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Realism Requires Generalism

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Abstract

In this paper, I am going to give an argument in favour of the atomistic and generalistic account in the realm of morality, according to which the behaviour of a morally relevant feature in different cases is answerable to general patterns. It follows from this that the particularistic account with regard the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature is implausible. Unlike generalists, particularists subscribe to holism, according to which the way in which a morally relevant feature contributes to the overall outcome of different cases is fully context-dependent. In order to criticise the particularistic view, firstly, it needs to be explained that in what sense the particularist and his rival, the generalist are realist. Moreover, by borrowing some notions from the philosophy of science, I show that realism requires atomism, both in science and morality. It follows from this that the particularistic account which is associated with the realistic account is implausible.

Key Words: 1. Realism 2. Generalism 3. Causal outcome
4. Disposition

1. Introduction

One of the issues which is discussed in meta-ethics is the extent of the pattern ability of the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature in different contexts. Generalists and particularists have conflicting views in this respect. According to generalists, we have some general moral patterns, to which the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature like causing

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pain in different contexts is answerable. In contrast, particularists do believe that the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature in different ethical situations is fully context-dependent. It follows from this that there is no such a thing as generality as far as moral reasoning is concerned.

Furthermore, some of moral particularists are moral realists. By moral realism, I refer to a position, according to which moral properties are part of the furniture of the world. It follows from this that they do not entirely depend on moral subjects. Rather, there is something which is out there, at varying degrees in accordance with different accounts of realism, to be picked out by moral subject. In what follows, I try to show that realism requires generalism in the realm of morality. If this is the case, the particularistic position which challenges the generalistic position is implausible.

2. Particularists: Moral Realist

Moral particularists like Dancy, McNaughton and McDowell¹ are realists with regard to moral properties.² In other words, they subscribe to the idea that moral properties are part of the fabric of the world, although their account of the existence of moral properties in the world is not the same. According to their view, in a concrete ethical situation in which a moral subject is confronted with one or more than one morally relevant features, something reveals itself to the moral subject. As these properties are not entirely subjective and are part of the fabric of the world, moral propositions regarding these properties can be, in principle, true or false.

Furthermore, McNaughton following McDowell compares ethical properties to secondary qualities like colour in order to give an account of how moral properties can be regarded as part of the furniture of the world, and claims that moral properties are similar to secondary qualities and both of them are as real as primary qualities.

On the other hand, Dancy criticises such claims for the similarities between secondary qualities and moral properties, while subscribing to the point that moral properties are part of the fabric of the world independent of the subject.³

So, according to particularists, moral realism can be conjoined with moral particularism, according to which the contribution of a morally relevant feature to moral evaluation can vary from case to case.

At present, I would argue as a generalist that realism requires generalism. In fact, having considered the realistic view, according to which there is something which is part of the fabric of the world, it does not follow from this that realism can be associated with the particularistic view.

Now, in order to elaborate the above points, let us borrow some notions from the philosophy of science. To this end we need very briefly look at the views of realists in the philosophy of science.

3. Powers and Dispositions

According to realism in the philosophy of science, notions such as tendency, causal power, etc. play a significant role in the realm of science and the philosophy of science in order to provide an explanation of phenomenon. This set of notions, which I will henceforth refer to as power, has been talked about widely in the philosophy of science.

Powers and the related group of concepts are applied to all physical entities. According to realist philosophers of science, the world is full of powerful entities, or entities with tendencies, which regularly exercise their powers. These entities react to each other in different ways in several contexts, as a result of which we are confronted with various phenomena in the world. Harré and Madden have defined the idea of ‘causal power’ which refers to this fundamental and basic power of entities in the following way:

The proper analysis of the ascription of a power to a thing or material (and, with some qualifications, also to a person) is this:

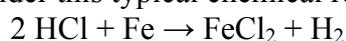
‘X has power to A’ means ‘X will/can do A, in the appropriate conditions, *in virtue of its intrinsic nature*’. In ascribing power to people ‘can’ must be substituted for ‘will’ (1975, pp. 86-7).

Some philosophers have used other terms such as “disposition” for the same purpose.⁴

Note that in the above definition, the concept “intrinsic nature” refers to what is known in the philosophy of science as

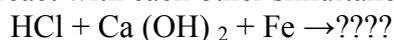
'conjectural essence'. It is plausible to suppose that notions such as power and disposition presuppose the existence of a conjectural essence for the entities which we are talking about. When one refers to the power of an entity in a phenomenon, one refers to its contribution to the overall causal outcome of the case. We can say that the entity has a contributory power to contribute to the causal outcome of the phenomenon.

An example from the realm of science sheds further light on the issue at hand. Consider this typical chemical reaction:

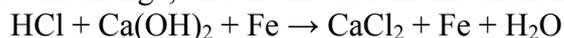


According to this reaction, acid dissolves the metal in the appropriate conditions, such as appropriate pressure, temperature, concentration, solvent solubility, PH and so on. So, we can say that acid has a causal power or contributory power to dissolve metal, and its contribution to the overall causal outcome of the case will manifest in the suitable condition.

Now, consider the following chemical reaction in which, acid, base and metal react with each other simultaneously:



As we have seen, acid has the contributory power to dissolve the metal and contribute to the overall causal outcome of the case in the appropriate conditions. However, in some chemical reactions, we have more than one contributory power, which come into conflict with each other. In the above example, there are two contributory powers: the acid's contributory power to dissolve the metal, and the base's contributory power to dissolve the metal. But the acid and the base will react with each other, prevent each other from exerting the contributory power they have, and prevent each other from contributing to overall causal outcome in this way. The final result depends on other factors, such as the concentration of the reactants, temperature, pressure and so on. For instance, if the concentration of the acid and base are exactly the same, they neutralise each other, the acid and base's contribution to overall causal outcome will change, and the metal remains unchanged:



There is a difference between a contributory power and its actualisation. In some concrete situations, these contributory powers can be actualised and in other cases they cannot. In other words, each contributory power, in principle, can be actualised and

contribute to the overall causal outcome of the case. But the crucial point which has to be considered is that each contributory power does not have to be actualised and contribute to the overall causal outcome of the case. In fact, according to the realist, although there is a conjectural essence that has a contributory power which *can* be actualised and contribute to the overall causal outcome of the case, it does not follow from this that it *has to* be actualised and contribute to overall causal outcome in each concrete situation. Rather, it can be manifested and contribute *only* within the suitable conditions and environment.

Let us see what would be the case if we apply the particularistic position in the realm of science. In other words, what would a moral particularist like Dancy say, if he is considered as a particularist in the territory of science?

Consider the above chemical example. According to the realist, the acid has a contributory power to dissolve the metal and contribute to overall causal outcome. However, in some concrete situations, because of other factors such as the existence of the base in the environment, this contributory power might not be actualised and contribute to the overall causal outcome of the case. But it does not follow from this that such a contributory power does not exist and cannot contribute to overall causal outcome at all. In the meantime, we know what would be the ultimate outcome in similar cases in advance. For instance, if the acid and the base and the metal are combined together in a concrete situation in which the concentration of the acid and the base are the same, the acid and the base will react together and the metal will remain unchanged. In addition, we can say in advance that in the similar situation, in which the concentration of the acid and the base are the same, they will react together and contribute to the overall causal outcome in this way, and the metal will remain unchanged.

If we are confronted with a situation in which merely the acid and the metal react together, the contributory power of the acid will be actualised and contribute to the solution of the metal. In all cases in which only the acid and the metal are combined together, the ultimate outcome will be the same and the contributory power of the acid will be actualised and contribute to the case. Things contribute to the context atomistically, not holistically in the realm

of science. They maintain their valence outside the concrete situation, and behave the same in similar situations.

On the other hand, according to the scientific particularistic account, according to which things contribute to the context holistically we are not entitled to say what would take place in similar concrete situations in advance. Consider the above chemical case, in which only the acid and the metal are present and react together. According to the scientific particularist who subscribes to realism, the contributory power of the acid dissolves the metal and contributes to the causal outcome of the case. But it does not follow from this that it will have to contribute in similar contexts. However, according to the scientific particularist, the situations which can be taken into account as 'similar contexts' never happen.

Having considered the reaction between the acid and the metal and their contribution to the causal outcome in the manner of a scientific particularist, in other cases in which the acid and the metal are combined together we are not permitted to say anything with regard to their contribution to final result. We just have to wait and see what happens. Similarly, having taken into account the reaction between the acid and the base and the metal and their contribution to the causal outcome as above, in other cases in which the acid and the base and the metal are combined together, we are not allowed to say anything concerning the eventual result.

This particularistic account of the contribution of each entity to overall causal outcome in the realm of science is counter-intuitive, especially for a realist. The realist, who subscribes to the existence of contributory powers in natural phenomena, will distinguish between the contributory power and its actualisation and contribution to overall causal outcome of the case. According to the realist, the contributory power exists, whether or not it can decide the overall causal outcome of the case. So, we can guarantee that the contributory power will be found in each concrete situation whether or not it can decide the overall causal outcome of the case. In this way, for the realist, realism is associated with generalism. Being a realist essentially leads to acknowledging generalism, for it requires an acknowledgement of the individuation of contributory powers that function in general law-like ways.

4. The Analogy between Science and Morality

Let us return now to morality. We can use the above model to explain the contributory powers of the relevant non-moral features of actions in the realm of morality. Here is the issue: consider a non-moral feature F. The whole point according to a particularist like Dancy and his generalist opponents is whether we can give a justified account with regard to the contribution of F to the moral evaluation of a case.

According to the moral realist like Dancy and his generalist opponent, in every concrete ethical situation, one is dealing with several contributory factors which are at work simultaneously. Moreover, the basic contributory power is the one that belongs to the relevant non-moral feature of the situation, and it is this contributory power that causes the others.

As we have seen, the relevant non-moral property F like causing pain, according to the moral realist, has a contributory power to contribute to moral evaluation and makes the action wrong and bad, other things being equal. On the other hand, we have to bear in mind that talking about the contributory power of an acid to dissolve the metal and its contribution to overall causal outcome of the case in the realm of science, is to give an account with regard to the essential contributory power of the acid which is manifested within the chemical reaction to dissolve the metal. It follows from this that the acid's contribution to overall causal outcome will be manifested within a similar chemical situation in which metal exists. In other words, in the realm of science, things contribute to overall causal outcome atomistically not holistically. They keep their own contributory power outside the context. Moreover, if things contribute together atomistically in the realm of science, why are they not combined together atomistically in the realm of morality? Why has atomism to be taken into account only in the realm of science?

Let us see how the analogy between "science" and "morality" goes. According to the moral realist, the contributory power of the relevant non-moral feature exercises its power on the agent, something which has an effect on the subject. As in the scientific case, we deal with the relationship between the contributory power of the morally relevant non-moral property and the moral subject which in no way can be ignored or ruled out.

Moreover, the analogy between “science” and “morality” has to be considered only in a narrow and precise way. What is common to the realistic approach to science and morality is the idea of *the contribution to causal outcome* in the scientific case and the idea of *the contribution to moral evaluation* in the ethical case.

I am not going to apply the scientific model to the way in which different morally relevant features are combined together. The scientific metaphysical account is based upon vector analysis, by which we can give a precise account of how different vectors are combined together in different cases. However, this exact and accurate scientific method cannot be applied in the realm of morality. However, it does not follow from this that there is no similarity between science and morality. Rather, the moral realist who accepts that moral properties are part of the furniture of the world can endorse that the way in which a morally relevant feature contributes to the moral evaluation of different cases can be articulated in patterns. Similarly, the scientific realist who says that entities’ dispositions are part of the furniture of the world can endorse the view that the way in which a disposition contributes to the causal outcome of the case in different cases can be articulated in patterns.

Based on what has been discussed in the above, I am inclined to conclude that realism requires generalism in both science and morality.

Notes

1- A version of moral particularism is presented by McDowell, although he does not use such terms as ‘particularism’ and ‘particularist’. He deals with the epistemological aspect of moral reasoning rather than the metaphysical aspect of the issue.

2- See McNaughton, D. (1988) *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell), chap.3, 4 and 5 & (1991) ‘The Importance of Being Human,’ in Cockburn, D. (ed.) *Human Beings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 63-81. See also Dancy, J. (1993) *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell), chap. 9.

3- It is worth noting that Dancy has argued in favour of strong moral realism, according to which moral properties can be regarded as primary qualities. Consider the following quote by Kaebnick: ‘Dancy’s argument

presupposes that we would go about discovering the features of moral properties in the same way that we discover the features of non-moral properties. The crux of the position is that moral values are part of the world as it is, independent of human responses. On this view, moral values are analogous to Locke's primary qualities: substance and shape, for example' (1999, p. 46). For more detail, see Dancy, J. (1986) 'Two Conceptions of Moral Realism. Part 1', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. (60), pp. 167-188.

Note that the comparison between McDowell and McNaughton on the one hand and Dancy on the other hand is not my concern at this stage. In other words, I do not wish to judge whether McDowell and McNaughton's position is justified or Dancy's view. What is crucial for me is that all these three particularists subscribe to moral realism, to varying degrees, according to which there is something out there as moral properties which are in a way independent of the moral subject and are part of the fabric of the world.

5- For more discussion on the notion of disposition see Wright, A. (1991) 'Dispositions, Anti-Realism and Empiricism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 91, pp. 39-59. See also Mellor, D. (1978) 'In Defence of Dispositions', in Tuomela, R. (ed.) *Dispositions* (Dordrecht: Reidel), pp. 55-76.

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