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Moral Principles: Criticism and Defense

Introduction

The fundamental paradigm for solving moral problems in ethics appears to be the paradigm of principle-based ethics. In light of adopted principles (one or several), an assessment of a particular moral situation is made. Principle-based ethics is, in short, a position that assumes that the rationality of moral thinking and making particular moral judgments depends on the proper application of general ethical norms. The basic criterion for evaluating an action is most often expressed in the form of the so-called norm of morality.¹ Only based on this norm are particular moral norms formulated. The norm of morality can be equated with a set of moral principles.²

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¹ Tadeusz Styczeń and Jarosław Merecki, “ABC etyki,” [ABC of Ethics] in *Objawiać osobę* [Revealing a person], ed. Alfred Wierzbicki, *Dzieła zebrane* 3 [Collected works 3] (Lublin: TN KUL and Instytut Jan Pawła II KUL, 2013), 392.

² For example, David Ross accepts the existence of several moral principles that indicate *prima facie* duties. An action’s evaluation, the assessment that duty should be



The approach of principle-based ethics has a long tradition in the history of moral philosophy. While criticism of this paradigm has been present in moral reflection from the beginning, it was mainly concerned with the criticism of individual moral theories. It is only recently, thanks to authors belonging to the so-called anti-theory and virtue ethics movements, that the paradigm of principle-based ethics itself has been subjected to criticism.³ Some of the most important proponents of this approach include Bernard Williams, John McDowell, Annette Baier, and Rosalind Hursthouse. On one hand, there is a criticism of the inadequate portrayal of moral reality using the language of principles; on the other hand, the impossibility of providing a decision-making procedure for making correct moral judgments about particular actions is criticized. What is criticized is not so much the specific principles, their conditional or unconditional nature, objectivity or subjectivity, but the practice of making moral judgments based on them.⁴ Anti-theorists formulate even more serious accusations—they demonstrate that to maintain rationality, and thus the correctness of our judgments, principles should be entirely rejected as useless for solving moral problems.

This article is dedicated to the discussion of arguments presented by the opponents of principles. Its goal is not so much to defend a specific version of principle-based ethics, but rather to point out the weak-

prioritized in a given situation, is intuitively resolved on a case-by-case basis. See David Ross, *The Right and Good*, ed. Philip Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). In this article, I will use the terms *moral principles* and *moral norms* interchangeably.

³ With all the differences between anti-theorists and virtue ethicists, both standpoints criticize principle-based ethics, hence in the text I treat the views of these authors together and call them anti-theorists. On the relationship of virtue ethics to the anti-theoretical trend, see Robert B. Louden, “Virtue Ethics and Anti-theory,” *Philosophia* 20, no. 1–2 (1990): 93–114.

⁴ Anti-theorists reject the very idea of building an ethical theory based on formulating and justifying moral principles.

ness of anti-theorists' arguments and attempt to defend the necessity of adopting norms to maintain the rationality of our moral judgments, as well as to highlight their usefulness in practice. Nevertheless, certain arguments formulated by anti-theorists are valid and should be considered by proponents of principle-based ethics. After presenting the role of principles in ethics and the main arguments against them, the reasons for rejecting the arguments of anti-theorists will be given. These reasons will be presented in three parts. The first argues in favor of the rational necessity of adopting moral principles. The second shows that principles are inherently linked to the nature of human cognition, while the third reveals the role of principles in the decision-making procedure. Defending the fundamental role of principles in determining the value of a given behavior thus signifies recognizing the meaningfulness of constructing an ethical theory. In my analysis, I will refer, among others, to authors belonging to the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, for whom principles are an essential element of proper moral judgments.

General Characteristics of Principle-based Ethics

The primary practical goal of principle-based ethics is to solve moral problems. A moral theory should not only provide explanations of moral facts,⁵ but also, as a practical theory, offer criteria for evaluating actions based on which an individual can discover what is right in a given situation. This requirement for principle-based ethics is formulated by, among others, anti-theorists. Charles Larmore points out that both Kantianism and utilitarianism, the two dominant ethical traditions

⁵ An explanation of moral facts is the theoretical goal of principle-based ethics.

today, have tried to formulate a clear decision-making procedure.⁶ Bernard Williams claims that ethicists aim to establish a rational decision-making procedure, a method for reliably solving moral problems.⁷

Supporters of principle-based ethics themselves shared the conviction of anti-theorists that the theory should provide criteria for evaluating particular actions. For instance, the principle of utility in utilitarian theories provides tools for solving the moral problems that we face.⁸ Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative points the way for the reasoning that a subject should conduct to discover what they ought to do in a given situation. If the subject in their reasoning appeals to the imperative, they should conclude what action to take in that situation.⁹ If the fundamental task of moral theory is to determine a decision-making procedure, it is necessary to examine how it functions in moral theory.

A decision-making procedure is a kind of method by which a theory guides the subject on how practical reasoning should proceed and how to ultimately obtain a correct answer regarding the moral value of a given action.¹⁰ It is worth noting that a decision-making procedure is not the same as a criterion for evaluating an action. The criterion indi-

⁶ Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 4.

⁷ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 100–101.

⁸ John Mill, *Utylitaryzm* [Utilitarianism], trans. Maria Ossowska (Warszawa: PWN, 1959), 13.

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Uzasadnienie metafizyki moralności* [Foundation of the metaphysics of the morality], trans. Mściśław Wartenberg (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1971), 20.

¹⁰ Mark Timmons, *Moral theory. An Introduction* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 3.

cates what features of an action make it morally right, whereas the decision-making procedure provides a way for the subject to answer the question of what is right and what is wrong.¹¹ To maintain a clear and rational schema, the decision-making procedure should be, on the basis of moral theory, presented discursively. Hereby, it can become a useful tool in the hands of the subject. It often takes the form of a certain reasoning pattern in which the first premise is a general moral principle, and the second is a factual judgment in which we describe the nature of the action and establish its relation to the principle.¹² Based on these two premises, a conclusion is drawn – a particular moral judgment about the rightness of the action. From the fact that an action is, for example, theft, and considering the premise that theft is wrong (this premise is captured in the general principle), we deduce that the specific act of theft is morally unjust. Of course, for the conclusion to be correct, both premises must be true, and the reasoning itself must be logically valid. The moral theory guarantees the correctness of the first premise, namely the truth of the moral principle. Most supporters of principle-based ethics, known as theorists, such as Alan Donagan, recognize that accepting principles is a requirement of rationality.¹³ The principles themselves are, after all, a rational representation of moral reality. The truth of the second premise is guaranteed by the accurate description of the fact. The particular moral judgment, resulting from correct reasoning, is therefore true. Thus, by logical reasoning, and based on the proper principles, the moral subject discovers what they should do in given circumstances.

¹¹ Moral theories differ in the accepted norm of morality. The scheme of functioning of the decision-making procedure in various moral theories is analogous.

¹² Tadeusz Ślipko, *Zarys etyki ogólnej* [Outline of general ethics] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, wyd. IV, 2004), 244.

¹³ Alan Donagan, "Consistency in Rationalist Moral Systems," in *Moral Dilemmas*, ed. Christopher W. Gowans (New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 273.

According to theorists, individuals are capable of correctly determining whether a particular situation falls under one principle or another. Moral theory is formulated in such a way that every individual, regardless of their level of moral maturity, can apply it. The requirements set by the theory and the method of arriving at correct answers are applicable to the average person, rather than being reserved solely for exceptionally morally mature individuals. Undoubtedly, the more morally mature the individual, the more efficient the application will be. Principles, according to theorists, are highly suitable for application because, on one hand, they abstract from the specificity of the situation, its distinctive individual characteristics, and on the other hand, they abstract from the uniqueness and character of the subject, their feelings, motivations, relationships with others, and cultural backgrounds. Principles are abstract, and thus they can apply to all rational subjects.¹⁴

Some ethicists argue that such a decision-making procedure should take the form of deductive reasoning. Ethicists from various philosophical traditions, such as Feliks Bednarski¹⁵ or Richard Hare,¹⁶ seemed to adopt this view. They both thought that a conclusion is derived about the moral qualification of the action on the basis of principle (although they justified it differently) and the recognition that a specific action is its case. It could be said that a particular act is wrong because it is, for instance, a case of murder, and murder is wrong. Other authors, like Donagan, indicated that moral reasoning within a theory should rather take the form of non-deductive inference. According to Donagan, principles, recognized as true within the theo-

¹⁴ Bernard Gert, *Morality. Its Nature and Justification* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 111–112.

¹⁵ Feliks Bednarski, *La deduzione delle norme morali generali dalla legge naturali* (Roma: Istituto degli Studi Ecclesiastici, 1969).

¹⁶ Richard Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 69.

ry, do not form a set of axioms from which other principles are deduced through purely deductive reasoning. Further norms are deduced from basic norms, but through the intermediary of additional premises. Principles and additional premises are adopted through informal, dialectical reasoning, as the author calls it.¹⁷ However, the discussion about whether such reasoning should take a deductive or non-deductive form is not essential for the analysis of this article. What is important is that moral reasoning, according to proponents of the theory, is in every case based on moral principles.

The possibility of discovering which principles apply to a particular situation stems from the observation that there is a relation between what is descriptive and what is normative (prescriptive). There is a proper relation between “is” and “ought.” The thesis that you cannot separate the description of an action and its moral evaluation, the thesis about linking the descriptive with what is moral, was expressed in the principle of supervenience.¹⁸ According to this principle, descriptive facts guide our moral judgment. Descriptively identical worlds are morally identical. Any change in the moral properties of a situation is conditioned by a change in its descriptive properties. If what is moral cannot change independently without an appropriate change in what is descriptive, then what is moral is determined by it. If two cases are the same regarding essential, natural properties, their moral assessment must be the same. Different moral assessments must be based on some difference in the natural properties of the situation. The fact that an action involves torture, for example, is the basis for considering it morally wrong. Such an assessment follows the pattern that combines

¹⁷ Donagan, “Consistency in Rationalist Moral System,” 273.

¹⁸ According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the principle of supervenience claims that there can be no ethical difference between two possible states of affairs or actions without there being some natural difference between them. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/supervenience-ethics/>.

non-moral, natural features of an action and the corresponding moral judgment. These universal patterns or relationships are precisely presented in the form of moral principles.

The “Anti-theoretical Critique” of Principles

Principle-based ethics, according to critics, not only presents a mistaken understanding of moral reality, but also fails to identify which action is right in a particular situation. The method used by theorists cannot fulfill its task, as the moral principles on which action is judged are inadequate for specific situations. Therefore, principle-based ethics cannot achieve its fundamental practical goal, which is to provide a decision-making procedure.

The very belief in the rationality and necessity of understanding morality in the form of principles is criticized by authors belonging to the anti-theory movement. Anette Baier speaks of the prejudice accompanying theorists that rationality in the realm of morality requires formulating moral norms.¹⁹ Williams, on the other hand, laments the fact that theorists introduce moral principles at all.²⁰ The inclination of theorists to formulate a system of principles, according to critics, stems from the mistaken belief that morality is rational only to the extent that it can be expressed in abstract and universal systems of norms.²¹

¹⁹ Annette Baier, “Doing Without Moral Theory?” in *Anti-theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism*, ed. Stanley Clarke and Evans Simpson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 32–33.

²⁰ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 100–101.

²¹ Stanley Clarke and Evans Simpson, “Introduction to Anti-theory,” in *Anti-theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism*, ed. Stanley Clarke and Evans Simpson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 3.

Moreover, the formal nature of moral reasoning based on the acceptance of principles introduces numerous problems. It is pointed out that moral reasoning is conducted by a subject with a specific character, personal plans, ideals, etc.²² They always reason in the light of what they consider important. Moral choices involve a subjective relation of the subject to reality. They cannot adopt a neutral, abstract, and impersonal perspective. How they reason and follow the principle is largely dependent on who they are, what is important to them, and what is not. The moral perspective is a first-person perspective, never a third-person one. Using principles thus requires the individual to assume the position of an impartial subject. The moral subject never exists as a general, uninvolved person making decisions in a “personal” vacuum.

If moral principles are rational, as anti-theorists argue, then everyone who accepts them should hold the same particular moral judgments. However, it turns out that there is no consensus of judgments, but rather a lack of agreement. As demonstrated by moral debates, basing decisions on principles does not necessarily lead to unanimity²³ Although moral principles are widely acknowledged, assessments of specific situations vary greatly. This is because, as critics emphasize, our moral reasoning is not solely based on principles. In our moral reasoning, individuals are guided not only by rational premises expressed in principles²⁴ but also by a multitude of non-rational considerations that influence the course of reasoning. The outcome of such reasoning, it seems, is not simply a passage from general principles to specific answers. There remains a whole range of premises that cannot be expressed in the language of moral norms. The fact that they do not fit

²² Edmund Pincoffs, “Quandary Ethics,” *Mind*, vol. 80, no. 320 (Oct. 1971), 560.

²³ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 40.

²⁴ Assuming that what is rational is captured by principles, all other premises of reasoning should be considered non-rational.

within the principles does not mean they are irrational. They might be better described as non-rational. These non-rational premises depend on who I am, my relationships with others, my feelings, attitudes, and all the beliefs I hold about a given situation. There is no purely rational progression from the “thou shall not kill” premise to the conclusion that one should not disconnect a dying cancer-stricken woman from life-sustaining equipment, even if there are no medical reasons indicating an improvement in her health.²⁵ According to anti-theorists, when making decisions, one should consider the broader context of the situation and take into account, for example, that the woman’s loved ones cannot bear to see her suffer. Ethical principles, when abstracted from non-verbalizable elements of situations (similar to how virtues cannot be fully expressed in the language of principles), are unable to solve specific moral dilemmas. Ignoring what cannot be expressed in the language of principles and relying solely on them for moral reasoning is, according to anti-theorists, misguided.

It is not only an error to overlook what is non-rational in our reasoning, but a more significant weakness of principles lies in their inability to capture what is essential in situations that are always exceptional. Principles are about, according to anti-theorists, what is repeatable, what is the same. However, every moral situation is different, not the same as the previous one. Its uniqueness and unrepeatability cannot be encompassed by any system. Everything that characterizes a particular situation eludes principles; it can only be perceived by the subject engaged in that situation.²⁶

²⁵ Jacek Jaśtał, “Etyka cnót, etyka charakteru,” [Ethics of virtues, ethics of character] in *Etyka i charakter* [Ethics and character], ed. Jacek Jaśtał (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Aureus, 2004), 17.

²⁶ John McDowell, “Virtue and Reasons,” in *Anti-theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism*, ed. Stanley Clarke and Evans Simpson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 88.

In perception, the concrete seems to take precedence over the general. Individuals always make decisions in a unique and unrepeatable situation. Principles, on the other hand, are general and “inflexible,” and therefore not useful. The practical indeterminacy of choice, due to the uniqueness and complexity of every decision-making situation, the individual nature and variability of situations; these are characteristics that, according to anti-theorists, define our moral practice. It cannot be encapsulated in a rigid system of principles. Such a system can only handle the features of situations that have already been captured by it. Even if familiar features emerge in a new situation, they might be arranged differently, possibly be unrecognizable by the system of principles the individual possesses. Describing new things in terms of old categories captivates and confines the subject to what is old, preventing it from embracing what is new and cannot be captured by the “old” language. According to Jonathan Dancy, such an approach often leads to morally wrong decisions because we typically ineptly try to fit the judgment given in the last case to the present, similar situation.²⁷ Focusing on what was makes us insensitive and inattentive to what is now.

Furthermore, the norms actually guiding our moral practice differ significantly from the principles endorsed by proponents of theories. Theorists claim, as Cheryl Noble emphasizes, that moral principles are identical to the norms that members of a community use in their moral practice, even though they do so unclearly and unsystematically.²⁸ However, a discrepancy exists between the moral norms functioning in specific communities and the general moral principles. Anti-theorists

²⁷ Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 3.

²⁸ Cheryl Noble, “Normative Ethical Theories,” in *Anti-theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism*, ed. Stanley Clarke and Evans Simpson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 136.

assert that the nature of moral principles adopted in theory does not correspond to the essence of the norms used in our moral practice. Moral principles, as Stanley Clarke notes, are substantively determined; otherwise, they could not effectively fulfill their role in practical reasoning. Even if they exhibit great generality, their meaning is defined. On the other hand, the norms we apply in our moral practice are not defined in their meaning but remain unclear and unspecified, allowing the context to determine their content and application.²⁹ It is the context, the circumstances that determine their use. This context includes not only the detailed conditions of a given situation, but also the entire socio-cultural practice of the community. For instance, the prohibition of marital infidelity presupposes the existence of the social institution of marriage and the marital rights of individuals.³⁰ Every norm has a cultural context that shapes its content. A norm without a cultural reference is incomprehensible. Without it, as Clarke points out, a given prohibition becomes a purely formal moral code that neither forbids nor supports anything.³¹

Baier expresses the same idea when she writes that moral principles are too general to justify specific judgments without referring to the entire cultural background of those judgments.³² Thus, for principles to be useful, they would need to consider the cultural context, but by design, they distance themselves from it. The gap between abstract moral principles and the interpretative context of practical moral norms emerges in every case. The semantic characteristics of moral

²⁹ Stanley Clarke, "Anti-Theory in Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, no 24 (1987), 238.

³⁰ Annette Baier, *Postures of the Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 273–274.

³¹ Clarke, "Anti-Theory in Ethics," 239.

³² Baier, *Postures of the Mind*, 274.

principles are thus incompatible with the norms applied in practice by community members.³³

Anti-theorists also criticize the principle of supervenience. They believe that it is impossible to derive an evaluation of an action by referring to its non-moral (natural) properties. There is no codified formula that determines the transition from “is” to “ought.”³⁴ The relationship between descriptive elements and evaluative ones is not only complicated, but irreducibly complex. As Simon Blackburn puts it, what is moral is “shapeless” in relation to what is descriptive.³⁵ There is no “shape” in what can be captured in descriptive concepts that would dictate a moral judgment. When we say that torture is typically wrong, it is not that this statement is false, but that there is not a fixed, typical set of features characteristic of all cases of torture. By confining ourselves to the description of facts alone, we cannot find an answer to the question of their moral assessment. This is because there are no common features in the description of each case of torture that would immediately indicate a negative moral judgment of such an action.³⁶

³³ Clarke and Simpson, “Introduction to Anti-theory,” 5.

³⁴ Dancy accepts a certain form of relation between the descriptive and the moral and calls it *resultance*. This term describes the relationship between all the natural features of a situation and one’s moral judgment. This relationship does not follow a constant pattern. Jonathan Dancy, “On Moral Properties,” *Mind* 90 (359) (1981), 367–385.

³⁵ Simon Blackburn, “Rule-Following and Moral Realism,” in *Wittgenstein: To Follow A Rule*, ed. Steven Holtzman and Christopher Leich (London: Routledge, 1981), 167.

³⁶ Dancy, “On Moral Properties,” 367–385.

A Critique of Anti-theoretical Argumentation

THE RATIONAL NECESSITY OF ADOPTING MORAL PRINCIPLES

The criticism of principle-based ethics presented by anti-theorists does not seem convincing. Let us start with the principle of supervenience. If we were to reject this principle, if we were to reject the existence of something that connects all descriptions with their corresponding moral evaluations, then the statement that a given description determines a moral verdict becomes a matter of chance. It simply happens that a certain description leads to a specific evaluation. As a result, we are unable to specify the differences between right and wrong actions, or the basis on which we differentiate them.³⁷ Qualifying each action would then rely on arbitrary decisions. In order to avoid the arbitrariness of our judgments, we must assume that what allows us to deem an action as right or wrong is some common characteristic shared by all right actions. The relationship of this characteristic to the rightness of actions is expressed by the principle of supervenience. Without accepting supervenience, there is no way to objectively explain our judgments.³⁸

Critics of supervenience might argue that there is some pattern connecting the normative and the non-moral, but it remains elusive and

³⁷ Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, "Ethical Particularism and Patterns," in *Moral Particularism*, ed. Bead Hooker, Margaret O. Little (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 2000), 87.

³⁸ Joseph Raz, "The Truth in Particularism," in *Moral Particularism*, ed. Brad Hooker and Margaret O. Little (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 2000), 52. The need to adopt the principle of supervenience does not determine its interpretation. The discussion on the type of supervenience and its specific version is beyond the scope of this article.

unknowable to us. It is important to note that in this scenario, we still would not know what makes a particular action right. If the pattern connecting action, description and its evaluation is unknowable, we remain powerless to non-arbitrarily determine the value of actions.³⁹ If we lack the ability to grasp the pattern, it means that the rightness of a given action is something we must simply acknowledge.⁴⁰

If there is no pattern connecting the normative to the non-moral, or if it is unknowable, then our linguistic competencies, our use of moral concepts, also become unintelligible.⁴¹ Declaring that a given action is admirable, honest, or generous is possible and comprehensible only under the assumption that moral concepts are grounded in non-moral shared characteristics. Without understanding the shared characteristics that underlie our moral judgments, without adopting descriptive characteristics that are common to all actions that we define as fair, just, etc., we cease to be credible users of moral language. Our ability to judge a specific action, like a case of murder, is based on the similarity of all essential characteristics of various murder cases. Without understanding what links all instances of murder, we could not declare the moral wrongness of such actions. If we cannot know the common attributes, it would mean we have to be acquainted with every possible instance of murder that is negatively evaluated, an impossible feat for finite beings. Since all instances share common features, they possess a certain “shape,” contrary to claims like Blackburn’s. A “shape” common to all actions that fall under the category of murder reveals how our evaluations are based on these patterns. Our moral judgments, so that they can be understood by other subjects, are issued on the basis of moral principles that capture the shape.

³⁹ Jackson and Pettit and Smith, “Ethical Particularism and Patterns,” 88.

⁴⁰ Robert Shafer-Landau, “Moral Rules,” *Ethics*, vol. 107, no. 4 (Jul. 1997), 600.

⁴¹ Jackson and Pettit and Smith, “Ethical Particularism and Patterns,” 89.

The necessity of adopting a framework where our moral judgments are grounded in certain non-moral characteristics of situations is also driven by the requirement to provide rational justifications for our judgments. Without moral principles, our moral judgments become incomprehensible and unjustifiable.⁴² Moreover, these judgments become unverifiable, as each verification system, employing general principles, sets certain universal standards. The verification of moral correctness is done by referring to a system of consistent basic propositions. This allows me to justify my actions to others and defend against unjust accusations. If my actions affect others, their reasons must be publicly justified. Thus, we need general principles that make certain moral judgments appear reasonable and justified while others are not.⁴³ Justifying judgments requires basing them on knowledge that forms a coherent system. Anti-theorists deny such a basis, suggesting that one can reject certain moral beliefs without affecting others. This does not create a system of beliefs mutually supporting each other, but rather a collection of disconnected judgments. Some judgments are independent of others. Without explaining an instance of some kind of action based on moral principles, it is impossible to expand our belief system. Ultimately, we cannot introduce structure and coherence into our moral reasoning. One anti-theorist attempting to address this problem is Dancy, distinguishing between good and bad arguments. A good argument, as Dancy puts it, is a good narrative that aligns with the shape present in a given moral situation.⁴⁴ However, Dancy does not clarify what he means by a good narrative. We lack criteria to deter-

⁴² Torbjörn Tännsjö, "In Defence of Theory in Ethics," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 25, no. 4. (Dec.1995), 573.

⁴³ Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Cambridge–Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 112–113.

mine if a narrative is genuinely true. There are no objective, intersubjectively verifiable conditions that good arguments should fulfill. As Torbjörn Tännsjö emphasizes, in such a case we can only talk about the persuasive power of the argument and not about its truth.⁴⁵

It is worth noting that rejecting supervenience appears as a form of moral nominalism. As we know, nominalism denies the existence of any general content.⁴⁶ Only individual names exist, each assigned individual meanings. Applied to the moral realm, this would imply the existence solely of unique features for each moral situation. Moral features would exist only as features of this and only this particular situation. Consequently, taking someone's life in two similar cases could not be categorized as murder. There would not be a general content of murder that would apply in both situations. In such a view, participants in a discussion about the moral evaluation of murder would not mean the same thing. In the absence of general content, of the general meaning of concepts, the participants of the debate would assign ad hoc meanings to the ethical terms they use. Without general content, the meanings of terms would be subjective, assigned by their users. In this scenario, not only would we cease to be competent in our linguistic practice, but moral discussion itself would lose its meaning. We would lose the ability to rationally explain why one instance constitutes murder and is judged as wrong, while another instance of murder would be judged as right. The moral relevance of an action's feature would become inexplicable and something random.⁴⁷ It turns out, therefore, that the moral principles revealing the pattern through which the descriptive connects to the evaluative are essential in our practice of making and justifying moral judgments. The captured content of an

⁴⁵ Tännsjö, "In Defence of Theory in Ethics," 686.

⁴⁶ Antoni Stępień, *Wstęp do filozofii* [Introduction to philosophy] (Lublin: TN KUL, 1995), 148.

⁴⁷ Shafer-Landau, "Moral Rules," 595.

action in the principles fundamentally points to its moral value. This does not exclude the possibility that in certain situations, an action fundamentally based on the same type (e.g., murder) might be justified, not because it is a case of murder, but due to additional unique features, exceptional circumstances, and the like that could outweigh the basic wrongdoing of this action.

Anti-theorists seem to be correct in demanding the grounding of our moral judgments in specific situations. Indeed, knowledge of the particular precedes knowledge of the general. Our moral experience starts from understanding particular moral situations, and only on this basis can moral principles be formulated. Jacques Maritain, a proponent of classical ethics within the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, highlighted that primary understanding of what is morally significant is made in relation to a given, concrete situation. According to Maritain, this moral understanding takes the form of an intellectual intuition participating in the direct grasp of moral reality.⁴⁸ Faced with a specific situation and a specific fact, the mind recognizes a certain intellectualizable content that can be captured in the elementary moral judgment

⁴⁸ Jacques Maritain writes that a particular situation “is captured in a vision, that is, a concrete knowledge of reason, a vision that is incorporated into, immersed in, embodied in, inseparable from the situation itself.” Jacques Maritain, *Dziewięć wykładów o podstawowych pojęciach filozofii moralnej* [Nine lectures on the basic notions of the moral philosophy], trans. Jarosław Merecki SDS (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 2001), 62. It is worth noting that the aforementioned intuition resembles the presence of intellectual intuition in the operation of the so-called “particular reason.” See the concept of *ratio particularis* in Thomas Aquinas. Thomas Aquinas, in *Eth. Nic.*, lect. 9, nr. 1255. See Mieczysław Albert Krąpiec, *Realizm ludzkiego poznania. Dzieła* [Realism of human cognition. Works], vol. 2 (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1995), 500–511. Karol Wojtyła writes that moral cognition “approaches that <ratio particularis> of which Thomas Aquinas spoke.” Karol Wojtyła, “Problem doświadczenia w etyce,” [The problem of experience in ethics] *Roczniki Filozoficzne KUL* [The KUL philosophical annals] 17, 2 (1969): 23.

that an action involving harm to another human being is morally wrong. Another figure from a different tradition, David Ross, also expressed a similar idea. According to Ross, in each moral situation, we initially grasp the *prima facie* rightness of a specific action of a particular type.⁴⁹ This action possesses a *prima facie* characteristic that determines its wrongness/rightness. We may not agree with Maritain or Ross on how wrongness/rightness is perceived, but undoubtedly our perception involves encountering an individual situation in which we have to make a decision and take action. The elementary judgment about the rightness of a specific action reveals a certain regularity, that is, principle. We intellectually grasp how a principle forbidding harm operates in a given instance, and we notice that it is not *a priori* but rather something recognized in that specific situation. The credibility of moral principles derives from their alignment with our moral insights. Thus, what verifies principles are our particular moral intuitions.

Contrary to anti-theorists, principles remain intrinsically tied to specific situations. We understand the sense of a particular situation and express it through normative judgments. We grasp the meaning of what it perceives, the essence of the relation between this description non-moral and the issued moral judgment evaluation. Although the sense is general, and the act or situation is always concrete, then this sense is intelligible only in concreteness. A principle, therefore, is not merely an inductive generalization of knowledge about a few cases, but rather an internal regularity recognized by the mind.⁵⁰ It is a regu-

⁴⁹ Ross, *The Right and Good*, 33.

⁵⁰ According to Tadeusz Styczeń, "(T)he transition from the particular to the general is not made [...] by generalizing induction, but by an act of clarifying intuition, which in turn is not something different from experience." Tadeusz Styczeń SDS, "Problem możliwości etyki jako empirycznie uprawomocnionej i ogólnie ważnej teorii moralności. Studium metaetyczne," [The problem of the possibility of ethics as an

larity without which what we know would not be understandable. Sometimes, when referring to a principle, it is said that the principle points to the primary sense (thought, idea) underlying the intelligibility of an action. This thought shapes the action and is virtually contained within it.⁵¹

MORAL PRINCIPLES AS A RESULT OF THE NATURE OF HUMAN COGNITION

The moral principles and the necessity of adopting them to maintain the rationality of our moral judgments find their confirmation in the way of human cognition and the fundamental aspect of the knowing subject. By performing acts of cognition, the subject reveals itself in its basic form as an epistemological subject, that is, a subject constituted solely by cognitive acts, directly revealed in the knowing consciousness and concerning moral reality. Knowledge is not treated here as a manifestation of human life, an aspect of personality characterized by its attitudes, emotions, desires, or socio-cultural conditioning, but as “emerging in the field of consciousness as a meaningful whole that serves the role (or pretends to serve the role) of informing about something.”⁵² The essence of this understanding of knowledge is solely being a source of knowledge

empirically empowered and generally valid theory of morality. Metaethical study] in *Etyka niezależna* [Independent ethics] ed. Kazimierz Krajewski, *Dziela zebrane 2*, [Collected works 2] (Lublin: TN KUL oraz Instytut Jana Pawła II KUL, 2012), 170.

⁵¹ *The Lexicon of Classical Philosophy* states that “a principle is that on which something depends in some way or in which it is virtually contained,” *Leksykon filozofii klasycznej* [The lexicon of classical philosophy], ed. Józef Herbut (Lublin: TN KUL, 1997), 549.

⁵² Antoni Stępień, “Aktualne spory o naturę i rolę poznania,” [Current disputes about the nature and role of cognition] in *Studia i szkice filozoficzne* [Philosophical studies and sketches], część I [part I] (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1999), 110–111.

about something.⁵³ The epistemological subject is “separated” from a specific human individual and is characterized solely by the content of a series of cognitive experiences, by direct data revealing themselves in the course of consciousness. This does not imply that this subject is some intellectual construct. It is a real person in its fundamental role of being a knowing subject. If all our cognition is determined by individual emotions and cultural influences, there cannot be any objective knowledge that is intersubjectively accessible. Without acknowledging that the subject, in their act of cognition, can distance themselves from everything that individually characterizes them, we are unable to formulate the conditions for the truth of any propositions. In order to preserve the possibility of objective knowledge, we must refer to the direct data that appear in the consciousness of the knowing subject. Mieczysław Krąpiec emphasizes that the “direct data of our consciousness are something primary and unquestionable in the process of cognition, and [...] any interpretations are something secondary to direct data.”⁵⁴

Such a basic data of consciousness is the general content extracted from particulars. The mind captures the primary differentiations within our cognitive field, also in the realm of morality. Thanks to the mind, we

⁵³ Cognition consists in acquiring knowledge: about the object, about its essence, about its properties, about the relationships it has with other objects, etc. This understanding of cognition comes from Aristotle, for whom cognition consists in the intentional (conscious) takeover of form by the mind. It is worth noting that Aristotle’s theory, from which the word theory derives, meant primarily cognitive insight, which means that it refers to the above understanding of cognition. Getting to know the so-called theoretical knowledge, i.e., cognition in order to know, has at its source a view of reality. See A. Maryniarczyk, “Metafizyka Arystotelesa – uniwersalny paradygmat filozofii,” [Aristotle’s metaphysics—a universal paradigm of philosophy] in *O metafizyce Arystotelesa* [On Aristotle’s metaphysics], ed. A. Maryniarczyk, N. Kunat, Z. Pańpuch (Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, 2017), 108–109.

⁵⁴ M. Krąpiec, *Człowiek i prawo naturalne* [Man and natural law] (Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, 2009), 162.

distinguish one action from another, what is essential from what is not in a given situation. Through the mind, we can intellectually grasp the general content of an action, which determines the type of action we are dealing with. This enables us to classify actions into specific classes and distinguish them from others. The intellectually apprehended content of an action allows us to classify it. Alongside the understanding of the object of action (the content of the action), we recognize its connection to a fundamental moral evaluation.⁵⁵ The principle is precisely an expression of the relationship, the regularity that exists between a given type of action and its fundamental moral assessment. Just as certain laws of logic, e.g., the law of non-contradiction, are not arbitrarily established by our mind, moral principles are a result of our mode of cognition, especially our ability to grasp the general, the ability for abstract thinking.

It seems that the general understanding of principles is accomplished both through abstraction by generalization and by elimination.⁵⁶ Recall that eliminating abstraction involves extracting general content from the concrete. The mind focuses on one feature of the object, then intentionally isolates it, separates it from its surroundings, and then that characteristic ceases to be individual. The feature loses its individuality along with its concreteness, and it gains a general nature, that is, it can be applied to many cases.⁵⁷ The “extraction” of

⁵⁵ Robert Spaemann writes: “If human acts are a kind of language, i.e., if they are to be regarded as human acts at all, they must have some kind of general nature which can be evaluated.” Robert Spaemann, “Czyn a piękne życie. O pojęciu natury czynu,” [The Act and Good Life. On the Concept of the Nature of the Act] trans. Jarosław Merecki, *Ethos* [Ethos], 1–2, no. 33–34 (1996), 39.

⁵⁶ Keyword *abstraction* in *Leksykon filozofii klasycznej* [The lexicon of classical philosophy], 19.

⁵⁷ Antoni Stępień, “Istnienie (czegoś) a pojęcie i sąd,” [The existence of (something) and the concept and judgment] in *Studia i szkice filozoficzne* [Philosophical studies and sketches], część I [part I] (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1999), 181.

content from individual objects by the mind causes the extracted content to become general, applicable to many individual cases. For example, the feature of injustice in an action that unjustly takes someone's life, abstracted from a specific case, can later be applied to many cases. Abstraction by generalization, on the other hand, involves recognizing certain common features that are the same in many objects or situations. Under certain aspects, objects or situations are identical. Bringing out this aspect or regard is what abstraction is. What is common is treated as content in itself, and then it becomes general. For example, we recognize that murder, despite situational differences, has certain common characteristics that make it murder. Abstraction does not threaten the sensibility or intelligibility of our moral judgments.⁵⁸ On the contrary, through abstraction, we discover meanings without which what is being known would lack shape and escape intellectual understanding.

Both the manifestation of direct data in the subject's consciousness and the nature of the epistemological subject itself allow for the elimination not only of subjectivity in the cognition of moral principles, but also of apriorism that denies the legitimacy of direct data. The epistemological subject is a guarantee of objectivity and intersubjectivity in the understanding of moral principles, that is, what is legitimate for him is also legitimate for any rational subject. Only such an understanding of the subject serves as an assurance that the principles apprehended have a rational and objective character. The category of epistemological subject and the category of direct data of consciousness also enable the rejection of the idea of constructing moral principles. When directly perceiving (intuitively) moral facts, our consciousness does not register the operation of constructing (creating) cognitive content.

⁵⁸ Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice: A Reconstructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 68.

The meaning of what we define as a moral principle is constituted within our consciousness and is not created by us. Behind constructivism lies the understanding of cognition as constructing possibilities rather than as a cognitive relation between an external object and our consciousness. The moral principle as the cognitive product derives its legitimacy from cognitive activity (perceiving moral reality). The cognitive product is a consequence of the cognitive activity, not a mental construction.⁵⁹

In cognitive activity, the mind spontaneously grasps the general content in the concrete. If a generally knowing mind abstracts from specific characteristics, and the moral evaluation of a specific situation requires considering all morally relevant features (to the extent possible), then knowledge using principles only provides a basic, not final, moral evaluation. It is hard not to agree with the opponents of theoretical approaches that principles should be supplemented with sensitive perception of the particular characteristics of a given situation. Supporters of principle ethics have often emphasized the importance of a moral education that allows the individual to develop the ability to perceive what is important. The necessity of moral sensitivity to what is essential in a given situation is undoubtedly necessary to formulate the correct moral judgment. It is worth noting that this type of sensitivity cannot be reduced to a purely psychological dimension because it contains a cognitive element. Specific moral judgments based on sensitive perception determine the validity of an action, not just its compatibility with a specific principle. According to Martha Nussbaum, the correctness of principles is determined by their consis-

⁵⁹ Antoni Stępień, "Relacja czynność – wytwór a przedmiot teorii poznania," [The relation between activity and product and the object of the theory of knowledge] in *Studia i szkice filozoficzne* [Philosophical studies and sketches], część I [part I] (Lublin Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1999), 105–106.

tency with specific judgments.⁶⁰ As previously noted, the correctness of principles is verified by our moral intuitions, what is perceived in the concrete. It is easy to agree with Nussbaum that principles, describing specific judgments, cannot in advance determine normatively their validity.⁶¹ However, this does not change the fact that specific judgments would be incomprehensible without principles.

The cognition of moral situations, carrying with them some elementary understanding, is also open to further deepening. Understanding is gradable. This follows from the “gradability of the general.” A given understanding can be more or less general, hence moral principles can be more or less general. The principle of justice is more general than the principle of fair payment for work. Thus, ethical theory divides principles into general and particular principles. Particular principles, even though specific, do not cease to be general.

It should be noted that in moral cognition, at the very beginning, the basic principle of practical reason is revealed, which states that one should do good and avoid evil.⁶² This principle is also known as the principle of *synderesis* (presumption).⁶³ It plays a fundamental role in moral reasoning (not only, but especially in classical ethics), constituting the foundation of the rationality of moral evaluation and norm-set-

⁶⁰ Martha Nussbaum, “The Discernment of Perception,” in *Love’s Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 67.

⁶¹ Nussbaum, “The Discernment of Perception,” 68.

⁶² Krąpiec, *Człowiek i prawo naturalne* [Man and natural law], 244 and 254. See also Ślipko, *Zarys etyki ogólnej* [Outline of general ethics], 287 and Jacques Maritain, “Prawo naturalne i prawo moralne,” [Moral principles of action: man’s ethical imperative] in *Pisma filozoficzne* [Philosophical writings], trans. Janina Fenrychowa (Kraków: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, 1988), 249–258.

⁶³ Krąpiec, *Człowiek i prawo naturalne* [Man and natural law], 253. Also, Jacek Woroniecki, *Katolicka etyka wychowawcza* [Catholic educational ethics], vol. I (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1986), 215.

ting. It has not only the most general character, but is also a formal principle, because it does not specify what constitutes the good to be done and the evil to be avoided.⁶⁴ No specific norm follows directly from this principle, but that is not its purpose.⁶⁵ This principle is a necessary logical component of any norm, because without recognizing that one should do good, it is impossible to formulate any norm. Without the principle of synderesis, a person would not be capable of formulating any obligation. When I formulate a moral judgment, I always apply the principle “do good and avoid evil” to the individual case. Thus, the principle of synderesis is a necessary condition for the rationality of a moral norm. The basis of understanding any norm is, after all, distinguishing between good and evil. Therefore, this principle constitutes the rational foundation of the entire practical-moral order. It expresses the truth that the categories of moral good and evil are necessarily embedded in human thinking about actions.

The principle of synderesis connects the theoretical order with the practical one in such a way that it applies the recognized truth about moral good and evil to the realm of action.⁶⁶ Even such a formal principle as the principle of synderesis, however, allows us to discover the

⁶⁴ Tadeusz Ślipko includes it in the *principia communissima*. Ślipko, *Zarys etyki ogólnej* [Outline of general ethics], 299.

⁶⁵ Krąpiec writes that “apart from the general formulation »good should be done«, there are no first principles of natural law formulated in detail and positively, which would define good more. There are only certain »signposts«, i.e., general directions of the rational nature of man through the so-called. primary inclinations.” Norms resulting from natural law are created by referring to the natural inclinations of human nature. These norms do not result deductively from natural law but are created, according to Krąpiec, by its particularizations. These particularizations are analogous in nature. Krąpiec, *Człowiek i prawo naturalne* [Man and natural law], 252–254.

⁶⁶ Karol Wojtyła, *Człowiek w polu odpowiedzialności* [Man in the field of responsibility] (Instytut Jana Pawła II KUL oraz Ośrodek Dokumentacji Pontyfikatu Fundacji Jana Pawła II, Rzym–Lublin 1991), 74.

sources of moral rationality, which are the distinction between good and evil, and the ability to grasp their imperative character. Furthermore, it assumes that the subject is not only capable of distinguishing between good and evil, but also of performing morally good actions and avoiding morally evil ones. A similar role to the principle of *synderesis* is played in the theoretical order by the principle of non-contradiction. From the principle of non-contradiction (“It is not true that both *p* and not *p*”) does not follow any meaningful sentence, but without respecting it, it is impossible to formulate any sentence. Every sentence is a linguistic formulation of some cognitive result. In every sentence, I either assert something or deny something; in every sentence, I distinguish between cognition and not cognition. If I say a sentence, I assume a difference between speaking and not speaking, and thus implicitly respect the above principle. Just as the foundation of the moral order distinguishes between good and evil, so the foundation of the theoretical order distinguishes between truth and falsehood.

THE ROLE OF PRINCIPLES IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Recall that principles play a significant role in moral practice by revealing the morally relevant features of actions in particular situations. This enables us to grasp the moral status of the situation we are in. Principles aid us in making decisions by highlighting the features of a situation that should be considered in evaluating a particular action. They prevent us from overlooking what is morally important when analyzing a situation. Moreover, principles help us to avoid being driven solely by self-interest, as we tend to perceive our situation as exceptional and overestimate its individual character.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Raz, “The Truth in Particularism,” 77.

Principles, by pointing out what is relevant in a situation, simplify and expedite its analysis. We do not have to reflect in a vacuum; we start with some knowledge. We do not need to re-recognize a situation we have already recognized. Although this knowledge is general, it provides us with essential information about the moral character of the situation, its key elements, and its context. This is the utility of moral principles. Their existence greatly simplifies moral reflection.

By knowing the principles and recognizing similarities in different situations, we can perceive what is dissimilar – the unique. Uniqueness or dissimilarity reveals itself against the background of the known, the similar. After all, the essential feature of cognition is recognizing similarities and differences. Principles are not schematic; they merely uncover certain fundamental moral judgments connected with certain rather than other features of actions. Abstract principles are a form of knowledge about many particular situations. It could be said that principles function as descriptions, as an attempt to synthetically capture what has been deemed important in analogous cases. Principles allow us to accumulate knowledge and anticipate future situations.

Though principles are general and abstract, they are not empty. They contain guidelines based on which we can attempt to address a particular moral situation. Principles are general, but contrary to what opponents of moral theory claim, their strength lies precisely in this fact. Due to their generality, they are operative, and they can be adapted to different situations. The subject specifies the principle itself to make it applicable. The generality of principles, rather than providing clear answers, compels the subject to engage in intellectual reflection and thus enables what virtue ethicists emphasize: moral development. Moral principles are therefore not rigid; they leave room for interpretation, clarification, and specification.

We do not know the exact scope of a principle. We cannot determine it in advance; some specification of principle is needed. Specification is the narrowing of indeterminate general moral principles into more pre-

cisely defined norms guiding our actions.⁶⁸ The specification of a principle indicates under what conditions we can apply the principle. It considers the purpose of the action, its subject, and its recipient. Specifying the principles in a particular context means that the accusation formulated by anti-theoreticians about the incompatibility of moral principles and norms that we follow in our practice loses its justification. The norms used in our practice are nothing more than appropriate, defined moral principles. It is important to note that the specification of the moral principle, which Henry Richardson especially paid attention to, is not the work of an arbitrary decision, but is carried out according to the standard of rationality.⁶⁹ The standard of rationality sets the framework within which a principle can be specified. It reveals the logical relationships between various norms and whether a given specification is consistent with them. A norm resulting from specification must, therefore, be coherent with other norms, making it comprehensible to other members of the community. If a norm fails to meet the criterion of consistency with other norms, it means that it is unjustifiable, and actions based on such a norm are morally wrong. Although principles demand specification, they are resistant to overinterpretation. Although they are general, they exclude certain forms of actions.

For many situations, principles are sufficient to provide answers about what we should do. Many actions are governed by a single norm. However, in more complex situations, even though we adhere to the same principles, we may find different solutions for particular issues. Even the specification of a principle may not be enough to resolve a problem.⁷⁰ To

⁶⁸ Henry Richardson, "Specifying Norms as a way to resolve concrete ethical problems," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 19 (4), (1990), 305.

⁶⁹ Richardson, "Specifying Norms," 305.

⁷⁰ Richardson believed that such a specification solves the moral problems, but it seems it is not so simple. There is still the problem of deciding which standards from our coherent system we will give priority to in the final verdict.

illustrate the insufficiency of principles themselves, let's consider the moral evaluation of abortion in a specific case. A teenage girl who is not mature enough to care for a child becomes pregnant. Can abortion be justified in such a situation? Although we may recognize the validity of the principle "do not kill," the assessment of the action in this case is not self-evident and requires theoretical considerations. First, we are dealing with a human embryo, so we must determine its ontological status. This determination is based on the adopted concept of a human person. Second, we must determine the value of human life. Third, we need some interpretation of the norm "Do not kill." Does it have an absolute or conditional character? Finally, what is the procedure for justifying the legitimacy of the action?⁷¹ All these points cannot be resolved solely based on the general principle prohibiting killing.

Alongside anthropological and even metaphysical considerations, we know from experience that sometimes the right action involves breaking a given principle. For example, to save a higher good, a minor lie can be justified.⁷² Does the principle itself provide us with knowledge of when it can be broken? It seems not. Principles do not account for exceptional circumstances in which they would not be a good guide.⁷³ Principles do not directly indicate when they are applic-

⁷¹ An example and points of analysis are given after: Barbara Chyrowicz, *O sytuacjach bez wyjścia w etyce: ich natura, rodzaje i sposoby rozstrzygnięcia* [About the "no choice" situations in ethics. Moral dilemmas, their nature, kinds and the ways of resolution] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2008), 397.

⁷² Absolute rules set a straight moral judgment and can never be broken. By principles I mean *pro tanto* principles, their role in formulating a moral verdict. The point is that moral traits are immutable, and this immutability is captured by the rules, not that this trait absolutely determines the verdict.

⁷³ Martha Nussbaum, "Why Practice Needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Principle, and Bad Behaviour," in *Moral Particularism*, ed. Brad Hooker and Margaret O. Little (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 2000), 238.

able or when they should be violated. However, this is not a valid criticism of principles; it simply points out their limitations. Despite some weaknesses, principles are essential in our moral practice. Only in relation to them can we seek what “completes” them.

Principles, without self-explanation, require an indication of the validity of their foundations. The basis for the validity of the principles depends on the adopted ethical theory. It is thanks to the theory that we understand why and how principles operate. For instance, in rule utilitarianism, the principle of utility explains the importance of the validity of rules. In Kant’s doctrine, the categorical imperative justifies the adoption of certain moral maxims. In personalistic ethics, such a principle is the principle of respect for personal dignity. In other words, principles need their grounding, and this grounding is provided by theory. Having the knowledge provided by ethical theory, we are able to identify new elements in a situation that make it unique and ultimately argue for acting in accordance with or contrary to the adopted principle. The explanatory insufficiency of principles prompts the adoption of a moral theory. It is the theory that identifies various elements constituting a moral situation and arranges them. The task of a theory is also to find the appropriate place for both important perspectives in moral reflection: the first-person and the third-person perspectives. The determination of which perspective takes precedence depends on specific theoretical resolutions.

It must be conceded that critics of principle ethics are right that we cannot establish a finite set of principles based on which we will be able to encompass the whole of moral reality.⁷⁴ Defenders of theory ethics do not necessarily claim that all morality is codifiable; the point

⁷⁴ Garrett Cullity and Richard Holton, “Principles and Particularism. Particularism and Moral Theory.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplemental Volume 76, (2002), 193.

is that at least the nature, the content of an action, is partially codifiable. Therefore, while some aspects of moral reality may not be codifiable, the nature and content of actions are at least partially codifiable. As we previously mentioned, it is precisely this content that primarily determines the affiliation of an action to a particular class and the basic characteristics determining its correctness. That is the fundamental aim of principle-based ethics: to provide a criterion for evaluating actions, not a vision of a fulfilled moral life.

Conclusion

The criticism of moral principles presented by anti-theorists raises numerous doubts. Principles are necessary for maintaining the rationality of our judgments. First and foremost, the rejection of the principle of supervenience, which involves the relationship between descriptive elements of a moral situation and its moral assessment, undermines the possibility of justifying our moral judgments. We are not able to competently use moral concepts and justify our evaluations towards other members of the community. Confirmation of the indispensability of principles for making moral judgments lies in the natural way we apprehend moral situations. The principles themselves reveal specific regularities discerned in particular. Thus, the ability to grasp a principle ultimately enables, contrary to what anti-theorists proclaim, the understanding of a particular situation. The principles, as a result of the ability to abstract, become general, and thus can be applied to many cases. Although they are general, their source is the insight of the subject into a particular situation. This insight is carried out by the knowing subject, which we have termed epistemological. This subject draws all cognitive information from direct data manifesting in its consciousness, hence it can guarantee the rationality and intersubjectivity of our moral knowledge.

The fact that principles are necessary does not mean that we only formulate the moral assessment of a specific action based on them. Principles, one could say, constitute a necessary but insufficient condition for formulating a correct moral assessment. They demand supplementation by the sensitive perception of the subject, as well as by grounding moral thinking within a moral theory framework. It is the moral theory, not just the principles themselves, that not only justifies moral judgments, but also provides tools for resolving moral problems. The ethics of principles is indispensable; however, the challenge lies in formulating such an ethics.



Moral Principles: Criticism and Defense SUMMARY

The main purpose of this essay is to defend moral principles in the light of their critique by advocates of anti-theory in ethics. Moral principles, according to critics, cannot realize the main aim of principle-based ethics, which is providing a decision procedure. Abstract, general character of rules cannot correctly recognize an action's moral value. The relation between normative and descriptive cannot be captured by principles. The above arguments were critically analyzed. For our moral judgments to remain rational and justifiable, they must assume the necessary relationship between what is non-moral (descriptive) and what is normative. Without that, moral evaluation would be arbitrary. Attention was drawn to the fact that rules are the result of the general (abstract) nature of human cognition, which takes place in particular situations. The principles

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themselves are revealed as specific regularities discerned in particular instances. The limited usefulness of principles requires the development of a moral theory to complement their deficiencies.

Keywords: principle-based ethics, moral principles, decision procedure, anti-theory, supervenience, abstraction, natural cognition, consciousness

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