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Failings of Strong Moral Particularism

Timothy Grainger Mr
Carleton University

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Jonathan Dancy has without a doubt raised important meta-ethical issues with traditional principle based ethical system, but he has also over stepped and taken up a position that he cannot defend. On one hand Dancy creates a strong argument for the need of context to play a role in ethical decision making and on the other hand he argues against the ability for principles to have any justified role in moral decision making. This paper will discuss the issues facing Dancy's extreme rejection of principle, be it his utter rejection of moral principle or simply his rejection that any moral principle can ever be justified, and argue that such a stance is both unproductive and incoherent.

Before attempting to dismantle Dancy's position it is important to see why he should not be discounted altogether. Dancy's particularism is motivated through two distinct paths; the idea that there is need for contextual sensitivity in ethical matters, and a belief that reasons are always holistic in nature. A need for contextual sensitivity in a broad sense of the term is a dedication to the understanding of the particulars of a situation being necessary for understanding or undertaking right action in that situation, and that these factors must directly influence the decision making process. This emphasis on contextual sensitivity I think is incredibly important. Yet this in itself is far from a radical stance, utilitarians can share a need for paying attention to particulars as do care theorists and arguably virtue ethicists as well, not to say that either will always do it well. These theories will in some way require that theorists use information from particular situations to explain what right action is in that case, and others such as relational theory will explicitly require it. Right action might take a very different course depending on the situation. The strong particularist differs from these others by saying that not only does the

situation change what you should do, it also changes the criterion for deciding what to do, and moreover there is no defined linguistic structure that can fully describe how this process works. They reject that any meaningful action guiding generalization about morality is possible.

In order to cash out the differences in Dancy's and less extreme particularist approaches I will borrow a distinction from David McNaughton's and Piers Rawlings' paper *Unprincipled Ethics.* They describe particularism as being able to be broken down into two variants of particularism: Valence Particularism and Verdict Particularism. Verdict particularism holds that "...a correct moral verdict can only be reached by paying close attention to the individual case-to what differentiates it from other cases as much as what it has in common with them." (2000 256) McNaughton and Rawlings go on to describe verdict particularism as operating from principles but requiring a close inspection of particular situations in order to apply the principles correctly. In this way verdict particularism incorporates contextual sensitivity with some adherence to moral principle.

This is contrasted with valence particularism which simply rejects the existence of any moral principles at all rather than their sufficiency. The valence particularist agrees that we must look at the particular situation closely and be attuned to its particular moral salience but they argue that this cannot be done by referencing general moral principles. Every moral situation is unique and cannot be separated from its own moral salience to inform any other situation. It is described as valence particularism as the reasons to act one way or another shift between cases, where in verdict particularism the background reasons for acting do not shift, but the verdicts of those reasons in each particular situation do. In valence particularism makes the claim "that there are no weak principles (that is, there are no properties, apart from the thin moral properties right, wrong, ect., that have universally and counterfactually invariant valence)." (2000 258)

This valence particularism is close to being trivially true. While ethical theories that hold principles which do not adapt at all to situations exist, extremist interpretations of religious texts or perhaps some less nuanced deontological approaches for example, most other uses of principles do shift depending on the situation. The difference principle from Rawls will find itself instantiated differently depending on conditions, as will maximization of utility within a utilitarian framework. This principles will still hold true (in theory) through different situations, thus precluding them from valence particularism, yet I see no reason why they would not be able to be classified under verdict particularism. That being said they may not be paying enough attention to certain details in each situation, or properly accounting for historical narratives, yet to say that are no contextually sensitive at all would be a gross mischaracterisation. So while they might not be focusing on the right things in situations or paying enough attention to context they do come to specialized conclusions for differing situations. The fact that so many theories could be roughly described under verdict particularism makes the distinction between it and universal theories of justice a less useful one.

Dancy in advocating for valence particularism is making a far more radical claim. Through his work he has provided examples meant to show that when we make moral decision we do not functionally use principles and that a moral person is not a person of principles. "...our account of the person on whom we can rely to make sound moral judgements is not very long. Such a person is someone who gets it right case by case. To be so consistently successful, we need to have a broad range of sensitivities, so that no relevant feature escapes us, and we do not mistake its relevance either. But that is all there is to say on the matter. To have the relevantly sensitivities just is to be able to get things right case by case." (1993 64) If then we have a moral actor deserving of praise we cannot attribute their success in moral actions to any

sort of principle that we can generalize to other situations. If they seem to be good moral agents by paying close attention to their relationships the valence particularist cannot say that it is through close attention to relationships that would make all agents good moral actors, rather that such attention seemed to be what was needed in that situation alone. Many other situations might call for the same focus but not all. In order for the valence particularist to truly be distinct from a principle based approach they must claim that there can be no generalization governing what makes morality right case by case at all.

This for Dancy is motivated by his belief that reasons, both moral and not, are holistic in nature such that they are context sensitive. From this holism of reasons he believes particularism necessarily follows. He points to everyday reasons for doing things and says that these will invariably be derived from the situations they come from. That everyday reasons vary from situation to situation as they are drawn from those situations is not contentious. Dancy takes this and argues that there is no reason to believe that moral reasons act in any way differently than everyday reasons. As reasons for acting one way or another vary depending on the moral situation there cannot be any moral principles that are generally true for every situation. Dancy expresses this in the following formulation:

> "1. What is a reason in one situation may not be the same reason in another; it may even change its polarity.
>
> 2. The way in which the reasons here present combine with each other is not necessarily determinable in any simply additive way.
>
> By analogy, then, our value-holism should look like this:
>
> 1. A feature or part may have one value in one context and a different or opposite value in another.
>
> 2. The value of a complex or whole is not necessarily identical with the sum of the values of its elemental parts." (2000 139)

While many parts of this seem to be not overly contentious we have to keep in mind what Dancy ultimately wants to prove. He does not want to simply say that reasons are generally holistic, he wants to say that reasons must be holistic, and as principles are ultimately reasons for action they too must be tied to particular situations. This would in Dancy's eyes make it impossible for principles to ever be universal and apply across all cases, thus negating the possibility of justifiable universal moral principles. For every possible moral principle, let us take, minimize suffering for example, there would be a situation where the principle would work in an opposite fashion, so there would be a possible scenario where creating suffering would be the morally right thing to do. While this seems somewhat difficult to swallow, Dancy believes the possibility that this can happen, no the inevitability that there exists some situation would flip this principle on its head, means that what was once seen as a principle is only a contingently applicable concept. The following is an example Dancy uses to describe the valence of reason.

 "Suppose I am trying to train myself into indifference towards a girl. I very much want to spend time with her. But I also want to not have this want, since she is permanently indifferent to me. It is better for me not to think of her at all. If I spend time with her it will make things worse for me rather than better-so long as I have not yet succeeded in training myself into indifference towards her. Once I am indifferent towards her, I can spend time with her without loss. In this situation, it seems, my desire to spend time with her might be a reason for me not to do so." (2000 133-134)

In this example Dancy is trying to show how the desire to spend time with this woman might be sometimes a reason to spend time with her in some situations and a reason not to in other situations. The example itself is somewhat convoluted by the fact he begins by saying he is trying to train himself into indifference, which seems to be an altogether different reason, yet we

can assume that this is because of the overarching reason that he wants to spend time with her. So we have the desire to spend time with this woman as a reason that Dancy is trying to show varying as a reason in different situations, on one hand counting for, and on another hand counting against. In order for this to be interesting to us the reason has to be somewhat equivalent to some sort of moral principle, Dancy seems to be attempting to show that the reasons that motivate him in this example are not different than moral reasons. For the sake of charity I will assume that such a step is not outrageous. In order to see what is happening here we have to look closer at the details of this thought experiment. Let us take desire to spend time with this woman in Dancy's example to be X and that Dancy actually spending time with the woman to be represented by Y. So to show that reasons vary in different situations Dancy has to show X as well as ~Y, so that one reason will vary in terms of the goal which it will push you towards. Here the reason he has to not spend time with her, ~Y, is motivated by the fact that after a bit of ~Y, you get Y. This seems problematic for Dancy, because he is trying to show that reasons will vary in how they will make you act. He needs for reason X to cause both Y in one situation, and ~Y in another. Yet the situation cannot simply change what is needed to do reach the goal, this would be verdict particularism. The reason itself must shift in what it makes you attempt to do for Dancy's holism of reason to hold weight.

Rodger Crisp believes that Dancy is mixing up ultimate reasons, and non-ultimate reasons. Ultimate reasons would be things like justice, or perhaps happiness, expansive concepts which motivate action. Non-ultimate reasons would be the reasons for action in particular instantiations of ultimate reasons. (2000 37) Crisp describes another of Dancy's examples where in one situation his having borrowed a book is a reason to return it, and in another the fact that he has borrowed the book is not a reason to return the book as it was stolen. Crisp points out that the

borrowing does not seem to be the ultimate reason, rather it is some conception of justice that governs both situations. To return to a past example, his wanting to spend time with the girl simply was not the ultimate reason guiding him. Rather it was the wish for a healthy reciprocated emotional relationship or something of the like. Crisp believes that all of Dancy's examples of moral valence fall to this same problem, and as such "…particularism about non-ultimate reasons [verdict particularism] will be accepted by all, while particularism about ultimate reasons is accepted by no one." (40)

Brad Hooker in his essay *Moral Particularism: Wrong and Bad* breaks Dancy's argument for the holism of reasons down into two fairly simple premises and finds the same problem with Dancy's use of reasons.

"P1 All good reasons for belief are holistic – i.e. context-dependent, particular

P2 If all good reasons for belief are holistic then all good reasons for action are too.

Thus all reasons for action are holistic (context-dependant, particular)." (2000 14)

Hooker begins by attacking premise one. He argues that if we were to look at the full specification of why we ground our beliefs will not be holistic in the sense that Dancy is presenting. Dancy gives the example of a person who sees red in one instance when looking at a thing, and then sees it as blue in another situation when they have taken some interesting perceptual changing drug. (2000 133) Here Dancy feels in one situation the fact that you see the thing is red is a reason to believe it is red but in the other the same seeing is not a reason to believe it is blue. So I see the thing is X colour is a belief that is context dependent. Hooker argues that it is possible that Dancy is misconstruing what the reasons for belief are and that the same reason does not in fact matter in one situation and not the other. Hooker thinks that seeing the red thing in an optimally not drug infused situation is a fully different reason as you only

believe it because of optimal conditions; those conditions are an inextricable part of the original reason. (2000 14) In this way Dancy does not have the same reason acting in contradictory way at all, as he is simply talking about two utterly distinct justifications for belief.

Dancy continues to focus on the wrong kind of reasons in other examples. He describes a situation where one is asked to rank ten paintings in the order in which you would want to own them. He then presents a second situation where you are given the money to buy one of the paintings, and then given the money to buy a second, and so on. (2000 146) Dancy argues that the orders might well be different in the two situations, as while you may have ranked them in the order you wanted them in the first situation, when you have the first six you might prefer to take the 8th on the list after that on the assumption you may not get all of them. You do not after all know you will get the money for the next painting until after you have bought the one in question. Dancy's target in this situation is rossian generalism, the concept that all moral values can be listed in a hierarchy and for every given situation that hierarchy would be able to tell you what mattered and how much. It would look something like 'X>Y iff Q < P ect.' The hierarchy and details would be huge literally beyond imagining, practically impossible to compile because it would contain ever possible contingency, yet not theoretically impossible the rossian generalist would argue.

Dancy means to show that the values of anything is always relative to the situation so such an apriori list of values is impossible. Yet that different situations yield different outputs is not disputed by rossian generalists, nor does it do anything to disprove the possibility of overarching moral principles. Dancy points out that in the different situations different rankings are possible, but he does nothing to show that the way in which the decision is made is itself shifting. As before he is looking at the wrong place for reasons, and for value. In this situation

you could well have a fixed principle for what paintings you want and yet get different results depending on how many paintings you already had and expected to get. That the value of the painting to you will change depending on how much wall space you have or the number of paintings you already have is not a contentious point. Dancy needs to show that the system you use to decide which paintings you want will change depending on the situation, not that the situation will affect which paintings you deem appropriate the system you are using.

Jackson, Pettit, and Smith provide an excellent example of how to interpret valence particularism's distinct approach to reasons and principles. They are not critiquing Dancy's holisms of reasons by arguing against why reasons operate holistically but rather the consequences of a strong particularist stance in itself.

"Consider the following raft of true conditionals connecting facts about particular heights with facts about who is taller:

If x is 180cm and y is 190cm, then x is shorter than y

If x is 185cm and y is 190cm, then x is shorter than y

If x is 180cm and y is 170cm, then x is not shorter than y, and so on.

There is an obvious pattern in the antecedents, and, once you have grasped it, you have grasped what it is for someone to be shorter than someone else." (2000 82)

Here it is clear that by looking at the different descriptions of height you can come to learn what being shorter is, and then take the features of a situation and point out which of a set of objects would be shortest. Jason, Pettit, and Smith point out that for a particularist if we made an analogous list that contained moral facts about the world like the one about height above, you could never grasp what it is to be moral. You would have a list of moral facts certainly, but there would be no pattern found within it that could allow you to extrapolate from that and judge another situation as moral not. If you could, then you could say that being moral extends beyond

taking action that is morally permissible to a reason for action that can be understood as a type of principle that would govern all sets. The fact that Dancy claims there is nothing more to acting morally than being properly attentive in particular situations means he accepts this stance.

Jackson, Pettit, and Smith argue that this is however far from satisfactory.

"Particularists cannot answer that what unites right action is *simply* the fact that we properly apply the predicate 'is right' to them. The problem with this answer can be variously put by saying that there is no such thing as bare predication, that predicates apply because of how things are, or that predication supervenes on nature. They might say that all that the right actions have in common is that they belong to the set of right actions. Grasp of the predicate 'is right' simply consists in a grasp of the various Di which constitutes that set. But this cannot be *all* that unites the class of right actions. There must be some commonality in the sense of a pattern that allows projection from some sufficiently large subset of the Di to new members. If there isn't, we finite creatures could not have grasped through a finite learning process (the only sort there is) the predicate 'is right'. So, there must be a pattern or commonality –in the weak sense operative in this paper of that which enables projection- uniting the set of right acts." (87)

Margaret Little argues however that this however misconstrues what a learning processes is. She argues that learning is done not by grasping principles, or by grasping regularities in non-moral features, but rather through a Wittgensteinian 'whirl of organism' which she describes as outstripping the conditions of learning. (2000 283) She is using this to show how we can grasp a conception of the predicate 'is right' without there being any binding rule enforcing what is right. This stems from Wittgenstein's conception of how we learn rules. What is right and wrong morally being what is learned in this situation, a binary ranking distributed across every possible moral situation. This seems less about learning a rule but learning a fixed designation for situations. Little agrees with Dancy that the moral does supervene on the non-moral such that

two situations that were identical non-moral features would also be identical morally, yet she believes that there is no pattern to how non-moral and moral features relate to each-other. And without this pattern there is no regularity in the non-moral to describe the moral. Little believes there is no description which can capture what being moral amounts to, but that leads me to question how and why she can even discuss moral rules as distinct from every other rule learned within our language games. Clearly she believes there is a significant difference between the moral and the non-moral, but if it is utterly uncodefiable it seems classifying all these facts learned in the moral language game as distinct from the other rules we learn in language games to be a move she cannot make.

Without the ability to describe a moral action as beyond something which gets morality right, it seems that to attempt to call a set of actions or state of affairs moral is simply doomed. If we had a friend who had somehow lived her life without encountering the idea of a boat we would be able to describe various things that would make that boat distinct from, say, a loaf of bread. We would be able to say more than you'll know it when you see it. We can describe a boat linguistically, we can differentiate them from not boats. Little and Dancy do think we can differentiate moral from non-moral situations, we simply cannot give a linguistic description of why they are different. So we can tell the difference between boats and not boats, but cannot for the life of us tell you why. Without a shared description there is no way for a discussion about morality to systematized and generalized at all. This makes it incredibly difficult to give theoretical backing for any real world project aimed at improving life on earth. The argument about principles in this way does not simply affect arm chair meta-ethics but how aid projects are developed, and how everything from wars, to heath care, to poverty initiatives are justified. In this if there is good reason not to reject principles, then we should work to create

good contextually sensitive principles that can be put to good use rather than writing papers like this one.

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