

## **Jonathan Dancy's Particularism: A Critical Assessment**

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Received: 7/4/2007

Accept: 11/7/2007

So the progress is from monism, the view that there is only one moral principle, through pluralism, the view that there are many, to particularism, the view that there are none.

(Jonathan Dancy, 1983)

### **Abstract**

**Jonathan Dancy advocates a radical particularist theory of ethics. Arguing against a variety of generalist doctrines, he maintains that there are no moral principles and that our ethical decisions are highly context-dependent: they are made case by case, without the support of such principles. In this paper, drawing on a number of theoretical concepts used in science as well as the philosophy of science I shall try to develop a moderate generalist-pluralist model. This model, I shall argue, is less vulnerable to Dancy's criticisms and better equipped, in comparison to Dancy's own model, to deal with moral cases.**

**Keywords: Particularism. Generalist-pluralist doctrines, Universal moral principles, Themes from science and philosophy of science.**

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### **Particularism Good, Generalism Bad**

In a series of publications, which appeared over a period of two decades, Jonathan Dancy has sought to argue against ethical monism and ethical pluralism (both varieties of generalist ethical theory) and to propound a particularist theory (Dancy, 1980, 1983, 1985, 1993, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2004). The main ingredients of his own particularist model, which has undergone changes over the time and has become more nuanced and pointed, can be summarised as follows:

- 1- There are no general or universal moral principles; and even if there are 'the possibility of moral thought and judgement, does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of such principles' (2004).
- 2- Moral judgements are made on a case-by-case basis.
- 3- Ethical particularism is based on 'holism of reasons': what is a reason for moral action in one case may be no reason at all in another, or even an opposite reason in another (2004).

Against this backdrop, Dancy builds up his case to counter the generalist monist and pluralist theories, though his main target is the latter since he regards the former as more or less a non-starter. In Dancy's view monist moral theories, like Utilitarianism, which uphold just one universal moral principle, are simply false: there is more than one sort of relevant property involved in moral considerations.

As for the generalist-pluralist theories, which subscribe to a number of general or universal moral principles, Dancy has raised three inter-related objections, namely:

- 1- How is it possible for an agent with two ethical principles whose recommendations conflict in a particular case to retain both of them after the struggle?
- 2- How do the general moral principles come to be known?
- 3- What is the relevance of the ethical decisions made by the virtuous agents in particular situations to the general moral principles? In other words, what sort of relation exists between the particular ethical decisions/duties and general moral principles? Is it, for example, logical, causal, token-type, or counterfactual?

There are some, more or less, standard responses by the generalist-pluralists (G-Ps for short) to these objections, which Dancy discusses and finds wanting. For example, as for the second objection, some G-Ps might claim that the general moral principles are self-evident. But Dancy is quick to point out that: 'the longer the list of principles, the less the likelihood that all of them are self-evident' (1983).

Some other G-Ps might say that they derive moral principles by ordinary induction from a number of particular cases, i.e., by empirical generalisation. Dancy rejects this approach on three grounds:

a) General moral principles if there are any, should both determine what is true in particular cases and explain it. In contrast, empirical generalisations or theories at most explain what is true in such cases.

b) The particular cases cannot be seen as *tests* for the evaluation of principles. But this is counterintuitive.

c) Moral principles are able, when defeated in a particular case, to linger or have residual effect, whereas, empirical generalisations, once falsified, do not have residual effects.

Yet other G-Ps may say that they ‘see’ the principles in particular cases by *intuitive induction*. Dancy holds that this account, like its counterparts, is not working: ‘The question is how this is supposed to work. What is that is discernible in one case and tells us that what we have here must repeat in all other cases?’ (2001).

What is the position of our modest G-P theory vis-à-vis Dancy’s objection? Perhaps we can better answer this question in the context of a real moral case, which provides an opportunity to further explain our model and assess its worth in comparison to Dancy’s model. The following piece of news from Washington Post could serve this purpose:

**Police Torture Threat Sparks Painful Debate  
in Germany**

By Peter Finn

Washington Post Foreign Service

Saturday, March 8, 2003; Page A19

BERLIN -- In September, 11-year-old Jakob von Metzler, son of a prominent banker, was kidnapped in Frankfurt while on his way home from school. Three days later, police watched a man collect a ransom equivalent to about \$1 million that had been placed at an arranged drop-off point. They moved in and arrested him.

But a serious problem developed: The suspect, law student Magnus Gaefgen, 27, wouldn't reveal where the boy was. For hours, he toyed with police, sending them down one false trail after another.

Wolfgang Daschner, deputy police chief in Frankfurt, has recounted that he feared the boy was dying in some makeshift cell known only to the suspect. So Daschner told his officers that they could torture the suspect, and he put that order in writing. They could extract information ‘by means of the infliction of pain, under medical supervision and subject to prior warning.’

Daschner's decision last year has only just become public, and it has plunged Germany into a tormented national debate: Is there ever a circumstance under which torture is permissible?

Daschner has said that in this instance, just the mention of torture had the desired affect. ‘After Magnus [Gaefgen] was threatened with pain, it only took about 10 minutes for him to tell us where the child was,’ he said in an interview with the magazine *Der Spiegel*. But when police went there they found that the boy was already dead.

Gaefgen has been charged with murder, and Daschner is under investigation for employing the threat of torture, a crime that carries a 10-year sentence in Germany.

### *Jonathan Dancy's Particularism: A Critical Assessment*

How do G-P theories react to this situation? Dancy has distinguished between two forms of G-P moral theories with respect to the general moral principles. The first form, which in Dancy's terminology subscribes to an 'absolutist conception' of moral principles, takes these principles to be universal claims, which state that all actions of a certain type are overall wrong or right. According to Dancy, absolutist G-P moralists are faced with real difficulty when they encounter cases like the one above. Conflicting moral principles would bar such moralists from coming to a clear-cut decision. This is because, Dancy claims, conflicting absolute principles cannot be reconciled and therefore one of them must be abandoned. However, being absolute, they, presumably, cannot be thrown away, hence the impasse. For example, according to Dancy, had Mr Daschner, deputy police chief in Frankfurt, been an absolutist G-P moralist, he would have hopelessly vacillated forever between the two absolute principles of 'helping an individual whose life is in danger' and 'not torturing a suspect'.

The second form of G-P moral theory according to Dancy, is the one that regards each moral principle as a partial or 'contributory' rather than an absolute reason: it specifies how things are only in a certain respect. Dancy points out that some subscribers to this theory suppose that the principles themselves can be ranked in order of importance. Others suppose

that there is no available lexical ordering of such a sort. Dancy believes that these two sub-groups of 'contributory' G-P moralists like their 'absolutist' peer cannot rise to the challenge of real-case moral situations like the above.

According to Dancy, a 'contributory' moralist supposes, qua generalist, that a feature making difference in one case will make the same sort of difference in every case. Dancy calls this aspect of generalist approach 'atomism' in contrast to his 'holism'. (2004) He also maintains that for a contributory G-P, there will be a contributory principle specifying its regular contribution. Dancy calls this feature, perhaps somewhat misleadingly 'atomism'. He mentions W D Ross as a major proponent of this view and offers three reasons, variants of his three main reasons against G-P theories cited above, to reject it. His first reason involves producing counter examples. He says (1983, 539): 'The moral principle 'Do not forget your obligations' is consistent with an action's being the better for its agent having forgotten his obligations. For instance, if I promise to help you move house and fail to turn up, it is better if I have forgotten my obligations than if I have not.'

Dancy's second and third objections flow from the first: 'The second prong of the particularist attack is to ask why we should suppose that a feature that counts in favour in one case must count the same way wherever it

appears. ... The third prong of attack on contributory generalism involves asking for an appropriate epistemology. How are we to tell, from what we can discern case by case, that this feature will function in the same way wherever else it appears?' (2001).

### **A Leaf or Two from the Field of Philosophy of Science**

What can a modest G-P say in response to Dancy's charges and how can he respond to the moral case introduced above? The modest G-P model that I intend to develop and defend in this essay relies partly on W D Ross' approach. It also makes use of some analogies from the fields of science/philosophy of science. In particular, I focus on the views of Ian Hacking and Nancy Cartwright. Incidentally, Dancy himself has alluded to 'interesting similarities' between his own views and those of Cartwright's. In a footnote of his 'The Particularist's Progress' (2000) Dancy observes: 'My views on the nature of explanation in general bear interesting similarities to those of Nancy Cartwright.' And he goes on to cite Cartwright's *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (1983) as the relevant source in Cartwright's works.

Cartwright is an entity-realist, i.e., one who maintains that many of the theoretical entities posited by more mature sciences actually exist, even though the descriptions provided by these

sciences, in the shape of fundamental (as against phenomenological) laws or theories, may not be quite accurate (Cartwright, 1983; Paya, 1995, 2000a).

It is not difficult to see 'interesting similarities' between Cartwright's (1983) views and Dancy's. Both writers are interested in the particular cases/phenomenological laws as against the general principles/fundamental laws. Both maintain that each case should be decided on its own, locally, as it were, rather than universally. Cartwright, for example, in her subsequent publications, has made it clear that she subscribes to a doctrine which she dubs, 'metaphysical nomological pluralism' according to which 'nature is governed in different domains by different systems of laws not necessarily related to each other in any systematic or uniform way, by a patchwork of laws' (1994, pp.288-9).

Dancy, too, in a more or less similar vein, denies G-Ps' claim that similarities between morally relevant aspects of moral situations enable one to apply general moral rules to particular situations. Dancy maintains that since moral properties of each case result from its non-moral properties, each moral situation is unique and governed by different set of moral considerations from other situations/cases. To claim that two situations are similar with regard to their moral properties, we must make sure that the two situations are similar in their other

### *Jonathan Dancy's Particularism: A Critical Assessment*

respects too. But this is impossible, because only two *identical* situations are similar in all their constitutive aspects. In any other case, one situation may contain further properties, which holistically may alter the overall similarity between the two otherwise similar situations (Dancy, 1981, 1983, 2001).

The similarities between the views of these two writers from the two different fields of philosophy of science and moral philosophy provide an interesting opportunity to make use of a theoretical machinery, which has been used in the former to discuss the latter.

Among the useful aspects of this theoretical machinery are notions such as tendency, causal power, propensity, disposition, liabilities and their ilk, which play a significant explanatory role in the realm of science and the philosophy of science. However, it must be emphasised that this cluster of notions, which for the sake of brevity we mostly denote by either tendency or power in the rest of this essay, is not the exclusive preserve of the science/philosophy of science. In fact, many philosophers of different persuasions (realist, anti-realist, rationalist, empiricist) and in different fields of philosophy have used these notions in their theoretical discussions (Andrew Wright, 1990).

Tendencies/powers and their related cluster of concepts are applied to all physical entities (including, with some qualifications, to human beings) but not to categories like events.

According to the realist philosophers of science, the world is full of powerful entities, or entities with tendencies, which routinely exercise their powers. Interactions between these entities give rise to various phenomena at both the macro and the micro (quantum) levels (Bhaskar, 1978).

Harré and Madden, among others, have defined the concept of the causal power in the following way: 'X has power to A' means 'X will/can do A, in the appropriate conditions, in virtue of its intrinsic nature' (1975, p.28). The following is a definition of the same concept in terms of disposition: 'X has the disposition (power to) A =<sub>def</sub> if X is subjected to stimuli or conditions of an appropriate kind, then X will do A, in virtue of its intrinsic nature (which may well be – at the sufficiently basic levels – identical with the disposition' (Paya, 2002). In the above definitions, the concept 'intrinsic nature' refers to what is known in the philosophy of science as 'conjectural essence' (Popper, 1974). It should therefore be clear that notions such as tendency/power presuppose the existence of conjectural essence or nature for the entities in question.

Drawing on the analogy with science/philosophy of science, I conjecture that tendencies/powers can be ascribed to moral agents, e.g., the virtuous agents and their actions in particular situations can be explained by means of these two notions and their counterparts. For example, one can talk of the

tendency of the agents to show mercy towards the needy, to not lose their tempers, to not become blind by greed, to help people in distress, to not be seduced by lust and so forth.

Tendencies/powers can also be ascribed to man-made or socially constructed institutions, in view of the fact that such institutions are the product of what Searle (1996) has dubbed 'collective intentionalities'. However, it is important to note that since actions are species of events, tendencies/power cannot be attributed to the acts performed by the moral agents. Any such attribution would be metaphorical or figurative. What is being unfolded in actions/events is the result of interactions between powerful entities/things in particular situations. Nevertheless, in the course of this essay, and as a matter of convenience, I attribute tendency/power to both entities and acts. I talk of 'acts having right (wrong) making tendencies' in lieu of 'agents' tendencies to act in right (wrong) ways'.

It is useful to make a distinction between the notions of causal power and tendency. A tendency is a power, which may be exercised unrealized or without being manifest in any particular outcome (Bhaskar, 1978). This distinction, as we shall see below, can help to overcome a number of misinterpretations concerning the use of the notion of causal power and tendency. Later on in the essay, I shall make the definition of the notion of

tendency more watertight. It is also useful to bear in mind that the notion of causal power does not refer to a tie that binds objects and events together. The exercise of causal power is not a force or power that has some existence of its own but refers to *forceful or powerful objects at work*. There are not both things and causality in nature, but only causally active things or objects or persons (Harré & Madden, *op.cit*).

Closely related to the above cluster of notions, there are two other important concepts used by the scientists/philosophers of science, namely, open and closed systems. Open systems are various parts of Nature where there are many different causal powers/tendencies at work simultaneously. The sheer number of the powerful entities in the open systems makes it impossible for us to determine particular powers/tendencies of any of the entities involved. This is why scientists, in order to measure the causal powers of various entities or determine their tendencies, resort to closed systems, i.e., the tidier environment of their laboratories, which are under the jurisdiction of *ceteris paribus* clause.

Closed systems, contrary to the open systems of Nature, are where our models of reality are being used. These models are inevitably and to varying degrees idealised, approximate, or abstract representations of phenomena, entities, and processes which we encounter in Nature. We use these less than

perfect models or representations to measure the causal powers/determine tendencies of various entities. These powers are being measured indirectly and through the effects they make upon certain observable phenomena. The greatest advantage of a closed system over the open systems is that within the confine of closed systems, scientists are able to cancel the effects of the unwanted causal powers and isolate the effect due to the one causal power they are interested in. For example, the falling autumn leaves fly in the air under the influence of a number of causal factors or operating mechanisms; gravitational, thermodynamical, fluid mechanical, and perhaps other factors. To measure the effect of each of these conjectured mechanisms, we have to eliminate the effects of other operating factors, and this can only be done by means of well-arranged experiments within the confine of laboratories (closed systems).

Another set of relevant concepts from the field of science/philosophy of science is the contrast between the so-called fundamental laws and phenomenological/technological laws. Fundamental laws of physics, which are universally applicable, form the bare backbone of the applied laws of applied sciences and technology, which can only be used in particular contexts. The former laws are paradigm cases of *ceteris paribus* laws. They are our best conjectures concerning some fundamental aspects of the physical world.

However, the exact effect of these laws can only be shown in closed systems. The latter laws, which are context-sensitive i.e. applicable to the particular messy situations in the real world are obtained from the former by what is technically known as 'approximate derivation' (Maxwell, 1993). The name is appropriate because although we make lots of simplifying amendments to go from the fundamental laws to phenomenological laws, there is always enough common ground between the simplified (idealized) model (which allows us to apply the phenomenological law(s) to particular case) and the original theory (which furnishes us with the fundamental law (s)) to warrant us to talk about refutation of the original theory should the predications of the modified model fail.

It must be pointed out, as Cartwright has argued in her 1983, that there is a difference between the theoretical and the actual outcome of a real physical system. The theoretical outcome is obtained by means of using appropriate phenomenological laws and applying simplifying assumptions. However, for this very reason, i.e. making use of simplifying assumptions (based on approximation and idealisation) the actual outcome may not exactly match this theoretical result. In such cases, engineers and technologists usually revert to further approximations and local adjustments which are only applicable to the cases at hand and are highly context-dependable. Nevertheless, even this actual outcome is in the



end and in a real sense an ‘approximate derivation’ of the phenomenological laws which are in turn the results of ‘approximate derivations’ of the fundamental laws. In other words, the physical quantities calculated by engineers/technologists or scientists in particular contexts, are dependent, on the final analysis, on the fundamental laws of physics. All raw data, observations and measurements are theory laden, and all theories, in the final analysis (and in approximate fashions), rely on the most fundamental theories. Needless to say, all theories, fundamental and otherwise, are just our fallible conjectures for making sense of some aspects of the reality (Popper, 1963).

As a real case example, for the above discussion consider the calculation of the midband gain of an amplifier, which Cartwright has discussed at some length in 1983. Here electronic engineers use approximate models applying the so-called Kirchoff voltage and current laws to calculate the required quantity. These are well-known phenomenological laws. However, due to the approximations and idealisations used in the construction of these models, the theoretical value for the required parameter usually does not match the real value obtained by direct measurement on the actual amplifier. To bring the outcome of the approximate models closer to the actual value, engineers make a number of adjustments/alterations to the approximate model.

The important point here is that the final relation/equation for calculating the parameter in question can be ‘derived’ in an approximate way from the phenomenological laws governing the operation of different parts of the electric circuits. These laws in turn, are based on the basic laws of electromagnetism (Paya, 2000a).

The last set of notions, which needs to be introduced before going back to the realm of ethics is the pair of ‘initial conditions’ and ‘boundary conditions’. Scientists distinguish the so-called ‘initial conditions’ and ‘boundary conditions’. The instantiation of the initial condition warrants the application of the features (i.e. tendencies or the laws which govern them) whether the system is closed or open. For example, the laws of physics or the universal constants of Nature could have been different had there been a different set of initial conditions at the Big Bang. The boundary conditions, on the other hand, are the conditions for the experimental testing of those features (i.e. tendencies or the laws which govern them) and not their applicability. These are conditions, which only apply to the closed systems.

Before going further, let us take stock of our exploration in the field of science/philosophy of science so far. The following table provides a list of key concepts in the field of philosophy of science and their counterparts in ethics. Some of the terms/notions in the table shall be explained in due course.

*Jonathan Dancy's Particularism: A Critical Assessment*

Ethics	Science/Philosophy of Science
Moral tendencies	Physical tendencies
Moral power	Causal power
Particular situations where only one morally-relevant factor or characteristic is present	Closed systems
Particular situations where many morally-relevant factors or characteristics are present	Open systems
Most basic moral principles (duties)	Fundamental laws of Nature (physics)
<i>Prima facie</i> duties (principles)	Phenomenological/technological laws
Actual duties (principles)	Theoretical outcome of an appropriate model of a sub-system operating in Nature, based on the effects of phenomenological laws
Final decision/judgement/act in a real situation	Actual outcome of a sub-system operating in Nature
Moral intuition	Scientific intuition

**Modest G-P vs. Dancy's Particularism**

As indicated in the above table, from my point of view, moral principles can be categorized under three headings: the most basic or fundamental principles, *prima facie* principles, and actual principles. The most general moral principles are like the fundamental laws of physics. Such laws are conjectured to be universally valid. This feature however, does not make them incompatible with each other. For example, Maxwell's laws and Newton's laws, assuming they are valid, are regarded as universally valid. They are not incompatible though, because each governs a different tendency/power in physical

entities. The behaviour of a charged particle in an electric field in the open system is governed, among other things, by both Newton's and Maxwell's laws. Likewise, basic moral principles which are conjectured to be universally valid, as I shall explain, would retain their validity even when they are operating simultaneously in real life cases. For example, two fundamental moral principles like 'thou shall not lie' and 'thou shall not kill' can both be operative in a real-life case without giving rise to an inconsistent situation.

In a way, analogous to the fundamental laws of nature, which are our best fallible conjectures of the fundamental aspects of the physical

universe, the most basic moral principles, are our best fallible conjectures concerning the fundamental aspects of man's moral universe. The exact effect of each of these principles, in a similar fashion to the fundamental laws of nature, can only be shown under the application of *ceteris paribus* clause.

*Prima facie* duties (principles) are like the phenomenological/technological laws used in applied science and technology. The notion of *prima facie* duty (principle) is due to Ross. He writes:

If, as almost all moralists except Kant are agreed, and as most plain men think, it is sometime right to tell a lie or to break a promise, it must be maintained that there is a difference between *prima facie* duties and actual or absolute duty (Ross, 1930, 28).

I would like to define the notion of actual duties (principles) in a way which might be slightly different from Ross' definition. I define an actual duty (principle) as the fallible outcome of the deliberations of the agent, based on his application of appropriate *prima facie* duties (principles) as he understands them, in a real case situation. It must be emphasised that the above does not mean that the conscientious moral agent, as a result of his deliberation, will definitely come to a right moral judgement with regard to his actual duty. In fact, it is conceivable that the agent may make a mistake

in deciding about his actual duty in a particular circumstance. It is also possible that, the agent, given his understanding of the *prima facie* principles at a particular time and in a particular context, might fail to come up with a clear cut decision concerning his actual duty in that circumstance.

The agent's decision in a particular situation, however, can be critically assessed by other moral agents. Such processes of assessment as well the processes of moral deliberation (by the moral agents in particular circumstances) can be assisted by what Popper has termed as 'situational logic' (Popper 1957, 1994; Paya 2003a, 2006) or by making use of thought experiments (Sorensen, 1992; Paya, 2003b). Of the latter of these two analytic tools I shall say some more later on.

Based on the analogy with the cases in science/philosophy of science, I distinguish between the agent's actual or absolute duty (in Ross' sense) and his actual final moral action. The agent's final moral action is based on his final decision/judgement, which in turn is a fine tuning of the actual duty he has come to through his deliberations, which take into account the complexity of the situation he finds himself in.

The above distinction can be explicated in terms of the case of the kidnapped boy discussed above. Wolfgang Daschner, deputy police chief, had to weigh two *prima facie*

### *Jonathan Dancy's Particularism: A Critical Assessment*

principles of immorality of torturing the suspect and immorality of not taking the proper course of action for saving the life of the kidnapped boy. 'I thought, I can sit with my hands in my lap and wait until Gaefgen maybe, at some point, decides to tell the truth and in the meantime the child is long dead,' Daschner told the Frankfurter Neue Presse newspaper. 'Or I do everything I can now to prevent just that.'

After due deliberation, Daschner came to the conclusion that under the particular circumstances he is faced with, he should recourse to torture in order to save the life of the boy. This outcome is tantamount to his actual (absolute) duty in Ross' terminology. Note that, the two *prima facie* duties (principles) he weighed against each other in order to reach his decision were based upon his understanding of two basic moral principles, namely, immorality of harming others and the sanctity of human life. The outcome of Dashner's deliberation is an 'approximate derivation' from the *prima facie* duties operative in the case at hand. Just as the theoretical outcome of a physical system in a particular situation is based on the consideration of the effects of a number of phenomenological laws operative in that situation.

Particular cases for moral decisions are similar to the particular cases in engineering and technology. The moral agent finds himself in a complex situation in which many factors,

e.g. other actors, institutions, physical entities, are playing their roles. Given actor's mental and physical limitations, he has no choice but to make a simplified model by using the usual processes of idealisation, approximation and abstraction. This means that he has to omit or ignore the effects of many factors which he deems insignificant. Of course, at each stage, the moral agent can make adjustments to his model by adding further factors, which he had deliberately ignored in his earlier deliberation while using his earlier, cruder models. These factors pertain to the social actors (including the moral agent himself), institutions and other elements which, in view of the moral agent, play some role in the particular context under consideration. Adding these new factors may result in drawing the attention of the moral agent to some aspects, hitherto, hidden from his view. This new understanding may, in turn, encourages the moral agent to take into consideration some other moral principles or to re-adjust the weight he had given to the principles he had already considered. However, the match between the two, i.e., the model, with the help of which he is trying to come to a moral decision with regard to that particular context, and the real situation in that context, remains, forever, approximate. After all, a human agent, being human, is not omniscient and has no other choice but to concentrate on a small number of factors he

considers to be the most important ones. Whereas, an omniscient being who is, by definition, aware of all factors and their significance and bearings on the case under consideration can make a judgement which is objectively the most appropriate one in that particular context. Let's call the judgment passes by such an omniscient being on each moral case 'the ideal moral judgement' for that case. Such an ideal, like the ideal of truth for scientific theories, can serve as a regulative sign-post towards which the non-ideal judgments of the mortal moral agents, who are deliberating on that case, are directed. The ideal judgement for a particular case in a particular context can be regarded as the outcome of proper weighing of the basic moral principles and all the relevant factors involved in that case within that context by the omniscient being.

To achieve the goal of approaching the ideal moral judgment in a particular context and therefore to increase the degree of objectivity such judgment, the virtuous agent tries to relate the particular moral considerations that he found relevant to the case at hand to the general moral principles he is equipped with. In other words, he tries to show that his judgement is based on (derivable from) the most basic moral principles. For example, in the case of the kidnapped boy, two apparently relevant principles are wrongness of harming others and rightness of saving lives. By taking into account the basic moral principles relevant to the case, the moral agent can explore,

in an objective way, the relative weight/power of each of the relevant actions which are open to him in that particular situation. In this way, the chief of the police, in the light of the above two principles and other relevant information about the case, can consider whether he should torture the suspect in order to increase the chance of obtaining vital information about the whereabouts of the victim and therefore increase victim's chances of survival or should refrain from resorting to such a means?

The analogy between the ideal of truth in scientific theories and the ideal moral judgement in moral cases would imply that just as in the case of science where a more competent and better informed scientist can produce a more verisimilar model for understanding some aspect of reality, in the case of moral judgements, the experienced moral judge, in comparison to a moral agent who is not well versed in weighing various factors and does not have extended experience in these matter, is better placed to assess ways in which a feature can contribute to determining how to act in a particular situation. Moreover, these judgements are fallible and in the light of further information (i.e., more realistic models of the situation) may alter.

### **Dancy, Ross, Tendencies and Moral Principles**

Having explicated the relationship between various types of moral principles, we need to

### *Jonathan Dancy's Particularism: A Critical Assessment*

say something about the nature/status of these principles. Philosophers of science spell out the laws of nature in terms of tendency/power of physical entities. Ross has tried to do the same for the moral principles. In an important passage Ross says:

Tendency to be one's duty may be called parti-resultant attribute, i.e., one which belongs to an act in virtue of some one component in its nature. *Being* one's duty is a toti-resultant attribute, one which belongs to an act in virtue of its whole nature and of nothing less than this. ... Another instance of the same distinction may be found in the operation of natural laws. *Qua* subject to the force of gravitation towards some other body, each body tends to move in a particular direction with a particular velocity; but its actual movement depends on *all* the forces to which it is subject. It is only by recognizing this distinction that we can preserve the absoluteness of the laws of nature, and only by recognizing a corresponding distinction that we can preserve the absoluteness of the general principles of morality (Ross, 1930, 28-29).

Dancy is not in favour of notions such as tendency/causal power. In his discussions of the deficiencies of the G-Ps' position, he refers to W.D. Ross' works as a special case of a G-P theory, which has anticipated (and tried to respond to) the objections raised by him against generalist theories by appealing to the notion of tendency. Dancy dismisses such an appeal to

the notion of tendency/causal power as misguided (1983, 1993). He writes: 'Ross offers two accounts of a *prima facie* duty. The first is in terms of tendencies; an action is a *prima facie* duty in virtue of being  $\phi$  iff  $\phi$  actions tend to be duties proper. It is obvious, I think that talk about tendencies can only be cashed at the general level. For particular, acts do not have tendencies to be duty proper; they either are so or not' (1983, 539). Dancy (1993) again writes:

... [T]he official definition of *prima facie* duty is not the only one to be found in Ross. There is a less formal account in terms of tendencies, which may seem more promising. Ross sometimes speaks of a property which makes an action a *prima facie* duty as one which *tends* to make any action that has it a duty proper. So here is a different definition of a *prima facie* duty: an action is a *prima facie* duty in virtue of having a property F iff actions that have property F tend to be duties proper. One's first thought here is that talk about tendencies can only be cashed at the general level, in a way that would completely distort the role of moral principles as we understand it (pp.98-9).

It seems, Dancy has been led astray in his rejection of Ross' use of the notion of tendency because of a narrow reading of this notion. His conception of this notion is nearer to the statistical definition of tendency which is in turn close to the meaning of the word 'trend'. There is however, another definition of

tendency, as we have seen above, in terms of disposition or other related concepts. Almost all the writers who have used tendency or its synonyms in this sense have ascribed them, in the first instance, to individual entities.

From the passages quoted above, it is clear that Ross himself has this second meaning of the word ‘tendency’ in mind. It is also clear that what he terms as part-resultant attribute is tantamount to the outcome of a particular tendency within the confines of a closed system whereas what he calls toti -resultant attribute is similar to what happens in the open system.

Dancy’s narrow reading of Ross’ notion of tendency has apparently led him to a second misinterpretation. As noted above, he maintains that Ross has offered two different definition of his basic notion of ‘*pima facie* duty’. In 1983, having discussed Ross’ ‘first definition’ he turns to his ‘second account’ and says, ‘But Ross’ second account of *prima facie* duty (perhaps his official one) is better: ‘I suggest ‘*prima facie* duty’ or ‘conditional duty’ as a brief way of referring to the characteristic ... which an act has, in virtue of being a certain kind, ... of being an act which would be a duty proper if it were not at the same time of another kind which is morally significant ((Ross, 1930, p. 19)’ (Dancy, 1983, p.539))’<sup>1</sup>.

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1. Dancy seems to have changed his mind about the relative effectiveness of what he claims to be Ross’ two different definitions. In his work (1983) he refers to what he calls Ross’s definition in terms of tendency as Ross’

But Ross, having introduced both notions of ‘tendency’ and ‘*prima facie*’ goes on to clarify a point, which he thinks may cause some confusion. He is worried that his use of the term ‘tendency’ may imply a sort of causal relation between an act and its moral value. For this reason he suggests to replace the term ‘tendency’ with the term ‘*prima facie*’: ‘... if the word ‘tendency’ is thought to suggest too much a causal relation, it is better to talk of certain types of act as being *prima facie* right or wrong (or of different persons as having different and possibly conflicting claims upon us), than of their tending to be right or wrong’ (Ross, *ibid.* 29).

Perhaps what has made Dancy think that Ross has introduced a second account of ‘*prima facie* duty’ is that Ross has also called this sort of duty as ‘conditional duty’. This might imply that what Ross has in mind is a counterfactual/subjunctive account of these types of duties which, presumably, is different from the account of duties as tendencies. But this does not seem to be the case. Ross’ new terminology is not a new account or definition but only an oblique way to refer to the distinction between the closed and open systems. What Ross is trying to make clear,

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first definition. He also calls this as Ross’ unofficial and the less satisfactory account. In a later work (2001) however, Dancy refers to this very definition as a more promising one than the other account. But this change of heart does not seem to be of any significance for our present discussion.

### *Jonathan Dancy's Particularism: A Critical Assessment*

which can be better understood in the light of what has been discussed so far, is that *prima facie* duties qua tendencies are expressed in terms of counterfactual statements which their actual instances can be seen within the confines of the closed systems, where we assume that the act under consideration has only one characteristic, and therefore this very act would determine the duty proper in that (counterfactual) situation. In other words, these are part<sup>ii</sup> resultant attributes or duties.

Dancy however, thinks that the point made by Ross *qua* a moderate G-P that a feature is relevant iff in any case where it is the only relevant feature or factor, it would decide the issue is both false and incoherent: 'It would be incoherent because the idea that a feature could be present alone, without any other features whatever, is surely nonsense. ... Further, there may be some features that can be relevant if some other feature is also relevant. ... If this can occur, any 'isolationist test' for reasons must miss some reasons. Finally, trying to isolate the contribution of a feature by asking how things would have been if no other feature had made any contribution is, when one comes to think of it, a rather peculiar enterprise. It is ... like trying to determine the contribution made by one football player to his team's success today by asking how things would have been if there had been no other players in the field.' (2001)

Now, it should be clear from our discussion above that Dancy has been misled by an

incorrect reading of the notion of tendency/power. The notion of moral relevance needs some careful considerations. In the first place, isolating the effect of one powerful individual in the confine of the closed system and omitting the unwanted effects of the other factors is something which is going on all the time in science. However, a closed system is not a situation 'without any feature whatever' but a situation in which the so called *ceteris paribus* clause is operating.

Morally relevant features are dependent on non-moral features. The role of these latter features can be likened to the role of catalysts in chemistry. Without their interference the tendency/power of the entities involved in the reactions cannot be manifested, and yet these catalysts themselves are not part of the relevant features of those reactions. In all such cases the same method of closed system is used to find out about the required tendencies/ powers. I shall further discuss the issue of moral relevance in sec.6 below.

In the case of an 'isolationist test', these non-moral features, which act as catalysts are not absent. It is true that for various single outcomes, different catalysts might be needed. In fact, here the two notions of 'initial conditions' and 'boundary conditions' can be used to clarify the above point. To this end, we first need, as indicated earlier, to make our definition of the notion of tendency/power more



watertight. We defined power as ‘X has power to A’ means ‘X will/can do A, in the appropriate conditions, in virtue of its intrinsic nature.’ We can now add that the appropriate conditions mean the satisfaction of the initial conditions and the absence of intervening or countervailing causes. Initial conditions, as we remember from above, are conditions for the applicability of the features in question. To *test* them we also need the boundary conditions. It is with the help of the boundary conditions which we will be able to ‘see’ X’s power. The ‘isolationist test’ is therefore done under the assumption of the presence of appropriate initial and boundary conditions.

The fact that Dancy, has been misled in his argument against G-P’s approach can be best seen from the way he misinterprets the analogy of the football player: contrary to what Dancy has suggested a football coach *can* test, to some extent, the basic abilities/qualities of a football player in an empty field. He can, for example, observe whether the player is good at controlling the ball, precise shooting, fast running, quick manoeuvring, physical endurance, and the like. These are boundary conditions for a professional footballer. In a real football match, i.e. in the open system, these abilities are not lost, though they may pale in comparison with the abilities of much abler players.

To recap, if an act has a right (wrong) making tendency/power, it will always retain

this property and it will always exercise its tendency in the same way, should the appropriate conditions become available. Even under those conditions where a *prima facie* duty is overridden/outweighed, it typically manifest itself in the appropriateness of regret, compunction, or reparation, but always in the continuing presence of a reason to perform the act which the person has decided to be his duty in that particular situation. It is the task of the closed systems to help bring about or realize or make manifest in full such tendencies, which are overridden/ outweighed. In these systems, there is only one relevant feature or property or tendency in operation, and therefore, it is this very feature or property/tendency which decides the case. In real cases, each action preserves its right (wrong) making tendency. The actual duty of the virtuous agent is the outcome of weighing these various tendencies (*prima facie* duties) against each other. For a moral agent to take a moral decision/act in a moral way, initial conditions for the exercise of his tendencies must have already been satisfied. To *test* or *examine* an existing feature (tendency/law), we resort to isolating cases where boundary conditions and the *ceteris paribus* clause is at work. Such an ‘isolationist test’ can be done by means of thought experiments or situational logic. Dancy, however, does not think that thought experiments can be used in ethics (But see section 6 below).

Let us apply the above to the instances of moral situation. Take the case of a person who

*Jonathan Dancy's Particularism: A Critical Assessment*

has promised his friend to help him move house. According to a modest G-P forgetting one's promise always count as morally unwelcome and it will always exercise its tendency or realize its power in this (unwelcome) way. In real case situations (open systems) many factors with various tendencies/powers are at work. Here, some tendencies/powers might be far more powerful than others to the extent that they can put those other tendencies in the shade, just as the powerful rays of sun would make the rays of a small torch bulb virtually invisible.

In the case of the man who has forgotten to keep his promise, if it turned out that he had been involved in a severe car accident in which, he had had to rush the victims to hospital and this has caused him to forget his promise, then in view of the fact that saving the lives of the victims of a horrible accident is of great importance, the right-making power of this act would overshadow the wrong-making power of forgetting promises and would mitigate the case against the person in question.

It is said that if an act has a right (wrong) making tendency/power, it will always retain this property and will always exercise its tendency in the same way, it should be added that it is quite possible that in a particular situation where the choice is between, for example, two wrong-making tendencies/powers, the one with less degree of wrong-

making power would become the preferred moral act. A case in point is breaking a promise. Here, we think better of a person if he breaks his promise because he has forgotten it than he breaks it knowingly.

Likewise, in the case of the kidnapped boy, according to a modest G-P torturing a suspect, or telling lies to him, in order to obtain confession/information is always regarded as morally wrong, whereas rescuing the life of an innocent victim is always a good moral act. However, in a particular situation where both these factors and perhaps many others are at work, each exercises its tendency or moral power and the final outcome is the product of the interaction between these different tendencies. It is here that the relative or apparent power of each tendency in comparison to the other tendencies and in view of the overall situation alters, whereas its power in absolute terms remains unchanged.

To torture a suspect, or telling lies to him, for the sake of extracting information from him always counts as morally wrong. However, in a particular circumstance where the overriding moral concern is to rescue an innocent victim, the wrong-making tendency of torturing a suspect, or telling lies to him, though exercised, may be overridden: in view of the moral agent its power may pale in comparison to the power of the act of rescuing the life of the innocent victim. However, in this case, as in all other

cases, the moral agent must provide his reason for his decision. These reasons can be objectively and critically assessed by other moral agents in the light of the moral principles and the context in which the agent has found himself.

### **Moral Deliberations, Thought Experiments and Holism of Reasons**

It was mentioned that a moral G-P uses, amongst other things, thought experiments for his moral deliberations. In such deliberations, the moral principles, as we expect, play an important role. Dancy is against the idea that thought experimental cases resemble the actual ones in all morally relevant respects, but are simpler and better manageable. Dancy, of course, is not against the use of *all* types of analogical arguments. He wisely observes that if we were to do this, ‘we would leave ourselves rather short of resources (1985, 143)

Dancy has produced four arguments against the use of thought experiments in moral deliberations. These arguments, notwithstanding his claim to the contrary (1985, 148), are not entirely independent of each other. The gist of the four has been captured in the following quotation:

The moral properties of a right action are *parti-resultant*, in Ross’ sense. The action has an enormous number of non-moral properties, only some of which are reasons why the action is right. ... One property results from another when the first exists in virtue of the existence of the

second. So the relation of resultance, which holds between moral properties and reasons, continue down what I call the resultance tree. ... The question then is this. If we have been told the properties which *de facto* constitute the reasons why the action is right, and nothing much more than these, can we reasonably be expected to form a sound view on the question whether the action is right or wrong? ... It would be misguided to suppose that, if there is a difficulty here, it could be resolved by provision of a bit more ‘information’ about the imaginary case. The problem will remain; we will still be in the business of determining a matter which is indeterminate’ (1985, 144-5).

Dancy maintains that imaginary cases are ontologically indeterminate but epistemically determinate (since the nature of an imaginary case is exhausted by its description); actual cases are ontologically determinate, but they may well always be epistemically indeterminate to some degree.

In a later publication (1993), Dancy appears to have given some concession to the use of imaginary cases. In his discussion of moral principles as a kind of ‘reminders’ he says that some properties are more commonly important than others and therefore consideration of imaginary cases can provide inductive support for *some* moral generalizations (especially if people normally or typically are not manipulated or tricked into making promises, etc.). However, his main problem with

### *Jonathan Dancy's Particularism: A Critical Assessment*

imaginary cases concerns using them to establish conclusions about the moral behaviour of features in *all* other cases. His holism concerns what may always happen to moral reasons; what actually or typically happens, and what tools are useful for finding that out, is hostage to further facts about the world.

From a modest G-P's point of view, Dancy's concern over the use of thought experiments does seem to be justified. On the one hand, Dancy seems to have committed the so-called fallacy of 'high standards': He is demanding something extraordinary from the conceptual tool of thought experiment. What he expects is something that cannot be fulfilled even by real experiments, i.e., filling the gap between our descriptions and the reality. On the other, there seems to be a conceptual flaw in his model of 'holism'. Let me take these two points in turn.

Suppose in the case of A (the imaginary case) the properties relevant to its F-ness are  $R^1, \dots, R^n$ . Now, according to Dancy, for an agent to claim that A and B (the actual case) are similar he must first decide whether properties  $R^1, \dots, R^n$  which are, *ex hypothesi*, shared by A and B, are all the properties that are relevant to the F-ness of A and B. Let us call this, 'static similarity stage 1'. Next, the agent must assume that A's other properties will, in no way, affect the moral relevance of  $R^1, \dots, R^n$ . This can be called 'static similarity stage 2'. But for Dancy, even this is not enough to licence the use of an

analogical argument. The moral agent, according to Dancy, needs to show that A and B also enjoy what can be called the 'dynamic similarity', namely the agent should show he knows that A pans out in a way which coincides with the detailed truth about B. Otherwise, B may contain further properties, which affect the relevance of  $R^1, \dots, R^n$  and therefore frustrate the overall relevance of A to B.

Thought experiments or imaginary cases are our constructs intended mostly to falsify or challenge our conjectures concerning the agent's moral action in a particular situation. Like all our theoretical constructs and conjectures, they are constantly revised in the light of new evidence or information. We conjecture that  $R^1, \dots, R^n$  are the properties relevant to rightness (wrongness) of an act both in an actual and an imaginary case. However, in light of further deliberation, we may decide against our initial conjecture. For example, in the case of the kidnapped boy, suppose that the deputy police chief is using an imaginary case to weigh his various options. He may imagine a case in which a harsh physical punishment would loosen the tongue of the kidnapper and on that basis he may initially decide that such a course of action is right. But then, upon further deliberation, he may come to the conclusion that perhaps the kidnapper may die if physical punishment is administered. Such a possible outcome which is not desirable may force the

deputy police chief to reconsider his initial decision concerning the rightness of the imagined course of action.

Dancy maintains that moral properties of an action (or situation) result from some non-moral properties (1993). One upshot of his holism is that being right (wrong) making is just one species of being morally relevant. As Dancy puts it in his more recent publications (e.g. 2004), whether a feature is right-making depends on the presence of 'enabling conditions' whose instantiation is independent of the instantiation of that feature. Conditions whose presence enables (and absence disables) a feature to be right-making clearly are morally relevant, but they are no part of the right-making feature when present. For example, a right-making feature of an act-type (say, promise keeping) is a hugely complex feature containing, as a part, any feature that is relevant to the prima facie rightness of the act-type in question. It is very plausible that issues such as whether the promise was extracted by manipulation or trickery, whether the promisor was insane when making the promise, and much else besides, are all relevant to whether having promised generates any prima facie duty at all. The sort of complex feature that is in question will include negative conditions, and it will be hugely heterogeneous, since the same feature will have to be possessed by any instance of the act-type.

But a G-P has no qualms about the effects of all these factors which are at work in any situation, what he questions is Dancy's dual use of the notion of 'resulting from' in developing his particularist case and defending his conception of holism. On the one hand, Dancy talks about the relation between the moral properties of an action and the reasons why it has them. In this sense action's rightness emerges or results from only a part of its non-moral properties. For example, the generosity, thoughtfulness, kindness. On the other, he introduces another type of 'resulting from' which is mostly material evidence for the rightness of an action. For example, a substantial donation. While the first type of 'resulting from' is a logical one, the second type is a causal or counterfactual one. This latter type is relevant to moral acts in an extended sense.

Dancy maintains that because of all these other relevant factors (in the extended sense) or the 'enabling conditions', even if the real case does have the narrow relevant moral properties similar to the imaginary case, it cannot be concluded that the two cases are genuinely similar enough to warrant us to apply an analogical argument.

It was explained in the previous sections that concepts such as 'closed system,' 'open system,' and 'tendency' are useful tools to make the task of analysis of complex situations

### *Jonathan Dancy's Particularism: A Critical Assessment*

more manageable. Such concepts can be used in the case of thought experiments and their application to real situations. We conjecture that  $R^1, \dots, R^n$  are properties relevant to the rightness of an action in both the imaginary and the real cases. We then use the imaginary case mostly for the purpose of challenging some proposed list of relevant properties by considering a hypothetical case satisfying the list, but lacking the target property.

An important tacit assumption of the concept of 'closed system' is that while operating within the confines of a closed system we assume that other factors, unknown to us or as yet not considered by us, do not have appreciable effect on the situation at hand. Of course, we may be wrong about this particular use of the *ceteris paribus* rule and for this reason we are open to revise our model in the light of new evidence or new information. However, it is important to further explore the significance of this tacit assumption and show its relevance to Dancy's two conceptions of 'resulting from' and his understanding of 'holism of reasons'.

Consider the case of an action being right in virtue of its generosity. According to Dancy the generosity of this action must result from something else, say a substantial donation. Now, Dancy maintains that in the imaginary case, we consider the rightness of the action by trying to provide a reason for it, say, its generosity. However, the real case is much

more complex and unexpected surprises would frustrate our reason-giving exercise in the thought experiment. For example, it may turn out that the generosity in question has actually resulted from a substantial donation for an illegal enterprise.

However, it seems Dancy's conception of 'holism of reasons' has misled him. According to a G-P, within the confines of a closed system, if an action is right, it is right not just in virtue of being  $R^1$ , but also because  $R^1$  is 'derivable' from fundamental moral principles and this in turn means that among the more substantial 'reasons' for ascribing rightness to the action in question, 'not being a substantial donation for an illegal enterprise' is also included. According to G-Ps, if an act has a right-making power, it would always manifest that power/tendency. In the cases where an act with wrong-making power temporarily and provisionally gains the status of the action of choice for a moral agent in a particular situation, he should be able provide 'reasons' for such a choice.

However, Dancy may object to this argument by reiterating his disapproval of the use of moral principles in ethical deliberations. It is to this point we should now turn.

### **Can Particularists Do Away with the General Moral Principles?**

As pointed out earlier, Dancy is not fond of general moral principles. He maintains that particularists have no need for such non-

existent principles: ‘As particularists, we give no sense to the notion of a property being generally morally relevant, since we cannot relate this satisfactorily to our epistemology; and hence we fail to understand the possibility of moral principles’ (1983, 542).

In his subsequent publications, Dancy has fine-tuned the same theme by distinguishing between the ‘more trenchant’ and ‘more cautious’ forms of particularism. The latter, which apparently included Dancy’s own version, holds that ‘though there may be some moral principles, still the rationality of moral thought and judgement in no way depends on a suitable provision of such things; ... Moral principles are at best crutches that a morally sensitive person would not require, and indeed the use of such crutches might even lead us into moral error’ (2001).

The question which inevitably arises at this juncture is: how can a moral particularist, if he is not going to make use of general moral principles, decide about particular moral cases. Dancy has a ready answer to this important question: ‘I suggest that what the experienced moral judge knows is a range of ways in which a feature can contribute to determining how to act. ... in understanding the practical purport of a concept such as cruelty, what one knows is the sort of difference it can make that what one proposes to do would be cruel, in a way that enables one to see new differences made in

situations rather different from those one has encountered so far’ (2001). Dancy goes on to liken the particularists knowledge of the practical purport of a concept to the knowledge of a competent language users of semantic purport of a term and the grammatical rules.

Dancy’s use of analogy with language is interesting. This is because the phenomenon of language provides a powerful argument in defence of G-P’s position. There is a similarity between the basic moral principles and the standards of an advanced language like English. Without these standards, making sense of the many different dialects, which comprise the large family of English language will be impossible. Different forms of English, e.g., British English, American English, Australian English, Indian English, and the like, are constantly deviating from the standard English, and yet their common aspects make it possible for speakers of these variants of English to be able to understand each other. The English language is larger than its standard version but the standard version, like a backbone keeps its various parts together. Moral principles are similar to the standard English. Moral acts, to be counted as moral, require moral principles, although the set of these acts is larger than the set of the moral principles.

Dancy’s own moral principles however, suffers from a deeper flaw which is not dissimilar to the position of the entity-realists

*Jonathan Dancy's Particularism: A Critical Assessment*

who are claiming that 'experimental work, and not theoretical knowledge, provides the strongest evidence for the reality of a postulated or inferred entity'. This is because, as the argument goes, 'we can measure or otherwise understand its causal power'. Furthermore, as Hacking has pointed out: 'The best evidence, in turn, that we have this kind of understanding is that we can set out, *from scratch*, to build machines that will work fairly reliably, taking advantage of this or that causal nexus. Hence engineering, not theorizing, is the best proof of scientific realism about entities' (1983, p.170, emphasis added).

Hacking's claim concerning the ability of the engineers 'to set out from scratch' and without the aid of general theories 'build machines that work reliably' bears striking resemblance to Dancy's claim that moral agents are capable to come to moral decisions in particular situations without recourse to moral principles.

However, Hacking's position is, as I have argued elsewhere (2000b), untenable: to build sophisticated machines or instruments in order to invoke the causal powers of the theoretical entities which in turn provide good grounds for the existence of the entities in question, we need to rely on two types of theories. One type puts us in a position to be able to claim that we have '*well understood* the causal powers' of these entities. The other enables us to construct sophisticated machines, purpose built to

manipulate these powers. Contrary to what Hacking says, it is impossible to set out *from scratch*, without prior theoretical knowledge, to build machines which work reliably and make use of this or that causal power. To paraphrase Lakatos: technological and practical knowledge without theoretical knowledge are blind (1971, p.91).

To be of any help to scientific realism about electrons, technologists and engineers must first determine whether *their* term 'electron' which they have used to refer to the entity whose causal power they are using has the same referent as the theoretician's term. However, any attempt on the part of entity-realists to show the co-referentiality of the two terms will result in establishing the realist theoreticians' case – that the experimental argument is not an *independent* support for scientific realism. This is because either the entity-realist would succeed in establishing the co-referentiality of the two terms, in which case what they would show is that the theorists have been right in their insistence on the reality of the posited entity, or the entity-realists would fail to establish the co-referentiality of the two terms, in which case, what they would discover is (possibly) a new theoretical entity which requires the help of theorists to produce an acceptable model of its behaviour and properties.

Now, it seems that many of the objections raised against the entity-realists can be re-framed in such a way as to be able to be equally raised against Dancy's particularism. For



example, it can be asked as how can an experienced moral judge come to know ‘a range of ways in which a feature can contribute to determining how to act’ without the benefit of a general knowledge about that very feature and its various ways of contribution to an act. How can the moral judge know whether humiliating a child in situation A, lying to an old mother in situation B, throwing stone at a dog in situation C, generously satisfying the appetite of an unwell friend with not quite healthy dishes in situation D, and ... are instances of acting cruelly or benevolently? Without general knowledge, we cannot even make analogical inferences from familiar cases to the ‘situations, rather, different from those one has encountered so far.’

Like Hacking, Dancy cannot appeal to ‘well-understood properties’ or ‘setting out from scratch’ or ‘relying on a modest number of homely truths’ for forming moral decisions. To claim that the experienced moral judge would use his ‘knowledge’ for making such decisions is to beg the question: the agent can only relate his disparate experiences in different situations to each other if he subsumes them under a general principle, since otherwise the experiences will remain unconnected and cannot illuminate his decisions in different situations.

### **The Status of General Moral Principles**

Dancy has challenged the G-Ps on the ontologic and epistemic status of the general moral

principles, which the G-P theorists maintain to be the main guiding light for their moral decisions/actions. As we have seen above, Dancy rejects the appeal to induction and self-evidence as means of epistemic access to these principles. He also rejects Ross’ use of intuition. Above all, he casts doubts on the very existence of such principles (1983). To explain the status of the moral principles, I should, once again, make use of my analogy with the fields of science/philosophy of science.

In my view, the basic general moral principles, which govern the moral universe of mankind can be likened to the fundamental laws governing Nature. The notion of moral principles governing our moral universe is not something extraordinary. Laws, rules, and instructions which give rise to structures or shape forms at various levels of inorganic, organic, biological and social reality are widespread. They are emergent properties of complex systems which appear at various stages of development of these systems. Like the fundamental laws of physics which since the Big Bang have allowed non-equilibrium structures to be formed in the universe, the basic moral principles, which have emerged since the appearance of the human societies have made moral decision-making possible. Moreover, like the fundamental laws of physics that apply universally and yet can endanger non-universal behaviour, if they act within

different environments, basic moral principles can give rise to different decisions/judgements/actions in different situations.

What entitles us to talk about general or universal moral principles such as 'one should regard the other as an end in itself and not means' is the fact that human beings, despite all their differences due to historical, cultural, and geographical factors, share a common nature, a set of shared innate capacities or dispositions. These shared capacities manifest themselves in various ways: in man's desire for self-preservation, his thirst for acquiring knowledge about his physical and social environment, his fascination with power, his love of freedom and justice, and so on. All such, manifestations can be regarded as the ways we, human beings, as organisms capable of adapting to new environments by invading as well as inventing new environmental niches, use our inherited capacities to face with certain pressures or challenges or problems in our natural and social environments (Popper, 1994).

In response to these challenges, we, amongst other things, try to capture the universal moral principles which govern our social milieu in the same way we strive to find out about the laws of nature. That is, by means of bold conjectures which are assisted by our intuitions. Moral intuitions just like scientific intuitions, in the sense of noninferential, unreflected, untutored and yet fallible beliefs can help us formulating

moral principles or criticizing them (Popper, 1963; Paya, 2003b). Our understanding of moral principles, like our understanding of the laws of nature, is ever-changing and can become richer by the passage of time as human beings collectively acquire more knowledge and accumulate more experience. However, at the same time, just as we can remain ignorant of the laws of nature, sometime to our detriment, we may also not have proper grasp of the moral principles, which sustain the fabric of our moral universe, and as a result experience undesirable consequences. In the domain of ethics, as in the domain of science, ignorance is not a bliss. Here, too, the achievements of the past generations in terms of better understanding of these principles should be constantly transmitted to the present and particularly the younger generations by means of proper education and training. It is in this context that the significance of teaching general moral principles, which go beyond the confines of exclusive forms of life becomes apparent. In the absence of a concerted effort for *teaching*, in a rich sense of the word, the general moral principles, the younger generations will be forced to acquire them the hard way with, possibly, at huge personal and social costs.

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*Jonathan Dancy's Particularism: A Critical Assessment*

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## نظریه اخلاقی اصالت مصداقی جاناتان دنسی: یک ارزیابی نقادانه

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تاریخ دریافت: ۱۳۸۶/۱/۱۸

تاریخ پذیرش: ۱۳۸۶/۴/۲۶

پس پیشرفت از مونیسیم، یعنی این نظریه که تنها یک اصل اخلاقی وجود دارد، به پلورالیسم یعنی این نظریه که اصول اخلاقی متعدّدند- به اصالت مصداق است یعنی این نظریه که هیچ اصل اخلاقی وجود ندارد.

(جاناتان دنسی ۱۹۸۳)

جاناتان دنسی از یک دیدگاه اصالت مصداقی افراطی در فلسفه اخلاق دفاع می کند. او ضمن انتقاد از شماری از رویکرد های قائل به اصول عام اخلاقی، مدعی است که هیچ اصل اخلاقی وجود ندارد و قضاوت های اخلاقی ما کاملاً وابسته به ظرف ها و زمینه هاست: این قضاوت ها مورد به مورد و بدون برخورداری از حمایت اصول اخلاقی به انجام می رسند. در مقاله حاضر با استفاده از شماری از مفاهیم در علم و فلسفه علم کوشش می کنم یک مدل متواضعانه در خصوص یک رویکرد اخلاقی قائل به کثرت اصول عام اخلاقی را بسط دهم. استدلال اصلی من آن است که این مدل، در برابر انتقادات دنسی از مدل های متکی به اصول عام از آسیب پذیری کمتری برخوردار است و در قیاس با مدل خود دنسی بهتر می تواند از عهده قضاوت در مورد مسائل اخلاقی برآید.

واژگان کلیدی: نظریه اخلاقی اصالت مصداقی، اصول عام اخلاقی، دیدگاه های اخلاقی قائل به کثرت اصول عام اخلاقی، آموزه های علم و فلسفه علم.

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