

Applications in the Theory of Practical Reasons: Particularism

I. Does Grounding Entail Necessitation?

Many authors in the grounding literature assume, without argument, the following to be true:

the necessitation principle: For any fact $[p]$ and any set of facts Γ , if $[p]$ is fully grounded in Γ , then, as a matter of necessity, whenever every fact in Γ obtains, $[p]$ also obtains.

In other words, these authors assume that the (full) grounding relation entails the necessitation relation.

Dancy denies this principle. Moreover, his denial of this principle forms the crux of his argument for a position known as *particularism*.

particularism (original formulation): There are no substantial, finite, exceptionless moral principles (or at least we should not expect there to be any).

particularism (formulation in later work): "...the possibility of moral thought and judgment does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles" (*Ethics w/o Principles*, p. 73).

In arguing for particularism, Dancy assumes what I elsewhere call the *generalized weighing model of morality*, according to which moral properties such as rightness and wrongness are grounded in the reasons for and against an action and its alternatives, which in turn are grounded in the non-normative properties of those actions. This gives us three levels of facts:

1. *the underlying level:* The facts about the non-normative properties of the actions available to a given agent in a given circumstance.
2. *the contributory level:* The facts about the reasons for and against performing each available action, which obtain *in virtue of* the facts at the underlying level.
3. *the overall level:* The facts about the rightness and wrongness of the available actions, which obtain *in virtue of* the facts at the contributory level.

Dancy's basic strategy is to argue that both *the connection between the underlying and contributory levels* and *the connection between the contributory and overall levels* are uncodifiable, and then to take this to establish particularism.

(Elsewhere I've argued that if both of these connections are uncodifiable, then Dancy is left without a coherent notion of a reason for action. Today I want to set aside that argument.)

Dancy's claim about the uncodifiability of the connection between the underlying and contributory levels partially rests on the following thesis:

holism about reasons for action: For every non-normative property of an action that grounds a reason for or against action in one possible circumstance, there is another possible circumstance in which that same property either grounds a reason of opposite valence or else provides no reason one way or the other.

It follows from this thesis (and the assumption that there exists at least one reason for action) that we have:

In circumstance C, [A's ϕ -ing has F] obtains and grounds [There is a reason *in favor of* A's ϕ -ing].

In circumstance C', [A's ϕ -ing has F] obtains and either grounds [There is a reason *against* A's ϕ -ing], or else neither grounds [There is a reason *in favor of* A's ϕ -ing] nor grounds [There is a reason *against* A's ϕ -ing].

That is, *holism about reasons for action* plus *the existence of reasons for action* entails the falsity of *the necessitation principle*.

II. Dancy's Argument from Cases for Holism

In his earlier work, Dancy tended to argue for holism about reasons for action by citing a host of examples allegedly supporting the view.

(Note: following Dancy, I am going to slide back and forth between talk of a fact *being* a reason for me to act in some way, and talk of a fact *grounding, providing, or giving* me a reason to act in that way.)

Some of Dancy's favorite examples:

- 1a. *Squishing Worms*: In many situations the fact that an action would bring you pleasure is *a reason in favor* of your doing it, but when Little Joe squishes worms for fun in the rain, the fact that doing so brings him pleasure is in fact *a reason against* his acting in this way (*Moral Reasons*, p. 56).
- 1b. *Satan's Pain*: In many situations the fact that an action would cause someone pain is *a reason against* your doing it, but if Satan is grieved (pained) by every right action, this is *no reason against* performing those actions (*Moral Reasons*, p. 61).
- 2a. *Stolen Book*: In many situations the fact that I borrowed a book from you gives me *a reason to* return it to you, but if you stole the book from the library, then the fact that I borrowed the book from you gives me *no reason at all* to return it to you (*Moral Reasons*, p. 60).
- 2b. *Under Duress*: In many situations the fact that I promised you to do something provides me with *a reason to* do that thing, but if the promise was given under duress, then the fact that I promised provides me with *no reason at all* to do what I promised to do (*Ethics w/o Principles*, pp. 38-40).
- 3a. *Repetition*: In some situations the fact that we've done an action in the past is *a reason in favor* of doing it again, but in other situations that fact is *a reason against* doing so again (*Moral Reasons*, p. 61).
- 3b. *Third Time*: In some situations the fact that I have already had two articles on the same general topic published in a journal is both *a reason in favor of* and *a reason against* the editor allowing a third paper of mine on that topic to be published in that journal (*Moral Reasons*, p. 62).

Three common strategies for resisting these examples:

- *strategy #1*: Deny (and explain away) Dancy's intuitions about a case.

For example, *hedonistic act-utilitarians* will deny Dancy's intuitions about (1a) and (1b).

Then they might explain our tendency to find these examples convincing by appealing to the distinction between *the evaluation of actions* and *the evaluation of agents* (a favorite utilitarian gambit).

- *strategy #2*: Insist that Dancy has only specified a *partial* ground for the reasons in question, and that the full ground gives rise to a reason of the same valence in every circumstance.

For example, someone might insist that the full ground in (2a) is [I borrowed from you a book *which you rightfully own*] and that the full ground in (2b) is [I *freely* promised you to ϕ].

- *strategy #3*: Appeal to a distinction between *basic* and *derivative* reasons, and insist that only the grounds of basic reasons give rise to a reason of the same valence in every circumstance.

A rough way of characterizing derivative reasons, if we take basic reasons as given:

[A's ϕ -ing has F] gives rise to a *derivative reason* for A to ϕ iff, for some G, (i) [A's ϕ -ing has F] grounds [A's ϕ -ing has G], and (ii) [A's ϕ -ing has G] gives rise to a *basic reason* for A to ϕ .

It is plausible to hold that the reasons in (3a) and (3b) are derivative.

Moreover, advocates of *desire-based theories of reasons for action* will hold that the reasons specified in all of these examples are only derivative reasons.

III. Beyond Favoring?

Strategy #1 is only plausible for a few of these cases, not for all of them.

Strategy #3 doesn't help with most of these cases unless we take "grounds" in clause (i) of our definition of derivative reasons to mean "partial grounds." But then this strategy is really piggybacking on strategy #2.

So strategy #2 is going to be where most of the action is at.

Some Dancyian terminology:

the resultant relation = the grounding relation

favorer = a fact that grounds (or is) a reason for action

disfavorer = a fact that grounds (or is) a reason against action

enabler = a fact that makes it the case that another fact is a reason for (or against) action

(Dancy often characterizes enablers in terms of counterfactuals, but he should know better: one of the main themes of his work is that it is a mistake to characterize favorers in terms of counterfactuals, and the same point applies to enablers.)

disabler = a fact that makes it the case that another fact is *not* a reason for (or against) action

intensifier = a fact that increases the strength of the reason provided by another fact

For example, maybe [I am the only other person around] is an intensifier of the reason provided by [She is in trouble and needs my help].

attenuator = a fact that decreases the strength of the reason provided by another fact

To this list we should add *flippers* (for cases in which what would have been a *reason for* is here a *reason against*), *enablers of enablers*, *disablers of enablers*, *enablers of intensifiers*, *intensifiers of intensifiers*, *attenuators of intensifiers*, etc.

A few of Dancy's arguments against strategy #2:

- *argument #1*: This strategy relies on an *agglomerative principle* according to which a favorer and an enabler can always be combined into a more complex favorer. But such a principle is false.

reply: No, strategy #2 does *not* rely on this principle. The advocate of strategy #2 *denies* that what Dancy sees as a favorer and an enabler really are a favorer and an enabler.
- *argument #2*: As we keep iterating this strategy to take into account (what Dancy see as) all of the enablers, enabler enablers, lack of disablers, etc., the *resultance base* for a given reason for action either will expand to become that reason's entire *supervenience base* (i.e. all of the non-normative properties of the action in question), or will be close enough to the entire supervenience base for the principles that we extract from that resultance base to be useless in deliberation.

reply: Is this really so? It's difficult to think of more than 3 or 4 candidates for an enabler, enabler enabler, etc. for any one of Dancy's cases.
- *argument #3*: Even if there is in fact a stable stopping point at which the resultance base ceases to expand all the way to the supervenience base, there is no reason to think that this must be so.

Note that this final argument doesn't really get us *holism about reasons for action*, as I formulated it earlier.

At most we get something like the following: the nature of reasons for action does not require that they all be invariant, even if as matter of fact a few of them are. ("Invariant reasons, should there be any, will be invariant not because they are reasons but because of their specific content" [*Ethics w/o Principles*, p. 77].)

This is one of the reasons why Dancy has shifted to his newer way of formulating particularism.

IV. Dancy's Argument from a General Holism

Since 2000, Dancy tends to argue for holism about reasons for action not by citing examples, but rather by insisting that holism about other sorts of reasons is universally agreed upon, and wouldn't it be weird if holism is true about one sort of reason but not true about another sort of reason?

Dancy's argument from a general holism:

- P1. Holism about reasons for belief is true.
- P2. Holism about ordinary (i.e. non-moral) reasons for action is true.
- P3. Holism about aesthetic reasons is true.
- P4. If holism about reasons for belief, ordinary reasons for action, and aesthetic reasons is true, then holism about moral reasons for action must also be true.
- C1. So, holism about moral reasons for action is true.
- C2. So, holism about all reasons for action is true.

Why believe P1?

Dancy insists that "nobody [has] ever thought of denying" holism about reasons for belief (*Ethics w/o Principles*, p. 74), and he cites a single example to illustrate how universally held a view it is:

Red/Blue Switch: In most situations the fact that I seem to see something red before me is *a reason in favor of* believing that there is something red before me. However, if I know that I've recently taken a drug which makes blue things look red and red things look blue, then the fact that I seem to see something red before me is actually *a reason against* believing that there is something red before me.

Why believe P2?

"...nobody has ever really debated the question of whether ordinary practical reasons are holistic or not" (ibid., p. 74).

Why believe P3?

"It is undisputed that a feature that in one place adds something of aesthetic value may in another make things worse; a given metaphor may be telling in one context and trite in another. Converted into talk of reasons, there are reasons to introduce that metaphor in the one case and reasons not to do so in the other" (ibid., p. 76)

Why believe P4?

"...it just seems incredible to me that the very logic of moral reasons should be so different from that of others in this sort of way" (ibid., p. 76).

Moreover, despite the title of his earlier book, Dancy is not even sure there is a distinctive class of "moral reasons": "...nobody knows how to distinguish moral from other reasons; every attempt has failed. How does that fit the suggestion that there is this deep difference between them?" (ibid.).

Let's return to P1. It's far from clear to me that holism about reasons for belief is universally agreed upon.

A few epistemologists might employ strategy #1 in reply to Red/Blue Switch and insist that when I know I've taken the drug, this gives me an extra *inferential* reason against believing there is something red before me that outweighs my non-inferential reason to believe there is something red before me.

Many more epistemologist will employ strategy #2 or #3 in reply to that example and insist that facts about seemings are not what grounds a basic reason for belief in such cases.

Moreover, it is not clear that the Red/Blue Switch case is representative. It is much more controversial that switches of this sort can arise for whatever it is that gives me reason to believe <I seem to see something red before me>, or <1+2=3>, or <Perception is reliable>, or <I exist>.