Moral particularism positions itself against the generalist view that if a consideration counts as a reason for doing something in one context, it counts as a reason in all contexts. Particularists don’t doubt that the consideration might be generalizable across a number of contexts, but they deny that there is any regular, lawlike way of codifying the moral landscape. Another way to say this is that the moral “valence” of a consideration “depends irreducibly on the context in which it appears,” as Maggie Little puts it. Pain is bad—well, except when lets you know that your hair is on fire. Pleasure always counts as a reason for favoring an action—well, except when it’s the sadist’s delight in her victim’s agony, where her pleasure is precisely part of what’s wrong with what she is doing.

In this seminar we’ll explore a range of particularist positions, from those that depart only slightly from generalism to those that depart quite radically indeed. Some particularists think it’s only nonmoral considerations whose valence can’t be counted on not to shift from context to context, as in our pleasure and pain examples, but that moral considerations, such as whether an action is just or kind or treacherous, retain their reason-giving force invariantly. Other particularists think that even moral considerations can switch valence depending upon the context in which they appear. We’ll examine these positions critically, with the help of some philosophers who are skeptical of moral particularism.

Students will be asked to give two seminar presentations during the term. These should be written papers, about 5 double-spaced pages long, in which you provide a critical summary of the reading you’ve signed up for. The papers should be e-mailed to me no later than 5:00 pm on the Monday preceding the meeting at which you present the paper. Each paper counts toward 25 percent of your grade. You may use either one as the basis for your final essay, which is to be written as an APA Colloquium paper (a sustained, original argument of no more than 3,000 words in which you position yourself with respect to some view in the particularist literature). The final paper counts toward 50 percent of your grade, and is due in my office by 2 May.

Your presence at seminar meetings is, of course, important. Please let me know in advance, if possible, if you find you can’t attend a session.
Schedule

Jan. 8  Getting organized
Jan. 22  Dancy, ch. 1
Jan. 29  Dancy, ch. 2
Feb. 5  Dancy, ch. 3
Feb 12  Dancy, chs. 4 and 5
Feb. 19  Dancy, chs. 6 and 7
Feb. 26  J. Nelson leads seminar. Dancy, ch. 8
Mar. 12  Dancy, ch. 10
Mar. 19  Dancy, ch. 12
Mar. 26  SEMINAR DOES NOT MEET
Apr. 2  Hooker, “Moral Particularism: Wrong and Bad”
Apr. 9  Jackson et al., “Ethical Particularism and Patterns”
Apr. 16  McNaughton and Rawling, “Unprincipled Ethics”
Apr. 23  Little, “Moral Generalities Revisited”