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## Ross and the Particularism/Generalism Divide

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Abstract: W. D. Ross is commonly considered to be a *generalist* about prima facie duty but a *particularist* about absolute duty. That is, many philosophers hold that Ross accepts that there are true moral principles involving prima facie duty but denies that there are any true moral principles involving absolute duty. I agree with the former claim: Ross surely accepts prima facie moral principles. However, in this paper, I challenge the latter claim. Ross, I argue, is no more a particularist about absolute duty than a utilitarian or a Kantian is. While this conclusion is interesting in its own right, it is also important, I argue, because it prevents us from overlooking Ross's criterion of moral obligation and because it may have implications on the broader debate between particularists and generalists.

### I

W. D. Ross is commonly considered to be a *generalist* about prima facie duty. That is, he is commonly thought of as holding that there are some true moral principles having to do with prima facie duty. Prima facie duty—or, as Ross also calls it, “conditional duty” (1930, 19), “duty *ceteris paribus*” (30), and “what tends to be our duty” (28)—contrasts with “absolute duty” (28).<sup>1</sup> About *that* (absolute duty), Ross is typically taken to be not a generalist, but a staunch *particularist*. That is, Ross is typically thought of as denying that there are any true absolute moral principles.<sup>2</sup> Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge, for instance, say the following about Ross:

While Ross denied that one could spell out principles that would determine when one had a duty overall to do something, he insisted that one

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<sup>1</sup> Ross also refers to absolute duty as “actual duty” (1930, 20), “duty proper” (20), and “duty *sans phrase*” (19). Contemporary philosophers also sometimes use the terms “overall duty” and “all-things-considered duty” to refer to what Ross means by “absolute duty,” and they sometimes use the term “pro tanto duty” to refer to what Ross means by “prima facie duty” (see, for instance, Kagan 1989, 17).

<sup>2</sup> The terms “particularism” and “generalism” are used in many different ways by many different philosophers. As I will be using the terms in this paper, they refer to the acceptance (or denial) of true moral principles: generalism is the view that there are some such principles; particularism is the view that there are none. For more on the many ways that particularism and generalism have been understood in the literature, see McKeever and Ridge (2005, 2006).

could specify principles of prima facie duty, i.e., principles operating at the contributory [i.e., prima facie] level. (2008, 1183-84; see also 2005, 85n)

Philip Stratton-Lake says something similar:

There are, he [Ross] maintains, no universal moral laws of the form, “actions of type F are obligatory.” There are, however, laws of the form “actions of type F *tend* to be obligatory.” *Prima facie* duties are these laws. (2000, 82)

Consider also what Jonathan Dancy says in the following passage:

Ross’s view is that there are many codifiable principles. Unlike the Utilitarian’s Sole Principle [i.e., utilitarianism] they are all principles of prima facie duty, not of duty proper. (2004b, 11)

And finally, Pekka Väyrynen claims that “pluralists” such as Ross “defend only contributory [i.e., prima facie] principles and deny the existence of true overall principles” (2006, 717n33; see also 2009, 110-11n).

I agree with these authors when they suggest that Ross accepts prima facie moral principles (and is thus a generalist about prima facie duty). Ross clearly thinks that there are some true prima facie moral principles. He holds, for instance, that there is a prima facie duty to keep one’s promises, a prima facie duty to perform acts of gratitude, a prima facie duty not to harm others, and so forth, for the rest of the prima facie duties on his well-known list (1930, 21). However, I take issue with these authors when they suggest that Ross denies that there are any true absolute moral principles (and is thus a particularist about absolute duty). In this paper, I explain why.

## II

While Ross is considered to be an arch-particularist about absolute duty, utilitarians are considered to be arch-*generalists* about this sort of duty. Hedonistic act utilitarians, for instance, believe that an action is morally obligatory if and only if (iff) it brings about a greater balance of pleasure over pain than any of its alternatives brings about. Hedonistic rule utilitarians accept something similar, though they would say that an action is morally obligatory iff it is required by a rule the general adherence to which would maximize the balance of pleasure over pain. Of course, there are many other types of utilitarian, but they all seem to accept something along these lines, and they all thus seem to accept at least one absolute moral principle.

Kantians, too, are taken to be generalists about absolute duty. Kantians accept claims such as the following: an action is morally permissible iff its maxim can be willed to be a universal law; an action is morally permissible iff its agent, in performing the action, treats humanity as an end in itself, not as a mere means; and an action is morally permissible iff it conforms to the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends. There is, of course,

much debate among Kant scholars about how to understand these claims and whether they amount to the same thing, as Kant suggests. But for my purposes, the point is that Kantians clearly seem to accept absolute moral principles, however those principles are ultimately understood.

Similar things can be said about divine command theorists, contractualists, and egoists. They all accept propositions of this form: an action is morally obligatory (permissible, wrong) iff \_\_\_\_\_. They all therefore seem to accept absolute moral principles, and they are thus considered to be paradigmatic examples of generalists about absolute duty.

However, it seems to me that if we consider utilitarians, Kantians, etc. to be generalists about absolute duty, then we should consider Ross to be a generalist about this sort of duty too. After all, consider what he says here:

It is worth while to try to state more definitely the nature of the acts that are right. We may try to state first what (if anything) is the universal nature of *all* acts that are right. It is obvious that any of the acts that we do has countless effects, directly or indirectly, on countless people, and the probability is that any act, however right it may be, will have adverse effects (though these may be very trivial) on some innocent people. Similarly, any wrong act will probably have beneficial effects on some deserving people. Every act therefore, viewed in some aspects, will be *prima facie* right, and viewed in others, *prima facie* wrong, and right acts can be distinguished from wrong acts only as being those which, of all those possible for the agent in the circumstances, have the greatest balance of *prima facie* rightness, in those respects in which they are *prima facie* right, over their *prima facie* wrongness, in those respects in which they are *prima facie* wrong. (1930, 41)

When Ross uses the term “right” in this passage, he clearly means “obligatory” (see 1930, 3-4, 159). Given this, Ross appears to accept the following claim in the passage:

**R1:** An action is morally obligatory iff its total *prima facie* rightness minus its total *prima facie* wrongness is greater than that of any of its alternatives.

So, like utilitarians and Kantians, Ross seems to accept a proposition of this form: an action is morally obligatory (permissible, wrong) iff \_\_\_\_\_. If this makes utilitarians and Kantians generalists about absolute duty, then surely it makes Ross a generalist about it as well.

Since utilitarians and Kantians are so often taken to be generalists about absolute duty while Ross is so often taken to be a particularist about it, one may suspect that I have misunderstood what an absolute moral principle is. But as I will show in the remainder of this paper, other plausible ways of conceiving of absolute moral principles don't do much better at making utilitarians and Kantians generalists about absolute duty while also making Ross a particularist about it. My general conclusion, then, is that Ross is no more a particularist

about absolute duty than a utilitarian or a Kantian is. While this conclusion is interesting in its own right, it is also important, I will argue, because it prevents us from overlooking Ross's criterion of moral obligation and because it may have implications on the broader debate between particularists and generalists.

### III

In the previous section, I was implicitly relying on something like the following conception of absolute moral principles:

**MP1:** An absolute moral principle is, by definition, a proposition that has the following form: an action is morally obligatory (permissible, wrong) iff \_\_\_\_\_.

As we've seen, if we accept this account of absolute moral principles, then we'll have to admit that not only do utilitarians and Kantians accept absolute moral principles, but Ross accepts them too.

Of course, I may have misunderstood what an absolute moral principle is. Perhaps MP1 is false. But if it's false, then what should we replace it with? Well, one thing that particularists are fond of saying is that moral principles must be explanatory.<sup>3</sup> Particularists typically insist that moral principles be explanatory in order to prevent the supervenience of the moral on the natural from generating moral principles. I take it that to say that a moral principle is explanatory is, roughly, to say that the principle specifies the feature or features in virtue of which some moral property obtains. Or, to put it another way, it's to say that the principle specifies what makes it the case that a certain moral property is instantiated.

But notice that according to MP1, a proposition might be a moral principle without being explanatory. For instance, the following propositions count as absolute moral principles on MP1: an action is morally obligatory iff it is morally obligatory; an action is morally obligatory iff it is morally required; and an action is morally obligatory iff it is morally wrong not to perform. But no particularist (or generalist) would regard these propositions as absolute moral principles. (If they did, generalism about absolute duty would obviously be true.) And, I suspect, they'd say that these propositions are not moral principles because they are not explanatory. They don't tell us *why* obligatory actions are obligatory.

This suggests the following modification of MP1:

**MP2:** An absolute moral principle is, by definition, a proposition that has the following form: an action is morally obligatory (permissible, wrong) iff *and in virtue of the fact that* \_\_\_\_\_.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Lance and Little (2006a, 307-9), Shafer-Landau (1997, 584-86), McNaughton (1988, 191-92), and McKeever and Ridge (2005, 85; 2006, 8).

But notice that R1 doesn't count as an absolute moral principle on MP2. After all, R1 is merely a biconditional. It merely says that moral obligation is necessarily coinstantiated with the property of having the greatest balance of total prima facie rightness over total prima facie wrongness. It doesn't make the stronger claim that obligatory actions are obligatory *because* they have this property. Thus, if MP2 is true, Ross's acceptance of R1 does not show that he accepts absolute moral principles.

Furthermore, it seems that utilitarians and Kantians do accept absolute moral principles if MP2 is correct. As I've said, hedonistic act utilitarians hold that an action is morally obligatory iff it brings about a greater balance of pleasure over pain than any of its alternatives does, and they will surely also hold that obligatory actions are obligatory in virtue of this fact. The same goes for other utilitarians: the biconditionals they accept will surely be considered by their proponents to be explanatory. Likewise, Kantians accept several biconditionals—one having to do with the universalizability of maxims, another having to do with treating humanity as an end in itself, and another having to do with a merely possible kingdom of ends—and they will, I assume, hold that at least one of these biconditionals is explanatory.<sup>4</sup>

So, one might think that MP2 is just what we are looking for: it's a conception of moral principles that makes Ross a particularist about absolute duty and utilitarians and Kantians generalists about it.

But the matter is not so simple, for it seems that not only does Ross accept R1, but he also accepts

**R2:** An action is morally obligatory iff *and in virtue of the fact that* its total prima facie rightness minus its total prima facie wrongness is greater than that of any of its alternatives.

That Ross accepts this is suggested by the passage I cited earlier where he appears to accept R1. In that passage, he claims to be stating the "universal nature" of all acts that are right (i.e., obligatory). It is reasonable to suppose that to state this is to state what makes all right actions right. So, since Ross seems to be telling us what he thinks the universal nature of right actions is when he says that right actions have the greatest balance of prima facie rightness over prima facie wrongness, it's reasonable to conclude that he thinks that all right actions are made right by having this feature. We therefore have good reason to believe that Ross accepts R2.

Another passage provides even stronger reason for thinking this. Consider what Ross says here:

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Timmons (2002, 163; 2006, 190), for instance, explicitly says that the second of these biconditionals (the so-called "Principle of Humanity") specifies, for Kant, what makes permissible actions permissible.

We have reached the result that my act is right *qua* being an ensuring of one of the particular states of affairs of which it is an ensuring, viz., in the case we have taken, of my friend's receiving the book I have promised to return to him. But this answer requires some correction; for it refers only to the *prima facie* rightness of my act. If to be a fulfillment of promise were a sufficient ground of the rightness of an act, all fulfillments of promises would be right, whereas it seems clear that there are cases in which some other *prima facie* duty overrides the *prima facie* duty of fulfilling a promise. The more correct answer would be that the ground of the actual rightness of the act is that, of all acts possible for the agent in the circumstances, it is that whose *prima facie* rightness in the respects in which it is *prima facie* right most outweighs its *prima facie* wrongness in any respects in which it is *prima facie* wrong. But since its *prima facie* rightness is mainly due to its being a fulfillment of promise, we may call its being so the salient element in the ground of its rightness. (1930, 46)

Ross says here that the “ground” of the rightness (i.e., obligatoriness) of the action in question is not that it is the fulfillment of any single *prima facie* duty, but rather, that its total *prima facie* rightness over wrongness is greater than that of any of its alternatives. While Ross is explicitly talking about only one action here, it is plausible to assume that he would say similar things about every other right action. After all, there doesn't seem to be anything special about the action Ross is discussing, and he even suggests that any other action with the same ground will likewise be right. So, I think there is good reason to believe that Ross is here identifying what he thinks is the ground of all right actions. He's suggesting, in other words, that the ground of all right actions is that their total *prima facie* rightness over wrongness is greater than that of any of their alternatives. But when Ross talks about the “ground” of a right action, he clearly means to be talking about the reason or explanation for why it is right—that is, the property in virtue of which it is right (see 1930, 10; 1939, 27-28). This passage therefore seems to show that Ross accepts R2.

Of course, R2 counts as a moral principle on MP2. So, if we accept this account of moral principles, we should conclude that like utilitarians and Kantians, Ross accepts absolute moral principles and should thus be regarded as a generalist, not a particularist, about absolute duty.

#### IV

However, even if R2 is to some degree explanatory, as Ross maintains, it may seem trivial in a way that utilitarian and Kantian principles do not. After all, Ross's notion of a *prima facie* duty is often understood in terms of the concept of a moral reason. More precisely, many philosophers assume that to have a *prima facie* duty to (not to) perform an action just is to have a moral reason to

(not to) do it.<sup>5</sup> But if we understand the notion of a prima facie duty in this way, then R2 will amount to the idea that an obligatory action is one that has the greatest balance of moral reasons for it minus moral reasons against it. But this, one might think, is hardly controversial: surely we should do what we have most moral reason to do. The same cannot be said, however, about utilitarians and Kantians: the claims they accept seem to be much more substantive.

Consider, then, the following modification of MP2:

**MP3:** An absolute moral principle is, by definition, a *non-trivial* proposition that has the following form: an action is morally obligatory (permissible, wrong) iff and in virtue of the fact that

\_\_\_\_\_.

Will this conception of absolute moral principles render Ross a particularist about absolute duty and utilitarians and Kantians generalists about it?

The answer, I think, is “no.” R2 is not as trivial as it may first appear. In fact, several philosophers reject it. For instance, Ned Markosian appears to reject it in his (2009). There he argues that a view he calls “Rossian Minimalism” is “the best ethical theory that can be stated in terms of Ross’s notion of a prima facie duty” (9). Rossian Minimalism is the view that an action is morally obligatory iff its prima facie wrongness is less than that of any of its alternatives.<sup>6</sup> Rossian Minimalism is thus very different from R2 since according to R2, moral obligation is determined by both prima facie wrongness *and* prima facie rightness—in particular, obligatory actions *maximize* the balance of prima facie rightness over wrongness. But Rossian Minimalism is not a maximizing theory. According to it, obligation is determined only by prima facie wrongness—obligatory actions are ones that are *least* prima facie wrong. Markosian argues that instead of accepting a maximizing theory such as R2, we should accept a minimizing one like Rossian Minimalism.

Other philosophers also reject R2, at least if we understand prima facie duties in terms of moral reasons. Doug Portmore (2008; 2011, chap. 5) is one such philosopher. Portmore is interested in finding a moral theory that accords as closely as possible with commonsense morality. And he thinks that supererogatory actions and agent-centered options<sup>7</sup> are part of commonsense morality. Portmore argues that in order to accommodate these things, we must admit that the deontic status of an action is determined not only by moral

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Stratton-Lake (2000, chap. 5; 2002, xxxiii-xxxviii; 2011), Dancy (1993, chap. 6; 2004b, 18-21), and Markosian (2009, 2).

<sup>6</sup> Markosian (2009, 7) officially states Rossian Minimalism in terms of permissibility, not obligation. However, I assume he’d have no problem with my statement of the view.

<sup>7</sup> According to Portmore (2011, 95, 237), an agent-centered option is an option either to do what makes things better overall but worse for oneself, or to do what makes things better for oneself but worse overall.

reasons, but also by *non*-moral reasons. If Portmore is correct about this, then R2 is false if it amounts to the idea that an action is obligatory just in case the balance of *moral* reasons for it minus the *moral* reasons against it is greater than that of any of its alternatives. R2, Portmore would urge, needs to be revised so that obligation is a function of not only moral reasons, but non-moral reasons as well.

Jonathan Dancy (2004a; 2004b, chap. 2) and Joshua Gert (2003; 2004, chap. 2) suggest something similar. They draw a distinction between requiring reasons and justifying reasons.<sup>8</sup> Requiring reasons are, roughly speaking, ones that can make an otherwise merely permissible action obligatory. Justifying reasons, on the other hand, are ones that cannot make an otherwise merely permissible action obligatory, but they *can* make an otherwise wrong action permissible. If we understand *prima facie* duties in terms of moral reasons, we should clearly understand them in terms of requiring reasons. This is because according to Ross (1930, 19), if there is a *prima facie* duty to perform an action, this means that the action would be obligatory if it had no other morally relevant properties. But only requiring reasons have this feature. So, if we understand R2 in terms of moral reasons, it will amount to the claim that an action is morally obligatory just in case the balance of moral requiring reasons in favor of it minus the moral requiring reasons against it is greater than that of any of its alternatives. But as Dancy and Gert suggest, this is problematic: moral obligation seems to be a function of not only requiring reasons, but a function of justifying reasons as well.

Of course, there is more to be said about all of this—perhaps the philosophers I’ve mentioned are too quick to reject R2. However, this is not an issue that I need to discuss any further here. My point is merely that R2 is not as obvious or trivial as it may first appear; in fact, several philosophers give strong considerations against it. MP3 is therefore not the conception of absolute moral principles that we are looking for: both Ross and utilitarians/Kantians will be generalists about absolute duty according to it. The search continues.

## V

One might think that the following is an important difference between utilitarians and Ross. Utilitarians think that obligatory actions are obligatory in virtue of possessing a *descriptive* feature. In the case of hedonistic act utilitarianism, this feature is the feature of bringing about a greater balance of pleasure over pain than does any alternative. In the case of hedonistic rule utilitarianism, this feature is the feature of being required by a rule the general adherence to which would maximize the balance of pleasure over pain. Ross, on the other hand, thinks that obligatory actions are obligatory in virtue of

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<sup>8</sup> This is Gert’s terminology. Dancy uses the terms “peremptory reason” and “enticing reason” instead of “requiring reason” and “justifying reason,” respectively. Dancy, however, seems to have the same distinction in mind as the one Gert does.

possessing a *normative* feature: namely, in virtue of having a greater balance of prima facie rightness over wrongness than that of any alternative. Perhaps this is what makes utilitarians generalists about absolute duty but Ross a particularist about it.

More precisely, suppose we modify MP3 as follows:

**MP4:** An absolute moral principle is, by definition, a non-trivial proposition that has the following form: an action is morally obligatory (permissible, wrong) iff and in virtue of the fact that \_\_\_\_\_, where this blank contains only descriptive terms.<sup>9</sup>

If we adopt this, then Ross's acceptance of R2 does not show that he accepts absolute moral principles. However, it might be thought that utilitarians and Kantians do accept absolute moral principles as defined by MP4; so, if we accept it, we'll be able to say that utilitarians and Kantians are generalists about absolute duty without having to say that Ross is a generalist about it as well.

Again, however, the issue is more complicated than it might initially appear. First of all, it's not clear that all utilitarians will be committed to generalism about absolute duty if we accept MP4. Consider G. E. Moore, for instance. According to his version of utilitarianism (known as "Ideal Utilitarianism"), an action is morally obligatory iff (and because) it brings about a greater balance of intrinsic goodness over intrinsic badness than any of its alternatives brings about.<sup>10</sup> However, this won't count as an absolute moral principle on MP4 since its right-hand side contains normative terms ("goodness" and "badness"). So accepting this won't, by itself, make Moore a generalist about absolute duty. But that seems odd: Moore is supposed to be a paradigmatic example of a generalist about this kind of duty, and surely it's his acceptance of Ideal Utilitarianism that makes him one.

It's also not clear to me that Kantians will necessarily be committed to generalism about absolute duty if we accept MP4. Whether they will be depends on how we understand the key notions that Kantians appeal to. Consider, for instance, what it means to say that someone "treats humanity as an end in itself." Some have thought that treating humanity as an end in itself involves treating people with dignity and respect. Others have thought that it involves treating

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<sup>9</sup> Lots of particularists and generalists suggest that moral principles link the descriptive and the normative (see, for instance, Little 2000; McNaughton 1988, 190-92; Leibowitz 2009, 184-85; Cullity 2002, 170-71; and Jackson, Pettit, and Smith 2000, 80-81). There's an interesting question about how to characterize the difference between descriptive and normative terms. I shall not pursue this question here. I will assume that the distinction is clear enough.

<sup>10</sup> This is the view that Moore ultimately seems to settle on in his *Ethics* (1912). However, in his *Principia Ethica* (1903), Moore seems to accept instead that "obligatory" means "maximizes the balance of intrinsic goodness over intrinsic badness." For a discussion of Moore's shift in position, see Ross (1930, 9-11; 1939, 42).

people with equal moral consideration. Still others have thought that it involves recognizing the value of humanity in people.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the concepts of dignity, respect, moral consideration, and value are normative concepts. But if the notion of treating humanity as an end in itself is, in part, a normative notion, then by accepting that an action is morally permissible iff it treats humanity as an end in itself, a Kantian won't necessarily be committed to generalism about absolute duty, at least if MP4 is true. Similar things can be said if either the notion of universalizability or the notion of a universal law in the kingdom of ends turns out to be normative.

This is not the place to discuss the proper way to understand these Kantian concepts. My point is merely that it's not obvious that Kantians will be committed to generalism about absolute duty if MP4 is true. Whether they are depends on some tricky interpretive matters. But one might again find this odd: Kantians are also supposed to be paradigmatic examples of generalists about absolute duty, and they should be so considered irrespective of the finer details of Kant exegesis.

Moreover, I see no reason to doubt that Ross would have accepted absolute moral principles even if MP4 is true. To see this, let's take a closer look at Ross's moral theory. As we've seen, he thinks that obligatory actions are ones that have the greatest balance of total prima facie rightness over total prima facie wrongness. The total prima facie rightness of an action is simply the sum of the strengths of all of the prima facie duties the agent has *to* perform it. The total prima facie wrongness of an action is the sum of the strengths of all of the prima facie duties the agent has *not* to perform it. Prima facie duties, then, have strengths. And the idea is that for any action a person can perform, we can look at all of the prima facie duties she has to do it and add up their strengths, and we can look at all of the prima facie duties she has *not* to do it and add up their strengths. Then we can subtract the latter sum from the former. If the resulting value is higher than that of any other action the person can perform instead, then it is obligatory.

Of course, stated this way, Ross's theory is very abstract. It's also incomplete. We still need to be told what prima facie duties we have, and we need to be told how to calculate their strengths. With regard to the first issue, Ross says a great deal. He says that we have prima facie duties of promise keeping, reparation, gratitude, justice, self-improvement, beneficence, and non-maleficence (1930, 21).<sup>12</sup> However, Ross says very little about how to calculate the strengths of these duties. In *The Right and the Good* (1930), he says virtually nothing about it. But in his later book, *The Foundations of Ethics* (1939), he does

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<sup>11</sup> For more on how to understand what it is to treat humanity as an end in itself, see Hill (1980), Wood (1998), Pogge (1998), and Dean (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Ross later reduces the duties of justice, self-improvement, and beneficence to the duty to "produce as much good as possible" (1930, 27).

address the issue briefly, at least with regard to the prima facie duty of promise keeping. There he says that the strength of the duty to keep a promise is, in part, a function of its “importance” to the promisee (100). The idea here seems to be this. If I make a promise to you and keeping it would please you greatly, then, other things being equal, I have a stronger prima facie duty to keep it than I would have if keeping the promise would only please you slightly. Ross also thinks that the strength of the duty to keep a promise is a function of its solemnity (100-1). In other words, the prima facie duty to keep a solemn promise (perhaps made under oath) is, other things being equal, stronger than the prima facie duty to keep a casual or offhand promise. Finally, Ross suggests that the strength of the duty to keep a promise is a function of its recency: other things being equal, the duty to keep a promise that has just been made is stronger than the duty to keep a promise that was made long ago (101).

This, of course, is merely a sketch. More needs to be said before we can calculate the strength of the prima facie duty of an actual promise keeping.<sup>13</sup> But for my purposes, the important point is that Ross seems to think that the strength of the duty of promise keeping is determined by purely descriptive facts—namely, by the promise’s recency, its solemnity, and its importance to the promisee. And while Ross never explicitly says so in his work, I suspect that he’d say that the strengths of the other prima facie duties are, at bottom, determined by descriptive facts too. But if he thinks this, then, since he thinks that moral obligation is determined by the strengths of prima duties, he would presumably also admit that obligation is, at bottom, determined by descriptive facts. He would, in other words, admit that there is a true absolute moral principle as defined by MP4.

I realize that I’m going somewhat beyond the text here. Ross never explicitly accepts a proposition that counts as an absolute moral principle according to MP4. But he clearly does think that obligation depends on the strengths of prima facie duties, and he does suggest, at least with regard to promise keeping, that the strengths of prima facie duties depend on purely descriptive facts. So I think it’s plausible to hold that Ross would, if pushed, admit that there is a true proposition that has the features necessary for being an absolute moral principle on MP4. Of course, such a proposition would be long and complicated.<sup>14</sup> Ross would likely say that we don’t know, or perhaps can’t know, exactly what it looks like. But I see no reason to doubt that Ross would accept that such a proposition exists.

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, while Ross tells us which things the strength of the duty of promise keeping is a function of, he never indicates precisely what this function is.

<sup>14</sup> Though it wouldn’t be nearly as long and complicated as the one generated by the supervenience of the moral on the natural, for its right-hand side would not mention *all* the descriptive facts of a world, but rather, only those descriptive facts that determine the stringencies of prima facie duties.

So, I think that MP4 is not a conception of absolute moral principles that has the features we're looking for. It doesn't commit all utilitarians—or even the most important ones—to generalism about absolute duty. It may not commit all Kantians to generalism about it either. Moreover, there is reason to think that it doesn't even commit Ross to particularism about this sort of duty.<sup>15</sup>

## VI

I have suggested that Ross may in fact accept that there is a true proposition that has the features needed to make it an absolute moral principle according to MP4. However, I admitted that such a principle would likely be long and complicated. It therefore wouldn't be useful as a guide to action. In other words, it would be very difficult for us to use it to determine whether our actions are obligatory. But some particularists suggest that moral principles are, by their very nature, useful, or action-guiding.<sup>16</sup> In light of this, they might say that MP4 needs to be modified as follows:

**MP5:** An absolute moral principle is, by definition, a non-trivial, *action-guiding* proposition that has the following form: an action is morally

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<sup>15</sup> An anonymous reviewer wonders whether the claims that utilitarians and Kantians accept constitute a much “deeper” or “robust” explanation of deontic concepts than do the claims that Ross accepts (in particular, R2). If utilitarians and Kantians do indeed accept deeper explanations of deontic concepts than Ross does, perhaps this is what makes utilitarians and Kantians generalists about absolute duty and Ross a particularist about it. However, if I am right that Ross would accept that there is a true absolute moral principle as defined by MP4, then he would seem to be on a par with many utilitarians and Kantians vis-à-vis explanatory depth. Consider for a moment the views of one particular utilitarian: G. E. Moore. As we've seen, he holds that an action is obligatory iff (and because) it maximizes the overall balance of intrinsic goodness. Moore (1903) also adopts a pluralistic theory of the good: he suggests that beauty, the appreciation of beauty, personal affection, and pleasure (taken in good things) are all intrinsically good. In addition, Moore would surely admit that the degree to which a beautiful object (a feeling of personal affection, etc.) is intrinsically good is determined by further descriptive facts. Now compare this package of claims with ones that Ross accepts. Ross holds that an action is obligatory iff (and because) it maximizes the overall balance of prima facie duty. Ross also accepts a pluralistic theory of prima facie duty: he thinks that beneficence, reparation, justice, etc. are all prima facie duties. Moreover, as I've suggested, there is no reason to doubt that Ross would say that the degree to which an act of beneficence (reparation, etc.) is a prima facie duty is determined by further descriptive facts. There is thus a striking symmetry between the claims that Ross and Moore accept. Given this, it is difficult to see one as offering a more robust explanation of moral obligation than the other. Similar things will apply, I think, when we compare the claims that Ross accepts with the claims of other utilitarians and Kantians. The general point, then, is that if Ross accepts that there is a true moral principle as defined by MP4, then no matter how we cash out the notion of explanatory depth, it looks as though the explanations that Ross endorses will be no less deep than ones accepted by many generalists.

<sup>16</sup> See Dancy (2004b, 87-88; 1993, 69, 77-79), Little (2000), and Lance and Little (2006b, 570-73).

obligatory (permissible, wrong) iff and in virtue of the fact that \_\_\_\_\_, where this blank contains only descriptive terms.

Will Ross count as a particularist about absolute duty on this conception of moral principles? I suspect that the answer is “yes.”<sup>17</sup> However, it seems to me that many utilitarians will also be particularists about absolute duty on MP5. Consider, for instance, hedonistic act utilitarianism. This theory is rarely action-guiding; we can almost never use it to determine the moral status of our actions because we almost never know the precise amount of pleasure or pain our alternatives will bring about.

Of course, there are other ways of formulating utilitarianism, but most of them don’t make the theory any more action-guiding. Consider, for instance, Moore’s Ideal Utilitarianism. It is no easier to determine how much intrinsic goodness and intrinsic badness our alternatives will produce than it is to determine how much pleasure and pain they will produce. Ideal Utilitarianism thus seems to be an extremely poor guide to action, as Moore (1903, secs. 91-94, 99) seems to realize.

Others formulate utilitarianism in a different way. They take it to be the view that an action is obligatory iff its expected utility is greater than the expected utility of any of its alternatives. However, as some have pointed out (especially Feldman 2006), this version of utilitarianism seems even less action-guiding than traditional act utilitarianism. After all, the expected utility of an alternative is the sum, for each of its possible outcomes, of the outcome’s actual value times the probability that it (the outcome) will obtain if the alternative is performed. More precisely, where  $A$  is an alternative,  $O_1, O_2, \dots, O_n$  are the possible outcomes of  $A$ , and for each outcome  $O_i$ ,  $V(O_i)$  is the value of  $O_i$  and  $\text{prob}(O_i/A)$  is the probability of  $O_i$  given  $A$ , the expected utility of  $A = \sum_i \text{prob}(O_i/A) \times V(O_i)$ . Thus, to determine the expected utility of just one of our alternatives, we would need to determine not only the actual value of each of its possible outcomes, but we’d also need to determine the probability that each of these outcomes will obtain if the action is performed. But these are things that we will almost never be able to determine, at least in any realistic scenario. And even if we could determine these things, we’d still have a multitude of mathematical calculations to perform—we’d still have to multiply the value of each of the alternative’s possible outcomes by the probability that it will obtain if the alternative is performed. Such a task is one that we could almost never carry out. And even if we could, in order to determine whether the alternative in question is obligatory according to expected utility utilitarianism, we’d still have to repeat this whole process for each of our other alternatives and compare their expected utilities—a daunting task indeed.

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<sup>17</sup> That Ross would deny that there are any true absolute moral principles that are action-guiding is, perhaps, suggested by his (1930, 31).

It thus seems that many of the main formulations of utilitarianism fail to provide us with absolute moral principles as defined by MP5.<sup>18</sup> I suspect that similar things can be said about many formulations of Kantianism. Consider, for instance, the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative, according to which an action is morally permissible iff its maxim is universalizable. In order for an agent to use this theory to obtain moral guidance, she'll presumably need to be able to determine (a) the maxims associated with her actions, and (b) whether these maxims are universalizable. However, I suspect that on many ways of understanding what a maxim is, it will be possible (perhaps even common) for an agent to have difficulty determining what the maxims of her actions are. For instance, if we think of the maxim of an action as the motive or intention that the action is performed on, then we will surely sometimes be unsure what the maxims of our actions are, for we are surely sometimes unsure what motives or intentions we act upon. Similar things seem to apply if we think of the maxim of an action as the underlying policy, aim, or principle that the agent acts on. And even if we could always identify the maxims of our actions, we may not always be able to determine whether they are universalizable. Suppose, for instance, that for the maxim of an action to be universalizable is for the action to be logically possible in a world where everyone acts on it (the maxim). However, it is difficult, in many circumstances, to determine precisely what the world would be like if everyone in it acted on a given maxim. So, I suspect that on this understanding of universalizability, agents will sometimes (perhaps often) be unsure about whether the maxims of their actions are universalizable. Similar things also seem to apply if we hold instead that for the maxim of an action to be universalizable is for the agent to be able to achieve the end of her action even in a world where everyone acts on the action's maxim.<sup>19</sup> Now, I don't take any of this to definitively show that Kantianism, in all of its forms, fails to be action-guiding. However, I think it at least shows that a *prima facie* case can be made that Kantianism, in at least some of its forms, is not fully action-guiding. And if I have successfully shown this, then I have also shown that a *prima facie* case can be made that MP5 will deem many Kantians—as it will many utilitarians—to be particularists about absolute duty.

Before concluding, I'd like to briefly consider one final account of absolute moral principles. Some generalists think that principles that have many of the features specified by MP5 are “constitutive” of moral judgment. That is, they think that in order to have the concepts of moral obligation, permissibility, and

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<sup>18</sup> For more on action-guidingness and utilitarianism/consequentialism, see Frazier (1994), Lenman (2000), and Miller (2003).

<sup>19</sup> The two ways of understanding universalizability discussed here correspond roughly to what has become known as the “Logical Contradiction Interpretation” and the “Practical Contradiction Interpretation,” respectively (see Korsgaard 1996, 78).

wrongness, one needs to accept principles of the sort suggested by MP5.<sup>20</sup> This may suggest another way of conceiving of absolute moral principles. Perhaps absolute moral principles don't merely specify what moral obligation (permissibility, wrongness) is coinstantiated with, nor do they tell us what grounds moral obligation (permissibility, wrongness), perhaps they instead provide us with an *analysis* of the concept of moral obligation (permissibility, wrongness). In other words, maybe we should understand absolute moral principles more along the lines of this:

**MP6:** An absolute moral principle is, by definition, a non-trivial proposition that has the following form: an action is morally obligatory (permissible, wrong) =<sub>df.</sub> \_\_\_\_\_, where this blank contains only descriptive terms.

If we accept MP6, I think we should again conclude that Ross is a particularist about absolute duty. He clearly believes that we can't give a descriptive analysis or definition of "obligation" (1930, chap. 1; 1939, chaps. 2-3). So, he'd deny that there are any true absolute moral principles as understood by MP6. However, if we accept MP6, it again seems that we'll also have to admit that many utilitarians are particularists about absolute duty. While some of the early utilitarians, such as Mill and Bentham, may have thought that utilitarianism provides us with an analysis or definition of "obligation," utilitarianism isn't typically understood in this way today.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, many important utilitarians—such as Sidgwick (1907) and Moore (1903)—explicitly deny that a descriptive analysis of deontic terms such as "obligation" can be given.<sup>22</sup> So, I think that if we accept MP6, we'll have to admit that while Ross would likely deny that there are any true absolute moral principles, so would many utilitarians.

## VII

I have now considered several ways of understanding what an absolute moral principle is, each of which is derived from things that actual particularists and generalists say about moral principles. I have shown that on many of these conceptions (MP1-MP4), Ross seems to *accept* absolute moral principles (or, at

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<sup>20</sup> Jackson, Petit, and Smith (2000) defend constitutive generalism. For discussion of their view, see McKeever and Ridge (2006, chap. 5).

<sup>21</sup> Utilitarianism is now typically understood as being a theory about the necessary and sufficient conditions for the moral obligatoriness (permissibility, wrongness) of actions, or a theory about the feature in virtue of which all obligatory (permissible, wrong) actions are obligatory (permissible, wrong). See, for instance, Feldman (1978, 26), Timmons (2002, 104-6), and Shafer-Landau (2012, 119-20).

<sup>22</sup> Of course, Moore (1903) claims that a *non-natural* analysis of obligation can be given: he analyzes obligation in terms of goodness and badness. However, he denies that a purely descriptive analysis of goodness and badness can be given.

least, we have no good reason to think otherwise). On these conceptions, Ross is therefore not a particularist about absolute duty, as he is widely seen to be. However, I also considered several ways of conceiving of absolute moral principles (MP5 and MP6) according to which Ross does seem to be a particularist about this kind of duty. But I argued that on these conceptions, many utilitarians and Kantians will also be particularists about it, not generalists, as they are widely assumed to be. My conclusion, then, is that Ross is no more a particularist about absolute duty than a utilitarian or a Kantian is. When it comes to affirming the existence of true absolute moral principles, Ross belongs in the same camp as utilitarians and Kantians. If we want to make utilitarians and Kantians generalists about absolute duty, that's fine, but we should then admit that Ross is a generalist about it too. If we'd like to make Ross a particularist about this sort of duty, that's fine too, but we should then hold that utilitarians and Kantians are particularists about it as well. But we can't have it both ways; there doesn't seem to be a plausible conception of absolute moral principles that will make Ross a particularist about absolute duty and utilitarians and Kantians generalists about it.

I think this conclusion is important. Too often Ross is considered to be fundamentally at odds with utilitarians and Kantians. Of course, Ross disagrees heartily with utilitarians and Kantians about many things. But as I see it, Ross is engaged in the same fundamental project as they are. Ross, like utilitarians and Kantians, is attempting to provide a true criterion of moral obligation. That is, he is trying to give a non-trivial, explanatory set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the moral obligatoriness of actions. And the criterion of obligation that Ross offers (namely R2) is, I think, both interesting and important. It deserves to be treated alongside the criteria that utilitarians and Kantians offer. However, if we think that Ross is a particularist about absolute duty while utilitarians and Kantians are generalists about it, we run the risk of neglecting Ross's criterion in favor of the criteria offered by utilitarians and Kantians. After all, a criterion of obligation certainly looks like an absolute moral principle, at least at first glance. So, if we hold that Ross denies while utilitarians and Kantians accept absolute moral principles, it's all too easy to ignore Ross's criterion altogether and consider only the utilitarian and Kantian criteria. And that, I think, is something we should be careful to avoid.

My conclusion is also important for another reason, for it may have implications on the broader debate between particularists and generalists. This is because I suspect that many self-proclaimed particularists would accept much of what I've argued that Ross accepts. That is, I suspect that many particularists would accept a proposition like R2 (or some minor variant of it), deny that it is action-guiding, deny that it is a conceptual truth, etc. But if particularists accept these things, then I would argue that, like Ross, these "particularists" are no more particularists about absolute duty than many utilitarians or Kantians are. If a particularist wants to resist this conclusion, she'll need to provide us with a conception of absolute moral principles that will render her a particularist about absolute duty without also rendering utilitarians or Kantians particularists about

it. Given what I've said in this paper, it should be clear that I suspect she'll have a hard time succeeding.

It would be especially interesting to see whether Jonathan Dancy—perhaps the most well-known particularist—can rise to the challenge. Detailed discussion of Dancy's rich and complex moral outlook will have to await another occasion. However, I will close this paper by briefly considering some of his views.<sup>23</sup> First of all, Dancy (2004b, chap. 5) accepts what he calls “holism,” both about contributory reasons and about ought-making features. According to holism about contributory reasons (i.e., reasons that count in favor of an action), a feature that is a reason for an action in one context might fail to be a reason for an action in another context (or it might even be a reason *against* the action). According to holism about ought-making features, a feature that makes an action obligatory in one context might fail to make an action obligatory in another context.<sup>24</sup> (Dancy says similar things about permissible-making features as well as wrong-making features.) Because of Dancy's commitment to holism, he might simply accept a conception of moral principles like MP2, according to which an absolute moral principle is a proposition of the form “an action is morally obligatory (permissible, wrong) iff and in virtue of the fact that \_\_\_\_\_.” He might then go on to claim that there are no true propositions of this sort: the blank simply cannot be filled in because ought- (permissible-, wrong-) making features are holistic. Utilitarians and Kantians, however, clearly do think that there are true absolute moral principles that conform to MP2 (as does Ross, I've argued). So, Dancy may in fact be able to rise to the challenge I've raised.

However, the matter is complicated by the fact that Dancy (2004b, 29-37) appears to accept something along the lines of Ross's R1, though Dancy prefers to state it in terms of “contributory oughts” instead of in terms of “prima facie duties.”<sup>25</sup> It's unclear to me precisely what Dancy has in mind by a “contributory ought”; however, he ultimately appears to understand “contributory oughts” in terms of “peremptory reasons.” (Recall that for Dancy, a peremptory reason just is what I earlier called a “requiring reason.”<sup>26</sup>) The upshot of all of this is that I suspect that Dancy would accept something along the lines of the claim that an action is obligatory iff there is more overall peremptory reason to perform it than there is to perform any of its alternatives. But if Dancy would indeed accept this (or something like it), it'd be natural to wonder: would he also admit (as Ross clearly does about R1) that obligatory actions are obligatory *in virtue of the fact* that

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<sup>23</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to consider this.

<sup>24</sup> It's unclear to me whether Dancy would say that it's possible for a feature to make an action obligatory in one context but *wrong* in another.

<sup>25</sup> He says, for instance, that “I have been gently moving towards the conclusion that the overall ought should be understood as some function of a contributory ought” (2004b, 34).

<sup>26</sup> See note 8.

there is most overall peremptory reason to perform them? It's unclear to me what Dancy would say about this. But if he'd say "yes," then it looks like he'd accept absolute moral principles according to MP2 after all.

At this point, Dancy might counter by saying that even if obligatory actions are obligatory in virtue of maximizing the overall balance of peremptory reasons, this is not enough to make him a generalist about absolute duty because such a "principle," even if it is to some extent explanatory, is certainly not action-guiding. Such a response would suggest that Dancy accepts a conception of absolute moral principles more like MP5. And indeed, there are several passages in *Ethics without Principles* where Dancy seems to adopt something like this conception of moral principles (see, for instance, his discussion of resultance and supervenience [2004b, 85-93]). But, as I've argued, even many utilitarians and Kantians will deny that there are true principles of this sort, and so, if Dancy accepts a conception of principles like this, he may not be able to rise to the challenge after all.

Of course, even if there is no good way of understanding what absolute moral principles are that will make Dancy a particularist about them and utilitarians and Kantians generalists about them, it might still be the case that Dancy is a particularist while utilitarians and Kantians are generalists *on some other sense* of the terms "particularism" and "generalism." As I noted above, there are lots of ways of understanding "particularism" and "generalism"; according to the way that I have been using the terms in this paper, they refer to the acceptance (or denial) of true moral principles.<sup>27</sup> However, it's worth noting that Dancy now seems to understand these terms in a quite different way. For him, particularism is the view that "the possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles" (2004b, 7, 73). Generalism, on the other hand, is the view that moral thought and judgment does indeed depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles. But to claim that the possibility of moral thought and judgment depends (or doesn't depend) on moral principles seems very different from the mere claim that there are some (or are no) true moral principles. Nothing I've said here has shown that Dancy is a generalist on his idiosyncratic sense of the term. Nor have I done anything to show that utilitarians and Kantians are particularists on Dancy's sense of the term. (Though I think a case can be made, at least for the latter claim, but I won't press the point here.)

Finally, let me stress that if it turns out that my argument implies that Dancy is no more a particularist about absolute duty than a utilitarian or a Kantian is, I wouldn't take this to be an objection to anything I've said. Indeed, while my main concern has been to make this point about Ross, not Dancy, one of the undercurrents of the paper has been that what I say about Ross may very well apply to other paradigmatic particularists. If it does indeed apply even to Dancy, this would merely confirm my suspicion. Though it bears repeating that Dancy's

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<sup>27</sup> See note 2.

views are complicated, and what I've said about them has been somewhat speculative. The extent to which what I've said about Ross applies also to Dancy (or to any other paradigmatic particularist) is a topic that deserves more consideration than I am able to give it here. I mention it merely as an illustration of what such an application might look like, or, at least, how it might begin.<sup>28</sup>

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