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Commentary on Jim Gough and Mano Daniel: “Solitarist Thinking and Fragmentary Logic”

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The authors think that a form of logical reasoning they call particularist logic is the best to accommodate what they call the non-solitarist version of multiculturalism. An argument employing particularist logic resembles conductive reasoning in that its premises lead us to the conclusion “by giving us some particular reasons – in this context, under these covering conditions – to accept the conclusion”. The authors give an example in which some people accept premise P1, other people accept premise P2, and still others accept premise P3. The individuals who accept P1 use it to support conclusion C.

However, while other people accept P2 as support for C, they do not accept P1 as support for C. Still others accept P3 but not P1 or P2 as support for C. The reasons in support of the conclusion are separate from each other but what holds them all together converging on the same conclusion is the acceptance and adherence to the Principle of Charity and the Principle of Communal Resolution, or the need to reach a practical resolution or conclusion.

COMMENTS

(1) The authors regard their example as illustrating an argument employing particularist logic. But note that the argument isn't accepted by the collection of individuals who supply its premises, for none of them accepts all of its premises as support for the conclusion; rather each of them accepts at most one of its premises as support for the conclusion. For the same reason, the argument isn't *made* by any of the individuals who supply its premises, or by all of them. It's simply a construct that integrates into a convergent pattern the different reasons that different individuals, or different groups of individuals, have for accepting the same conclusion.

(2) In the example, some people don't accept P1 as support for conclusion C. This could mean simply that P1 isn't their reason for C – their reason for C is P2 or P3. And this may be what the authors mean in saying that some people in the example don't accept P1 as support for C. But another possibility is that these people think that P1 doesn't support C. This is an interesting possibility to consider, for then the situation isn't simply that the people in the example have different reasons for C, but that they have a logical disagreement with one another: some think P1 supports C, but others think it doesn't. What precisely is at issue here depends on how the concept of support is understood. Support requires favourable relevance: statement A supports statement B only if it is

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favourably relevant to B – that is, only if its truth counts in favour of the truth of B. On some accounts, support also requires truth: statement A supports statement B only if A is true and favourably relevant to B.

In the authors' example, P1 is the statement that “[h]uman beings have a *natural ethical obligation* to protect species in the natural world”, and C is the statement that “[*it is important for human beings to protect endangered species in the natural environment*”]. Suppose that some person, X, in the authors' example doesn't accept P1 as support for C because he doesn't accept P1 – he thinks P1 is false. By contrast, Y, who accepts P1 as support for C, thinks P1 is true. Y might try to persuade X that P1 is true, but he might not succeed: X might refuse to accept that human beings have any natural ethical obligations, and stick to his view that P1 is false. In this event, and if support requires truth, as X thinks it does, then the disagreement between X and Y as to whether P1 supports C will not be resolvable.

But suppose that X doesn't accept P1 as support for C not because he thinks P1 is false but because he thinks P1 isn't favourably relevant to C. By contrast, Y thinks P1 is favourably relevant to C. *This* disagreement between X and Y would appear to admit of resolution. For it is obviously true that *if*, as P1 says, human beings have a natural ethical obligation to protect species in the natural world, this counts at least to some degree in favour of the view that it is important for human beings to protect endangered species in the natural environment. The underlying assumption on which this relevance assessment depends could be stated, weakly, as follows: if human beings have any natural ethical obligations, then, other things being equal, it is important for them to act on those obligations. It is at least possible, and perhaps very likely, that X, who began by thinking that P1 isn't favourably relevant to C, would on reflection admit the truth of this assumption, and so agree with Y that P1 is favourably relevant to C. And if favourable relevance is sufficient as well as necessary for support, and if X accepts that this is so, then he can be brought to agree with Y that P1 supports C. On these conditions, then, their initial disagreement is resolvable.

(3) As noted above, the authors say, with reference to their example, that the reasons in support of the conclusion are separate from each other but what holds them all together converging on the same conclusion is “the acceptance and adherence to the Principle of Charity and the Principle of Communal Resolution, or the need to reach a practical resolution or conclusion.” But this doesn't seem the right way to characterize the example. The individuals in the example are not brought to accept C by the separate reasons given for C in their dialogue with one another; this can't be what happens because they don't accept one another's reasons as support for the conclusion – they only accept their own reason as support for it. But then the conclusion must be seen as one they accept antecedently. So the example is not one in which there is a need to reach a practical resolution or a conclusion. Similarly, since the example isn't an attempt to reach a resolution, the Principle of Communal Resolution doesn't apply to it. Neither does the Principle of Charity as characterized by the authors, for so characterized that principle obligates practitioners of particularist logic “to accept ... an attempt to reach a position based on fairness and respect for the views of others with whom one does not necessarily agree”; again, however, the example is not a case of reaching a position, since the conclusion has already been reached. But if the example doesn't illustrate the Principles

of Charity and Communal Resolution, then it doesn't illustrate particularist logic; for the authors say that the practitioners of particularist logic adhere to both of these principles. They also say that "[i]n particularist logic, reasoning and negotiation operate together". But there is no negotiation in their example, and this is a further reason to say that the example does not illustrate particularist logic.

What the authors need in order to illustrate particularist logic is an example in which a conclusion not antecedently accepted by the parties concerned is reached by them through reasoning and negotiation governed by the Principles of Charity and Conflict Resolution. But could this happen in the absence of one or more premises that all the parties accept as (direct or indirect) support for the conclusion eventually reached? I don't see how it could. But the authors might not say that it could; they might say that the process of reasoning and negotiation that the parties engage in must yield mutual acceptance of one or more premises if it is to result in mutual acceptance of a conclusion.

(4) I want finally to consider the authors' point that particularist logic is governed by a principle requiring respect for the views of others with whom one doesn't necessarily agree. Suppose it is said of a certain group of children that they shouldn't be permitted to attend school, the reason being that they are girls. The underlying assumption is that girls shouldn't be permitted to have an education. Am I required to respect this view? Are you? Surely not. But we can readily imagine a case in which there was need for disagreeing groups in a multicultural society "to reach a practical resolution or conclusion" on the question of whether all children should be required to attend school. And this would seem to be a case of the sort that particularist logic is meant to handle. But if as applied to this case particularist logic requires respect for the view that girls should be denied an education (assuming this view to be held on one side of the discussion), this is a damaging objection to it.

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