whose configuration is robust enough to be impervious to the changes of the contexts. For once an action involves the non-moral properties of torturing an innocent person merely for fun, it must be wrong. For example, it would be wrong to torture innocent Mary merely for fun just as it would be wrong to torture innocent Sally, Jane, Angel or indeed anyone else who is innocent merely for fun. Hence, it seems very easy to come by a moral principle that is grounded by the identical robust resultance base of different actions.

But does what is said above really illustrate a case where the existence of a moral principle is grounded by a robust enough resultance base? Given the strong intuitions elicited by moral principle A, even many particularists have conceded that. But in fact, I think the answer is negative, for the description 'torturing an innocent person merely for fun' is a general description of a *type* of action, which can cover all of the following descriptions of individual actions:

- (1) John tortures innocent Mary merely for fun.
- (2) John tortures innocent Mary merely for fun; Mary is a masochist who enjoys being tortured.
- (3) John tortures innocent Mary merely for fun; Mary is a masochist who consents to being tortured during her sexual intercourse with John.

And I trust that if the readers have the same intuitions as I do, it is not implausible to contend that the action described by (1) is morally worse than the action described by (2) and the action described by (2) is morally worse than the action described by (3). The three actions have different moral properties. Accordingly, given that the thesis of resultance holds or that there cannot be a difference in moral properties of actions without a difference in their resultance bases, it follows from the fact that the actions described respectively by (1), (2) and (3) have different moral properties that they have different resultance bases. And if the three actions turn out to have different resultance bases, this does not really illustrate the claim that there are true moral principles established by a *single* identical robust resultance base.

Of course, the principlists might well argue that although the resultance bases of the three actions mentioned above are different ones, they nevertheless fall under the same general resultance base that involves the non-moral properties of torturing an innocent merely for fun. But in that case, the principlists' claim that all actions that have this resultance base must have the same moral properties cannot be sustained as the three actions above have different moral properties. Then, this shows that the non-moral properties involved in torturing an innocent person merely for fun do not provide a robust enough resultance base such that all actions that have the resultance base would have the same moral properties.

So to sum up, no matter whether the three actions have the same resultance base or not, they do not illustrate the principlists' claim that there is a robust resultance base such that any action that has it must have the same moral properties. Moral principle A, even though it might be true, does not give the principlists what they want.

But it is worth noting here that the fact that the non-moral properties of torturing an innocent merely for fun does not illustrate a robust resultance base should not be taken as saying that actions expressed by (1), (2) and (3) do not have a robust resultance base respectively in themselves. They do, but it is quite redundant to say that an action has a robust resultance base since the moral properties of any action, being what they in fact are, must result from the non-moral properties inside the resultance base and that the moral properties resulting from them are impervious to the non-moral properties outside it. The particularists do not deny this. The point is whether there is any set of non-moral properties of any action whose configuration is robust enough such that it can be exported to other contexts and remain unaffected there. And to think that the non-moral properties involved in torturing an innocent person merely for fun illustrates such a set is mistaken, as I have shown. Hence, the principlists cannot use moral principle A as an example to illustrate their claim that there is a moral principle grounded by a robust resultance base.

Although this has not proved that the principlists are wrong about their claim that there are true moral principles, nevertheless it does show that even if there are true moral principles, they are not established by a robust resultance base since there does not appear to be any. Given the fact that a configuration of non-moral properties as robust as that of torturing an innocent person merely for fun is actually not robust enough, then one is rightly entitled to doubt whether any such robust resultance base as required by the principlists exists.

8

Let me take up two possible objections from the principlists.

Objection 1: The principlists may suggest that so long as the non-moral properties of torturing an innocent merely for fun have the same moral *valence*, then no matter how they are instantiated in particular circumstances, there is some sort of robustness that those properties can be said to have, for their valence does not change from negative to positive (or from wrong to right). And this sort of robustness is all the principlists need for their purpose of establishing the existence of true moral principles; they need not go any further as to claim that their moral properties are the same in different contexts.

Reply: Although it is true that this sort of robustness is all the principlists need for their purpose of establishing the existence of true moral principles, it is not sufficient for the purpose of establishing the existence of true moral principles *via* the thesis of resultance/supervenience. For the thesis of resultance/supervenience claims that any action that has the same resultance/supervenience base must have the same moral properties. But as I have shown in Sect. VII by the three examples, not every action

that has the non-moral properties of torturing an innocent merely for fun would have the same moral properties, despite the fact that they all may well have the same negative moral valence.¹¹

In fact, it can even be doubted whether all actions that have the properties of torturing an innocent merely for fun have a negative moral valence. Take (3) in Sect. VII for instance. It is not clear that John's torturing innocent Mary is wrong if Mary has given him consent to do so during their sexual intercourse. If so, it is far from clear that a moral principle such as 'torturing an innocent merely for fun is wrong' is always true in all contexts. Hence, it is also far from clear that it provides a knockdown case against particularism.

Objection 2: It may be objected that the proposal of this paper, i.e., the proposal that the existence of true moral principles (or generalities) cannot be established by the thesis of resultance, may well be adjusted to a picture of resultance where moral relevance comes from unique particular patterns involved in the judgments concerning the moral situation. These patterns may be compatible with interpretation of generalities as tendencies and not as exceptionless generalities.¹² In fact, the objection is well motivated by Lance and Little's 2009 paper "From Particularism to Defeasibility in Ethics." In that paper, they contend that one can be skeptical of moral principles construed as exceptionless generalities without being skeptical of moral principles construed as expressing tendencies. To illustrate, one might well be skeptical of the exceptionless moral principle 'lying is wrong' without being skeptical of the moral principle 'lying has a tendency to be wrong.'

Reply: I agree with the gist of the objection, with the following qualification. It is not my intention in this paper to argue against the existence of moral principles construed as expressing moral *tendencies* of actions. Rather, I only intend to argue against the acceptance of the existence of *exceptionless* moral principles. For ease of exposition, let's call the exceptionless moral principles E moral principles and those expressing tendencies as T moral principles for short. The sort of moral principles targeted by this paper are the E ones rather than the T ones. While it might be true that the existence of the T moral principles can be established by the thesis of resultance, as the objection suggests, this is tangential for the purpose of this paper. Rather, what I have been trying to demonstrate in this paper is the point that there is no strong reason for us to believe that the existence of E moral principles can be so established.

To further clarify, we can distinguish two types of principlism according to the sort of moral principles they espouse. Let us call the sort of principlism that espouses the existence of E moral principles E-principlism and the sort of principlism that

¹¹ It is noteworthy here that an action's moral properties must be distinguished from its moral valence. Two actions having the same moral valence may not necessarily have the same moral properties. To give a simple example, both the action of stealing a candy bar from a shop and the action of raping have negative moral valence (they both are wrong rather than right, and hence are both negatively valenced rather than positively valenced), but they do not have the same moral properties because the latter action is certainly, in a sense, much more wrong than the former one.

¹² I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this objection and giving me the opportunity to further clarify my position.

espouses the existence of T moral principles T-principlism. The aim of my paper has been to argue that there are no good reasons to think that the truth of E-principlism can be established by the thesis of resultance; I have remained neutral on the issue of whether the truth of T-principlism can be so established. In fact, I may well embrace the truth of T-principlism while arguing against the acceptance of E-principlism. It may be wondered, however, whether one can coherently do so. I think one can!

To see this, let's concede to our objector that the truth of T-principlism can be established by the thesis of resultance. Does this therefore mean that the truth of E-principlism can be so established as well? The answer is, which I hope is straightforward enough for the readers, no! For there can certainly be T moral principles without there being any E moral principles, as they are different sorts of creatures. While the E moral principles are about the overall moral status of an action, the T ones are not; rather, the T ones, in our construal, are about the moral tendencies of an action. On some interpretation, W.D. Ross can be regarded as a strong defender of the view that there are various T moral principles expressing the moral tendencies of actions (he called them *prima facie* moral principles); there are no E moral principles that can settle the conflicts between those T moral principles should they arise. While Ross's position can certainly be faulted for lacking a mechanism to settle the conflicts (McNaughton 1996), there is nothing incoherent about this position. One can certainly hold to the truth of T-principlism while arguing against the acceptance of E-principlism.

To sum up my reply, since my paper is aimed to argue that there is no good reason to subscribe to E-principlism, it may well coherently accept the truth of T-principlism, should the existence of T moral principles be established by the thesis of resultance. The truth of T-principlism is, however, tangential for the purpose of my paper. The chief target of my paper is E-principlism.

9

Finally, let me briefly summarize the dialectic between the particularists and the principlists. In Sect. 7, the principlists argue that there is a resultance base whose configuration of non-moral properties is robust enough such that any action that has this resultance base would have the same moral properties. If this is indeed so, then the principlists' claim that there are true moral principles may well be justified. Yet, the particularists argue that even if there are true moral principles, as they would grant to the principlists for the sake of the argument, they are not established by the thesis of resultance. The moral principle that claims that torturing an innocent merely for fun is wrong, though it may well be true, is not established by the thesis of resultance. For as we have already seen in Sect. 7, the non-moral properties of torturing an innocent merely for fun cannot square with the idea of a robust resultance base. If this is the case, the particularists may well contend that we have every reason to doubt whether there is any such resultance base. Until the principlists have shown otherwise, the particularists can rest content.

What I have argued so far in this paper is that the strategy of appealing to the thesis of resultance/supervenience will not help the principlists to establish their

claim that there are true moral principles. This does not exclude, however, the possibility that there might be other strategies available to the principlists to establish the existence of true moral principles. These strategies might include, amongst others, Richard Holton's (2002) appeal to what he calls the "that's it" clause, Rossians' appeal to the atomism of reason, McKeever and Ridge's (2006) appeal to seeing moral principles as regulative ideals, Väyrynen's (2009) appeal to hedged moral principles or Luke Robinson's (2006) appeal to a dispositionalist understanding of moral principles. Whether these other strategies are successful or not, however, lies beyond the scope of this paper. They are all interesting topics for future research.

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