

Missing the target? Dancy's understanding of moral principles

Abstract

Whether one thinks that morality can, should or needs to be principle-based obviously depends crucially on one's understanding of moral principles. It is therefore astonishing that both opponents and proponents of principle-based ethics – so called moral particularists and generalists – have often left their understanding of moral principles rather vague. This paper discusses Jonathan Dancy's understanding of moral principles. Since Dancy is the main current defender of moral particularism it is important to determine whether his characterisation of moral principles is one which moral generalists want to, or have to, accept. In this paper I argue that generalists neither need, nor should, accept Dancy's notion of moral principles. I show that Dancy's understanding of moral principles fails to do justice to a number of prominent examples of traditional principle-based ethics as well as some recent generalist accounts. Since it is Dancy's declared aim to provide an argument against the whole tradition of principle-based morality, this is fatal for his project. Due to Dancy's narrow understanding of moral principles his particularist critique is, contrary to his own claim, of a rather limited scope and can therefore be said to be missing its target.