

holism, weight, and undercutting

forthcoming in *Noûs*

Particularists in ethics emphasize that the normative is *holistic*, and invite us to infer with them that it therefore defies *generalization*.¹ This has been supposed to present an obstacle to traditional moral theorizing, to have striking implications for moral epistemology and moral deliberation, and to rule out reductive theories of the normative, making it a bold and important thesis across the areas of normative theory, moral epistemology, moral psychology, and normative metaphysics. Though particularists emphasize the *importance* of the holism of the normative, however, it is not something that they have generally been able to explain. In this paper I'll show how to use a small number of simple and, I'll argue, independently compelling assumptions in order to both predict and explain the holistic features of the normative with respect to the non-normative. The basic idea of the paper is simple. It is that normative claims are holistic because they are general, rather than because they defy generalization.

The structure of the paper will be simple. In part 1, I'll present old-fashioned, Clarkean generalism, and the original particularist challenge. I'll explain the nature of the standard, Rossian, response to this challenge, what it tells us about 'ought' facts, and how that is related to the 'is'- 'ought' gap. In short, Ross's proposal was that 'ought' facts are general facts, not particular facts – they are facts about the balance of *all* of an agent's reasons – or in Ross's framework, her *prima facie* duties. The nonderivability of 'ought' from 'is' and absence of general 'ought' principles, on this view, is a consequence of the general nonderivability of general facts from particular facts.

Then I'll introduce the new particularist challenge, which poses essentially the same challenge to Rossian generalizations about reasons (or *prima facie* duties) as the original particularist challenge poses to Clarkean generalizations about 'oughts'. I'll point out the obvious: that given its

¹ McKeever and Ridge [2006] provide an excellent classification and characterization of many different varieties of particularist theses. In this paper I will not be concerned so much to distinguish between these particularist theses, as to be trying to explain the phenomena to which particularists call our attention by using conservative explanatory materials.

similar structure, it is open to exactly the same diagnosis as the original challenge – that what we are interested in when we make claims about reasons are themselves general claims, rather than particular claims.

The remainder of the paper serves to elaborate on, justify, and explain that diagnosis. In part 2 I'll point out that the assertability of claims about reasons depends on the weight of those reasons, and that the weight of reasons depends on the existence or not of partial undercutters – what Dancy [2004] calls 'attenuators'. Since the fact of having no attenuators is a negative existential fact, it is itself a general fact, and so the weight of reasons depends on general facts. Together with the fact that the assertability of 'reason' claims depends on their weight, this explains why 'reason' claims behave like general claims, validating my diagnosis. Finally, in part 3 I'll offer a conjecture about the nature of the weight of reasons that both explains how undercutting works, and *why* it is that the weight of reasons is subject to undercutting and hence a matter of general fact. The moral of my story is that the holism of the normative is interesting and important, but not deep. The normative claims we are interested in are holistic in the same way that all general claims are holistic. That doesn't make them defy generalization or unamenable to explanatory theorizing.

1.1 clarkean generalism and the original particularist challenge

In the eighteenth century, Samuel Clarke [1706] held the view that obligatory actions are *intrinsically* so. Hence, he held, it cannot ever be the case that there is something that one person ought to do, but another ought not to do, and what a person ought to do cannot vary with changes in her circumstances. Of course, it seems obvious that there are *some* changes in what a person ought to do in different circumstances – for example, if you promise to meet Suzy for lunch, then it seems that you ought to meet her for lunch, while this is not the case for someone who has not so promised. Clarke, along with Cudworth [1996] and Price [1948], allowed for such variation, but only on the grounds that it amounts to variation in the *means* to doing what everyone at all times ought to do – to keep their promises. It is only because keeping promises is intrinsically obligatory – for everyone and at all times – that meeting someone for lunch can become derivatively obligatory for some people at some times, as a result of promises that they make.²

² For further discussion of this sort of view and its connections to particularism, see Schroeder [forthcoming a].

This view committed Clarke to some list of basic obligations – things that everyone at all times ought necessarily to do, no matter what her circumstances. It was this conception of obligations that Kant [1799] was concerned to maintain, when he insisted that the wrongness of lying requires that it is wrong to lie, even to save the life of one's dearest friend. But Kant's example draws out the implausibility of the central claim of Clarkean generalism – that there are some things that you necessarily ought to do, no matter what. Refraining from lying, at least, is not a good example of such an action, because we can imagine cases in which it is not the case that someone ought not to lie, and Kant's example seems like such a case. Similarly, it seems possible to construct examples in which it is not the case that someone ought to keep her promise.

So Clarkean generalism seems too strong. Universal generalizations about what we always ought to do, under any circumstances whatsoever, are generally implausible, appearing to admit of counterexamples, at least as long as they are framed in non-normative terms.³ So according to the original particularist challenge, since we can't formulate plausible generalizations about what we ought to do in non-normative terms, there is something 'holistic' about morality. What we ought to do depends on how things are *on the whole*, and that is why it defies generalization. Moreover, this appears to substantiate the idea that there is a 'gap' between 'is' and 'ought'. The only necessary connection between what is, non-normatively, and what people ought to do, requires a complete specification of the entire world. Nothing else will do.

1.2 Ross and the diagnosis of the problem

If the original particularist challenge is on the right track, then 'ought' facts are in a sense holistic. They are never guaranteed by an incomplete specification of how things are, descriptively, for further facts might still make things go the other way. At least, that is the idea. The particularist suggests that this makes 'ought' facts defy generalization, and hence unamenable to explanatory theorizing. But holistic facts are familiar. General facts are holistic. A universal generalization like 'all swans are white' is holistic. No matter how much of the world we describe, it is not enough to

³ Here I am glossing over a more involved dialectic; one response to this challenge is to keep the Clarkean thesis that if anything is wrong, then some things are necessarily wrong, but to *refine* one's characterization of what the necessarily wrong actions are – so rather than putting *lying* on the list, we put *lying except when it would save a friend's life* on the list. The problem with this approach is essentially that because of *additional* counterexamples, these refinements rapidly become extraordinarily complicated, and it becomes hard to say what the various refinements that we need to add have in common, other than that they are needed in order for it to turn out that the action is necessarily wrong – which seems to get things the wrong way around. The worry is that the potential counterexamples are *open-ended* in such a way that we would need to know *everything* about the world in order to rule them out. That is the grounds on which their behavior is said to be *holistic*.

guarantee that all swans are white, for there may yet be a black swan somewhere else. Only a complete specification of the world can guarantee that all swans are white.

At the heart of Ross's [1930] observation, is the idea that if 'ought' facts are general facts, then they, too, would be holistic in this way. Ross held that rather than being a collection of things that we intrinsically ought to do, there is, rather, a collection of things that we have *prima facie* duties to do – actions in favor of which, as we would put it nowadays, there is necessarily some reason. The thing that we ought to do, Ross held, is the thing which is supported by the *balance* of *all* of our *prima facie* duties. That is, it is the thing we have most reason to do. That is, out of all of the reasons there are for us to act in one way rather than another, the collective weight of those to do it is greater than the collective weight of those not to do it.^{4 5}

So *ought* facts, on this view, are general facts. They are collective facts about *all* of our reasons. This makes them holistic in the same way that other general facts are holistic, and so there is no surprise in the observation that we can construct examples in which it does not turn out to be the case that we ought to lie. The recipe to construct them is simple: you just pile up reasons to lie until they outweigh the reason not to lie. Moreover, on this picture, the nonderivability of 'ought' from 'is' is just a special case of the general nonderivability of general facts from particular facts. The particular concrete features of a situation may guarantee that there is a reason to lie, or not to lie, but it is only *general* facts about *all* such features of the situation that are sufficient to fix the overall balance of reasons, and hence sufficient to fix what we ought to do.

In an insightful paper, Gillian Russell [forthcoming] has pointed out that corresponding to putative counterexamples to Hume's Law that no 'ought' can be derived from an 'is', similar counterexamples can be constructed to each other natural 'inferential barrier' thesis – from the particular to the general, from the past to the present, and from the possible to the actual. And in a companion paper, she and Greg Restall [forthcoming] show how, given appropriate assumptions about the logic of each of these domains, to state provable versions of these inferential barrier theses, on which the relationship between 'is' and 'ought' is *analogous* to the relationship between the

⁴ Ross's view was, of course, more complicated than this, including some complicated ideas about how *prima facie* duties added up to determine what someone ought to do. Here I abstract from the details of his view to focus on what I take to be the main insight.

⁵ Note that Ross's view, which analyzes *ought* facts in terms of reasons or 'prima facie duties', conflicts directly with the alternative order of explanation espoused historically in Toulmin [1950] and more recently in such authors as Broome [2004] and Kearns and Star [forthcoming], according to which reasons are to be analyzed as things which explain, or are evidence for, *ought* facts. I take it that it is in fact one of the significant pieces of evidence against the Toulmin-Broome order of explanation, that it cannot take advantage of Ross's diagnosis.

particular and the general. As I understand Ross's move, its basic idea is that Russell and Restall are right in spirit, if not in detail. The truth in Hume's Law is that *ought* facts are a *special case* of general facts.

1.3 the new particularist challenge

The new particularist challenge is the same as the old, except that it is a challenge about reasons, rather than about *oughts*. Not only is it possible to think of cases in which it is false that one ought not to lie, it is also possible to think of cases in which it is false that the fact that some action would involve lying is a reason not to do it. For example, if one is playing the game Bullshit, or the game Diplomacy – both of which are sometimes said to be designed to involve lying, or at least to not discourage it. So, the new particularist challenges, Ross's sophisticated generalism falls to the same problems as Clarke's extremist generalism, simply at the next level. Reasons are holistic, and as a result, they defy generalization. So, at any rate, goes the challenge.⁶

Moral theorists have offered any number of complicated defenses against the new particularist challenge, everything from *a priori* arguments that the data which motivate the challenge are misdescribed, to *a priori* arguments that the particularists' conclusion simply can't be correct, no matter what the evidence in its favor.⁷ I think, in contrast, that we should grant the new particularists their data, or at least that there is no problem, if we do, because the possibility of these data is something that we should be able to straightforwardly predict, on the basis of independent and more general observations.

The answer to the new particularist challenge, I'll be arguing in the remainder of this paper, should be the same as to the old. When we make claims about reasons, we are interested in *general* facts. The claims we make about reasons behave holistically not because they defy generalization, but because they are general.⁸

⁶ See, for example, Dancy [1993], [2000], [2004], Little [2000], McNaughton [1988], and Lance and Little [2007]. For my own part, I am inclined to think that the game of Bullshit does not really involve lying, because it doesn't really involve assertion, but that Diplomacy is a better example.

⁷ See, for example, Hooker [2000], Crisp [2000], Raz [2000], Jackson, Pettit, and Smith [2000], and McKeever and Ridge [2006].

⁸ I will not be concerned particularly to explain how the same thing that is a reason to do A in one circumstance is not a reason to do A in another circumstance – I think that is quite easy to explain, as Jackson, Pettit, and Smith [2000] and McKeever and Ridge [2006] have illustrated. Rather, in this paper I will be particularly concerned to explain how the circumstances in which something which is otherwise a reason might *fail* to be a reason is *open-ended* in the sort of way that merits describing its behavior as *holistic*, in that it depends on *everything* else, rather than simply on some particular further condition.

2.1 the pragmatics of reason ascriptions

In part 1 I offered the interpretation of Ross's response to the original particularist challenge as granting the holism of *ought* facts, but explaining that holism by the hypothesis that *ought* facts are general, rather than allowing it to lead to the conclusion that they defy generalization. Then I introduced the new particularist challenge, and sketched the same diagnosis. It is the role of the remainder of the paper to fill in that diagnosis, by elaborating on it, justifying it, and explaining it. The project in part 2 is to explain and defend two very simple, independently motivated assumptions about reasons, which together support the thesis that when we make claims about reasons, we are making claims about general facts.

Notice that I am being careful. I did not say that I will defend the thesis that facts about reasons are themselves general facts, though I can imagine how to go about doing so, and in work partly inspired by an earlier draft of this material, Jeff Horty [2007] has given an elegant and instructive model for how to do so. What I said is that *when we make* claims about reasons, we are *making claims* about general facts. The view that I will be motivating, is that sentences about reasons are *pragmatically associated* with facts about the weight of reasons, which are general facts. When we say that there is a reason to do something, we generally mean that it is a *relatively weighty* reason to do it. And the fact that a consideration is a relatively weighty reason to do something is itself a general fact – which is why it is holistic, without defying generalization. When we make claims about reasons, we make claims about such facts, and so claims about reasons behave holistically as well.

That, at any rate, is the structure of my story. But first I must convince you that it builds on simple, independently plausible assumptions. The assumption that sentences about reasons are pragmatically connected to claims about their weight is one that I have defended in several other places (Schroeder [2005a], [2005b], [2007a], [2007b]). My first point is always that it should not be a surprising thesis. We care about reasons because they affect what we ought to do, and because weightier reasons affect what we ought to do more, they interest us more.

In fact, a toy thought experiment suggests that for most purposes, we should only be interested in the very weightiest of our reasons. It goes like this: imagine that God undertakes the task of compiling a complete list of the pros and cons of your doing some particular action. God is all-knowing and far-seeing, so He can think of an awful lot of things to put on the list. In fact, since God is infinite, there is no reason to think that He won't see infinitely many things to be said

in favor of and against your action, framed in terms of its remotely possible far-reaching consequences or implications. But we're finite creatures. We can't take account of infinitely many considerations in deliberating about what to do. In fact, we can't take into account very many at all in a computationally tractable way. So we should only be interested in the top of God's lists – the weightiest reasons pro and con. They are the ones that it makes sense for us to take into account in deliberating about what to do.

If this general thesis about which reasons we care about and are interested in knowing about is true, then it yields a simple prediction: that in ordinary talk and thinking about reasons, it will be only reasons of relatively high weight that are relevant to our conversational and contemplative purposes. And if that is right, then simple pragmatic principles predict that we will interpret claims about reasons as implying that they are at least sufficiently weighty in order to be worth paying attention to.

The most orthodox way of generating this prediction is by means of Grice's maxim of relevance [1967, 27]. Since our conversational purposes standardly involve an interest only in reasons that are weighty enough to be worth taking into account in our (finite) deliberations, someone who said, 'R is a reason to do A', knowing full well that R, though a reason to do A, is such a weak one that it isn't worth mentioning, would be flouting this Gricean conversational maxim. Since any speaker and audience should be able to tell this, both speaker and audience will know to interpret the assertion, 'R is a reason to do A' as implying that R is a relatively weighty reason to do A, else it wouldn't have been worth saying.

But my pragmatic suggestion needn't rely on any peculiarly Gricean mechanics. All that I need is the hypothesis that we somehow associate the claim that R is a reason to do A with the stronger claim that R is a relatively weighty reason to do A. Given our interests in relatively weighty reasons, it is easy to see why this *would* be the case. But I also think that this prediction is supportable directly by evidence about our judgments about relatively weak reasons.

2.2 attenuators and the weight of reasons

A simple case which exemplifies the prediction of the pragmatic hypothesis comes from the literature on *undercutting defeat*.⁹ In the basic case, you are standing outside the library, when you see Tom Grabbit exit, pull a book from under his shirt, cackle gleefully, and scurry off. This gives you

⁹ Lehrer and Paxson [1969].

pretty good reason to believe that Tom just stole a book from the library. Case 2 is just the same as the first case, except that Tom has an identical twin, Tim, from whom you can't visually distinguish him. In this case, it has seemed to the judgment of many philosophers that your visual evidence is not a reason to believe that Tom stole a book. Cases like these have been used in order to introduce the notion of *undercutting defeat*, which as a concept, is grist for the new particularist's mill. An undercutting defeater, it is usually said, is a consideration which, if it obtains, makes it the case that what would otherwise be a reason is not a reason after all. Examples of undercutting defeaters are therefore exactly the kind of examples to motivate the new particularism. The new particularists realize this, and have focused on such cases. Jonathan Dancy [2004] calls undercutting defeaters 'disablers'.

A simple argument, however, strongly suggests that things are more complicated in the Tom Grabit case. Consider a third version of the case, exactly like the other two except that in the third case, in addition to Tim, Tom has a *third* identical sibling, Tam, from whom you can't visually distinguish him. This third case underwrites a compelling argument against the intuitive judgment that in the second case, your visual evidence was no reason to believe that Tom stole the book. For if you go on to conclude, in the third case, that Tom stole the book, then you are doing worse than if you had gone on to conclude this in the second case. Your reason to believe that Tom stole the book therefore doesn't seem to have *gone away* in the second case; it merely seems to have gotten substantially weaker. It seems to have been, in Dancy's [2005] phrase, *attenuated*.

If this is right, then it is, first of all, evidence in favor of the pragmatic hypothesis of section 2.1. It is part of the philosophical orthodoxy about undercutting defeat, that cases like Tom Grabit's are ones in which what would otherwise have been a reason turns out not to be a reason. But my argument based on the third case claimed to show that it *is* in fact a reason, albeit one of reduced weight. And this, in turn, strongly suggests that our intuitions about what is and is not a reason are *strongly* affected by the weight of those reasons, and that we are sometimes inclined to judge that something is not a reason, simply because it is a reason of relatively low weight. And this is just what is predicted by the pragmatic hypothesis of section 2.1.

In section 2.1 I argued that given that our interest is primarily in reasons of relatively high weight, we should expect that we would associate claims about reasons with stronger claims about reasons of relatively high weight. Cases like the Tom Grabit case show that this does, in fact, appear to happen. Indirect evidence supports the view that you really do have a reason to believe that Tom stole a book, even in the second case, because that reason could still be attenuated even

further, as in the third case. This runs contrary to the clear intuitions of many philosophers who have considered the case, and that strongly suggests that those philosophers' intuitions are being affected by the reduced weight of the reason, just as the pragmatic hypothesis would predict.

But cases like Tom Grabit's do more than support my pragmatic hypothesis. As with all other cases of attenuators, they show that the weight of a reason is not intrinsic to that reason itself, but can be affected by further facts. In fact, they show that the weight of a reason can be affected by an indefinite array of further facts. Just as to rule out the hypothesis that not all swans are white, we must rule out, for each thing, its being a non-white swan, to rule out the hypothesis that your reason to believe that Tom stole a book is attenuated, we must rule out, for each thing, its being an attenuator for that reason. So attenuators make the weight of reasons a holistic matter.

2.3 the undercutting hypothesis

In the last two sections I've defended two independently plausible assumptions: (1) that when we say things about reasons, we standardly imply claims about relatively weighty reasons. So, for example, when we consider the hypothesis, 'R is a reason to do A', we standardly use that to consider the stronger hypothesis that R is a relatively weighty reason to do A. And so if this stronger claim is false, we conclude, 'R is not a reason to do A'. And (2) the weight of reasons is a holistic matter, because the weight of a reason is affected by the existence or non-existence of potential attenuators.

Putting (1) and (2) together, we arrive at the prediction that intuitively speaking, ordinary claims about reasons will behave holistically. They will behave holistically, because facts about the *weight* of those reasons *are* holistic, and because the facts about the weight of those reasons are the ones in which we are really interested, when we make ordinary claims about reasons.

This prediction, I claim, is a vindication of what I have elsewhere called the *undercutting hypothesis* [2005b]. The kinds of counterexamples to Rossian generalism that the new particularist needs, are cases in which what would otherwise be a reason to do something, is in fact no reason to do it. These are cases of *complete undercutting defeat* – undercutting defeat as it is normally defined.¹⁰ But many of the cases of apparent undercutting are really only cases of *partial undercutting*, or as I have been following Dancy in calling it, *attenuation*. And partial undercutting clearly comes in degrees. If the case in which Tom has two identical siblings shows that in the case in which he

¹⁰ Pollock and Cruz [1999, 37].

only has one, you still have a reason to believe that Tom stole a book, then a fourth case, in which Tom has *three* identical siblings, will show by analogous reasoning that in the two-sibling case, you still have a reason to believe that he stole a book. And if that is right, then we can construct an indefinite chain of increasingly powerful attenuators, each of which will leave you with a reason to believe that Tom stole a book – simply by arbitrarily increasing the size of his sibling cohort. But once we see that a reason can be arbitrarily attenuated, it is natural to contemplate the hypothesis that *complete* undercutters are simply a limiting case of such *partial* undercutters (attenuators). And that is the *undercutting hypothesis*.

The prediction that we get from theses (1) and (2) coheres very well with the undercutting hypothesis. It says that given our interest only in relatively weighty reasons, all it takes to explain our intuitions of complete undercutting is to observe that partial undercutting may reduce the weight of a reason below the threshold of relevance. It therefore makes it easy to see how complete undercutting could arise as a limiting case of partial undercutting (attenuation).¹¹

So far, in this section, I have shown how two simple and independently plausible theses yield the prediction that reasons will seem to be holistic. This is because the weight of reasons is holistic, and when we make claims about reasons, what we are really interested in includes claims about their weight. This prediction shows that it is compatible with the seeming holism of reasons that reasons are not, in fact, holistic – only their weight is. But I have yet to explain *why* the weight of reasons is a holistic matter, or to connect this kind of holism with the overall Rossian diagnosis of this paper that the holism about reasons derives from their basis in *general* facts, rather than in facts which defy generalization. I'll fill these gaps in part 3 by showing how a simple and very natural hypothesis about the nature of the weight of reasons explains why the weight of reasons is affected by attenuators, by making the weight of reasons out to be a certain kind of general fact.

3.1 the weight of reasons and correctness

The weight of a reason is not a matter of how heavy it feels. Nor is it a matter of how seriously people take it, in deciding what to do – how much weight they *place* on it, in deliberation. But it is

¹¹ Important advantages of my pragmatic account over Horty's [2007] proposal that reasons whose weight is below a certain threshold are not reasons at all, include that it appeals only to independently plausible pragmatic assumptions, that it explains where the threshold comes from (it is the threshold of relevance), and that it allows that the threshold may vary from context to context and case to case, as our conversational purposes vary. In fact, as I've argued elsewhere [unpublished], my account correctly predicts that the threshold of relevance is higher when there are clearly decisive contrary reasons, such that the reason in question would have to be quite weighty in order for it to be worth considering at all.

a matter of how much weight is placed in it in *correct* deliberation about what to do. If the fact that ice cream is tasty is a weak reason for you to have some ice cream right now, and the fact that ice cream adversely affects your health is a weighty reason for you not to have any right now, then you're deliberating well if you take the latter reason more seriously than the former, and you're making a deliberative mistake if you take the former reason more seriously than the latter.

If this is right, then a reason's being weighty is like someone's being *admirable*. Being admirable is not a matter of being able to be admired – it is a matter of being correctly or appropriately admired. Similarly, I'm proposing, being a weighty reason is not a matter of being taken seriously; it is a matter of being correctly or appropriately taken seriously. I think this is a natural idea. My aim is not to defend it in detail here, but to show that it is a powerful idea, and leads very naturally to an explanation of why it is that the weight of reasons is affected by further considerations such as attenuators, by amounting to an explanation of why facts about the weight of reasons are themselves general facts.

The hypothesis that facts about weight are facts about correct deliberation explains why facts about weight are general facts, because facts about correct deliberation are *always* general facts. Recall my gloss on Ross's central idea, from section 1.2, that facts about what you ought to do are themselves general facts about the weight of the reasons for action. Correctness is also widely held to be explained in terms of reasons, and in a similar way.

This is visible in the justly famous 'wrong kind of reasons' problem for the idea that to be admirable is to be correctly admired.¹² The 'wrong kind of reasons' problem is that not all reasons to admire someone have anything to do with her being admirable. Cal may have compelling reasons to admire Narcissa, because as his boss, she holds the reins to his path to promotion. But that doesn't make Narcissa any more admirable. This is a problem for the idea that to be admirable is to be correctly admired only if that view is committed, further, to the view that being correctly admired is a matter of the reasons to admire one. And the problem for that view, is to distinguish between the 'right kind' of reasons – the ones which *do* contribute toward whether Narcissa is admirable – and the 'wrong kind' of reasons – the ones which don't so contribute. The fact that Narcissa is hard-working and dedicated is a reason of the 'right kind' to admire her,

¹² See, for example, D'Arms and Jacobson [2000] and Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen [2004].

whereas the fact that she is a narcissist with control over one's career is a reason of the 'wrong kind'.¹³

So if being admirable is a matter of being correctly admired, and being correctly admired is a matter of reasons to admire one (as you have to think, in order to get worried by the wrong kind of reasons problem), then being admirable must be a matter of reasons of the *right kind* to admire one. Generalizing from this idea, R is a weightier reason than S just in case the reasons of the right kind support placing more weight on R than on S in deliberating about what to do – that is to say, just in case it is correct to place more weight on R than on S.

Let's back up and review the two proposals I've just made. First, (3) that facts about the weight of reasons are facts about correct deliberation. And second, (4) that facts about correctness, like facts about what someone ought to do, are generalizations about reasons. In elaborating on these proposals I've been sketchy on detail, but that is because the lessons I want to draw are compatible with many different ways of developing these two ideas. It followed from these two hypotheses that facts about the weight of reasons are themselves general facts – generalizations about reasons. And since general facts are holistic, that explains why facts about the weight of reasons are holistic – in the mundane way that generalizations like 'all swans are black' are holistic, not by defying generalization. And so given the conclusion of part 2, that explains why reasons themselves seem to be holistic.

3.2 explaining undercutting defeat

Moreover, together, proposals (3) and (4) provide an explanation of what undercutting defeat is, and of how it works. They make predictions about which considerations will serve as attenuators, and explain why. According to the view resulting from (3) and (4), facts about the weight of a reason are holistic, because they are generalizations about the right kind of reasons to place more or less weight on it. So they predict that the kinds of consideration that will lower a reason's weight will have to be reasons of the right kind to place less weight on it. This, I think, is a consideration that is plausibly borne out by the Tom Grabit case.

In the Tom Grabit case, recall, your visual evidence is a reason for you to believe that Tom stole a book from the library. The fact that Tom has an identical sibling is not a reason to believe that Tom did not steal a book – identical twins are no less likely to be thieves. But it does seem to

¹³ Here I bracket the large but arguably answerable question of what makes something the right kind of reason. See Schroeder [forthcoming b] for further discussion.

play the role of attenuating the weight of your reason to believe that Tom stole a book. How does it do that? Our prediction is that it must be a reason of the right kind to place less weight on your visual evidence, in favor of the conclusion that Tom stole a book. Is it? Intuitively, yes – if you know that Tom has an identical twin you can't visually distinguish him from, that gives you a great reason to be very cautious about drawing conclusions about Tom on the basis of purely visual evidence. And although we would have to have a more developed proposal on the table as to what constitutes the 'right kind' of reason in order to fully evaluate this, it seems to be a reason of the right kind, as well – contrasting with a paradigmatic 'wrong kind of reasons' case in which someone offers you \$1000 to discount your visual evidence about Tom in forming beliefs about him.

Moreover, not only is the fact that Tom has one identical sibling a reason to place less weight on your visual evidence in forming beliefs about Tom, the fact that he has *two* identical siblings is clearly a *better* reason to place less weight on it. So if the weight of your original reason is affected by the weight of your reasons in favor of and against placing weight on it, then this explains – correctly – why your reason is of even lower weight in the case in which Tom has two identical siblings, than it is in the case in which he has one.

I think this lends further support to both of proposals (3) and (4). They make predictions about what sort of things should turn out to be undercutting defeaters, and the relative degree to which those considerations should undercut, and those predictions are borne out. Moreover, (3) and (4) allow us to explain *why* this happens. Given (3) and (4), attenuation is not a *sui generis* or inexplicable phenomenon – it falls out from a set of very general simple principles of more general application. So I conclude that in addition to being independently plausible, (3) and (4) contribute to our understanding of undercutting defeat more generally. And the bottom line is that they explain why facts about the weight of reasons are general facts, and hence holistic.

3.3 a recursive account of weight

That completes my diagnosis of the apparent holism of reasons. Theses (1) and (2), from part 2, explain why reasons seem to be holistic in terms of the pragmatic commitments of talk about reasons and the fact that the weight of reasons is itself holistic. And theses (3) and (4) *explain* the independently plausible thesis (2) – why the weight of reasons is itself holistic. This is because the weight of a reason is a matter of how it is treated in correct deliberation, and because facts about

correctness are themselves general facts – generalizations about the totality of the reasons of the right kind. Finally, this explanation validates my original Rossian diagnosis of the new particularist challenge. Just as the answer to the original particularist challenge was that the holism of ‘ought’ facts derives from their generality, not from their defying generalization, my answer to the new particularist challenge is that claims about reasons are pragmatically tied up with claims about the weight of reasons, whose holism derives from their generality, not from their defying generalization. In this final section I confront an obvious and important objection to the conjunction of theses (3) and (4).

The objection goes like this: according to thesis (3), facts about the weight of reasons are facts about the correctness of deliberation. Whereas according to thesis (4), facts about correctness are themselves general facts about reasons, in the same way as facts about what someone ought to do are facts about her reasons. But of course, reasons alone don’t suffice to account for what someone ought to do – only facts about their *weight* do so. There might be many weak reasons to do A but one particularly weighty reason not to, and that might make it the case that you ought not to do A. So what you ought to do isn’t just what you have the most reasons to do – it is the thing such that your reasons to do it are the *weightiest*. Similarly, the thing that it is correct to do, if it is to be understood in terms of reasons, will have to be the thing in favor of which the reasons of the right kind are the *weightiest*.

But this is a problem. How can facts about the weight of reasons be facts about correctness, which are in turn facts about the weight of reasons? Some kind of vicious circularity or regress clearly looms. I have a favored answer to this problem, which I’ve defended elsewhere [2007b]. I like my answer because it preserves all of the attractions of theses (3) and (4) as well as some others, and because it coheres with some further observations about the nature of undercutting defeat.

First, the further observations about undercutting defeat. Suppose that Tom has one identical sibling, Tim, and that you see Tom come out of the library, pull the book out, etc., as before. But now let’s modify the case in a different way, and suppose that this morning Mrs. Grabit, the twins’ mother, informed you that Tim is away in Thailand all week (add to the case that the library is not in Thailand). In this case, your visual evidence is a pretty good reason, after all, to believe that Tom stole a book – and despite the existence of Tim. Why is that? It’s not because Mrs. Grabit’s telling you that Tim is in Thailand is any reason for you to believe that Tom stole a book. And it’s not because her telling you is itself any reason for you to place more weight

on your visual evidence about Tom. What it is, is an undercutter for your original undercutter. It is an undercutter-undercutter. And it can be further undercut! Suppose that you know, further, that Mrs. Grabit is a notorious liar. That is an undercutter for her telling you that Tim is in Thailand. And this can go on for a long time.

The important phenomenon of undercutter-undercutters is predicted by the (seemingly problematic) proposal that the weight of a reason is affected not only by the reasons to place more or less weight on it, but by the *weight* of those reasons. Their weight, in turn, can be affected by the weight of the reasons to place weight on them, and so on – and that is how we can get strings of undercutter-undercutters. As this phenomenon is real, and this proposal explains it, I take this to be further support for my explanation of undercutting defeat. But it also gives us a clue as to why it involves no vicious circle or regress. It involves no such circle or regress because intuitively, *eventually undercutter-undercutters run out*.

This leads to the idea that the correct account of the weight of reasons should be *recursive*.¹⁴ In the base clause, one set of reasons is weightier than another if the latter set is empty – trivially, any set of reasons is weightier than no reasons at all. And then in the recursion clause, we say that one set of reasons is weightier than another if the set of all of the right kind of reasons to place more weight on the reasons in the first set than on those in the second outweighs the set of all of the right kind of reasons to place more weight on the reasons in the second set than on those in the first. And this, in turn, allows us to hang onto the essence of theses (3) and (4), and hence to the explanations that I've offered in this paper.

4 two lessons

Paying close attention to the diverse ways in which reasons appear to behave holistically, recent particularists have argued that reasons defy generalization, and drawn drastic morals for normative theory, moral epistemology, moral psychology, and normative metaphysics. In this paper I've tried to show that a small set of conservative and independently plausible hypotheses predict and, moreover, explain the same kinds of data. The holism of reasons arises, not because reasons defy generalization, but because facts about the weight of reasons are general facts, and because our interest in reasons is first and foremost an interest in relatively weighty ones. The lesson is that particularism – at least insofar as it goes further than a mere cataloguing of the kinds of data I have

¹⁴ See Schroeder [2007b, ch 7] for details.

been concerned to explain here – is quite a large overreaction to an important and illuminative, but not deep, phenomenon.

In a lesson closer to my heart, the principles I've outlined here show that appeals to particularism or to Hume's Law in order to establish the irreducibility of the normative are premature. The hypothesis that normative properties like *reason* are reducible is rich in explanatory value, enabling progress in explaining why the normative *supervenes* on the non-normative, how our normative thought and language comes to have the *contents* that it has, and how an *epistemology* of the normative can get off of the ground. It is the hypothesis that there is some answer to the question of *what it is* to be a reason, which can ultimately be spelled out in non-normative terms.

As such, the reducibility of the normative requires that there be *generalizations* about reasons in non-normative terms. If what it is to be a square is to be an equi-angular rhombus, then being an equi-angular rhombus is both necessary and sufficient to be a square: necessary, because failing to be an equi-angular rhombus means lacking what it is to be a square, and sufficient, because being an equi-angular rhombus is *having* what it is to be a square. Similarly, there is nothing that can be spelled out in non-normative terms that is *what it is* to be a reason, unless there are necessary and sufficient conditions on being a reason in non-normative terms. And this is something that both particularism and Hume's Law have claimed to challenge.

But the simple picture I've outlined leaves ample room for it to turn out that reasons are subject to the kinds of generalizations in non-normative terms that could be the basis for a proposed reductive theory (and I've defended such a theory in Schroeder [2007b]). And in doing so, they explain what is nevertheless compelling about Hume's Law. This is that the normative categories in which we are interested – what we ought to do, what we have relatively weighty reason to do, and so on – all consist in general facts, while the kinds of 'is' facts we normally compare them to are only particular facts.

So insofar as there has seemed to be an insurmountable 'is'-'ought' divide, my hypothesis here is that it has been because the cases we have been interested in have all been instances of the gap between the particular and the general. Since this is what is predicted by a small set of independently plausible assumptions, we should not find it surprising or deeply puzzling, or allow it to derail the explanatory ambitions of constructive moral theorizing.¹⁵

¹⁵ Special thanks to Jeff Harty, Gillian Russell, and an anonymous referee for *Noûs*, as well as to audiences at Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva, particularly to Hagit Benbaji, at the 2008 conference of the British Society for

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