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Particularism, Holism and Atomism

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...we have to learn to live with a sense of vertigo, though if we still feel the vertigo this shows that we have not yet escaped from a sense of insecurity that is based on an illusion. If we can only dispel the illusion the vertigo must fall away with it(1, p.84).

Abstract

In this paper, I am going to present an argument in favour of the generalistic and atomistic position and criticise the particularistic and holistic view with regard to the way in which different morally relevant features are combined together in different contexts. According to the argument, the holist (particularist) is confronted with a dilemma. The first horn of the dilemma concerns the problem with the idea of the contribution a morally relevant feature makes to moral evaluation. The second horn of the dilemma deals with the point that the holist's metaphysical account with regard to the way in which different morally relevant features are combined together is vague. Having seen the dilemma, I am inclined to conclude that the particularist's argument with regard to the way in which different morally relevant features are combined together in different contexts is implausible.

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1. Introduction

Accounts of the metaphysics of reasons and the way in which morally relevant features contribute to the moral evaluation of different cases can be classified into one of two broad types: particularist and generalist. According to the particularist, the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature is not answerable to general patterns. This means that there is no generality to the reason-giving impact of a morally relevant feature; the feature's impact is not on types of situations. Given this core metaphysical claim, it follows that we cannot generalise what we find as a wrong-making feature of action, such as killing, in a particular case into a moral principle about killing in general. The main argument for this draws on the idea of holism with regard to the moral power of morally relevant non-moral properties. The idea is that the contribution of each morally relevant non-moral property to the moral evaluation of different cases is contextual, and its contributory behaviour may change from case to case. In different cases it is compounded with other morally relevant non-moral properties so that what makes an action wrong in one case may make it right in another case. In other words, the deontic valence of a morally relevant non-moral property such as causing pain, i.e. its reason-giving behaviour in different concrete ethical situations, is not constant and may vary from case to case. Therefore, we are not entitled to say anything, metaphysically speaking, with regard to the deontic valence of each morally relevant non-moral property outside different contexts. In other words, the moral power of a morally relevant non-morally property is a function of how it stands in the context. There is no generality to the moral power of a feature and so its power cannot be articulated in a general rule.

According to particularists such as Dancy and McNaughton it is not the case that different morally relevant non-moral properties are combined together atomistically in the sense that the occurrence of a property has an invariant deontic valence which can be retained outside the context. Rather, such properties have no invariant deontic valences independent of different contexts. They have no stable invariant contribution to the moral evaluation of different contexts and their contribution can vary from case to case. This means that there is no shape between non-moral (descriptive) properties and moral (evaluative) properties, and different morally

relevant non-moral properties are combined together holistically. In other words, metaphysically speaking, particularists are *anti-realist* with regard to generality and general rules. According to them, we can justifiably talk about the nature and metaphysics of the moral power of morally relevant non-moral properties only within a concrete ethical situation. We are not entitled to generalise from the outcome of a particular case in similar cases. Indeed, there is no such thing as a class of relevantly similar cases. Consequently, particularists have to be regarded as anti-realists concerning the existence of general patterns for reasons.

On the other hand, to be regarded and classified as a generalist one needs minimally to acknowledge that there is a pattern to which the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature is answerable. In other words, the generalist holds that there are patterns which have shape and articulate the relationship between right-making, wrong-making... features, on the one hand, and right, wrong... properties on the other hand. This is the minimum ingredient that is required for generalism.

As we have seen, according to the particularist who subscribes to holism, the moral power of a morally relevant non-moral property has no invariant deontic valence independent of different ethical contexts. In other words, it is not the case that the moral power of a morally relevant non-moral property like causing pain has a stable contribution to the moral evaluation of different concrete ethical situations. The particularist holds that its contribution may vary from case to case. McNaughton says: One powerful reason for rejecting generalism in moral as in aesthetic justification is that it offers an unduly atomistic picture of moral reasoning. It supposes that each reason is insulated from its surroundings so that the effect of each on the rightness or wrongness of the action as a whole can be judged separately. The moral particularist prefers a holistic view (1991, p.68).

In this paper, I am going to argue that the particularist's position with regard to the nature of the moral power of a morally relevant non-moral property is inconsistent and counter-intuitive.

2. The Holist's Dilemma

Here, in outline, is the argument I wish to propose. Consider the very idea of holism which constitutes the main

argument in support of normative particularism. According to holism, the moral powers of different non-moral properties are combined together holistically. These non-moral properties have no invariant contribution to the moral evaluation of different cases. For instance, causing pain can be regarded both as a right-making and wrong-making feature in different contexts. Its deontic valence and contribution can vary from case to case. A particularist denies the atomistic approach with regard to the nature and the combination of the moral power of different morally relevant non-moral properties.

What I wish to argue is that the holism which the particularist is offering leads, when thought through, to atomism. The structure of the argument is a dilemma. According to the dilemma, the particularist has to commit to atomism or give a mysterious and unclear account of the way in which several morally relevant features are combined together in different ethical situations.

2. 1. The First Horn of the Dilemma: ‘The Contribution Problem’

I start with the first horn of the dilemma, according to which holism leads to atomism. When a particularist talks about the contribution of a morally relevant non-moral feature like causing pain to moral evaluation in different contexts, the central question is: what is it to have an invariant or variant contribution? How can we talk about *the* contribution of a morally relevant non-moral property like causing pain in different ethical contexts? What is *its* contribution to moral evaluation? It seems that when we are talking about *the* contribution of a morally relevant feature to the moral evaluation of different cases, we regard it as it is, that is to say, as it is in itself, and that seems to be to consider it independently of context. The very idea of ‘its contribution’ seems to require the idea of what its intrinsic valence is independently of context. This suggests the idea of the invariant characteristics of the morally relevant feature which is at stake in this metaphysical account. Now, if the morally relevant feature and *its* contribution is crucial and has to be taken into account in order to arrive at the ultimate outcome of the moral evaluation of the case, why cannot we subscribe to atomism? If *it* and *its* contribution matters, it seems that subscribing to holism would be untenable and indefensible.

The very notion of 'it and its contribution' seems to suggest the atomist's conception of a context-independent character that the feature then contributes to different cases.

Indeed, when a particularist talks about a morally relevant feature and its different contributions in different contexts, he *individuates* the morally relevant feature and its contribution to the moral evaluation of the case. In other words, when one says that a morally relevant feature like promise keeping makes different contributions in different contexts, the particularist is trying to individuate the morally relevant feature and talk about its individual contribution to the moral evaluation of different cases.

Now, here is the question. If the particularist tries to individuate each morally relevant feature in order to arrive at a tenable explanation of the way in which different morally relevant features are combined together in different ethical situations, why has he not committed to atomism? An atomist individuates each morally relevant feature in order to give an account of how different morally relevant features are combined together in different cases. If this is the case and the whole idea of individuation has an indispensable role in giving the metaphysical account of how several morally relevant features are combined together in different contexts, what is the difference between the particularist and the atomist? Why does holism not lead to atomism?¹

Consider a morally relevant non-moral feature like causing pain. According to the particularist, it is not the case that causing pain is a wrong-making feature in the sense that in different concrete ethical situations, *its* deontic valence would be invariant and contribute to the moral evaluation of different cases in the same way. Rather, *its* contribution can vary from case to case. In other words, *its* deontic valence entirely depends on the context and how *it* is combined with other morally relevant non-moral properties which are at stake. These morally relevant features are combined together holistically and have no independent nature and characteristics outside the context. They have to be seen and evaluated solely within the context. We are not entitled to say anything with regard to *their* invariant deontic valence and *their* contribution to the moral evaluation of different cases in advance.

According to the opponent, if it is the case that morally relevant features are combined together holistically and none of them has separate characteristics outside the context, how can we talk about *the* contribution of a morally relevant non-moral property to the moral evaluation of different cases and *its* alteration? In fact, when we are talking about a morally relevant feature like causing pain and *its* invariant or variant deontic valance, we consider the morally relevant feature on its own regardless of the context. However, the particularist who subscribes to holism cannot apply such a method to evaluate the metaphysics of the situation. The particularist cannot apply such a method because he endorses the view that in each concrete ethical situation we are confronted with a condition in which several morally relevant features are combined together concurrently and there is no account available of how that combination has the resulting characteristics.² In such a situation, how can we detect and individuate a specific morally relevant feature and talk about *its* contribution to moral evaluation which might be changed in another ethical context? We have to bear in mind that the very idea of holism rejects the notion that each morally relevant feature can be evaluated on its own and alone. In contrast, holism holds that each morally relevant feature has to be examined only within a concrete context. But, at the same time, the holist claims that *the* deontic valence and *the* contribution of a morally relevant feature can vary from case to case. How can that be the case? If it is the case that each morally relevant feature which we have in the realm of morality is fully context-dependent, how can he talk about *its* contribution to moral evaluation? If *its* contribution really matters, how can he still stick to holism?

Consider the following quote by Dancy:

Although we are able to observe, in a given case, the importance that a property can have in suitable circumstances, the particularist can still insist that no notion is available of a sort of circumstance in which it *must* have that importance (1993, p. 70).

What does Dancy mean by *the* importance of a morally relevant feature in different circumstances? If we can pick out a morally relevant feature and talk about *its* metaphysical status and the way in which its importance *must* or *can* be manifested in other cases, why cannot we subscribe to atomism with regard to moral

reasons, according to which the metaphysical status of a morally relevant feature and the way in which it contributes to the moral evaluation of different cases is evaluated on its own?

Consider a concrete ethical situation in which four morally relevant features F, G, H and I are combined together. According to the particularist, we are only entitled to say something with regard to the whole metaphysical status of the case. Suppose that the ultimate metaphysical outcome of the case, following the combination of these features together, is right-making. Now, as a thought experiment, let us remove the morally relevant feature F. If the metaphysical situation changes, it follows from this that F had a contribution to the moral evaluation of this case. But, according to the particularist, we are not allowed to say anything with regard to F's contribution to moral evaluation outside the context. All we can say is that in this concrete situation; F, G, H and I are combined together, and the final outcome is right-making. In the meantime, in another ethical situation in which F is removed, the end result is such-and-such. In other words, strictly speaking, according to the particularist, all we are entitled to say about the morally relevant feature F, is that it can be joined with G, H, and I in different contexts in different ways. That is all. We cannot say that F is right-making in this case and wrong-making in that case. All we can say is something about the ultimate outcome of the combination in which F, G, H and I are combined together. We are not allowed to go further and give details regarding *the* contribution of F to the moral evaluation of the case. We cannot say that F contributes to the ultimate outcome of the case in this way or in that way. In order to talk about a morally relevant feature like F in such a way, one has to subscribe to atomism, according to which a morally relevant feature like F has an invariant deontic valence which can be kept outside the context. But this is exactly what a particularist like Dancy rejects. Nevertheless, the moral particularist appears also to allow the examination of the behaviour of a morally relevant feature outside the context. So, to be a real particularist, one has to talk about the metaphysical status of a concrete case as a whole, regardless of the behaviour of a specific morally relevant feature.

Consider a morally relevant feature like promise keeping. The particularist cannot give an account of how it behaves. He

cannot say that promise keeping is right-making or that it is wrong-making. All he can say is that, in a concrete ethical situation in which promise keeping is joined with gratitude and other properties, the ultimate outcome, for instance, is right-making. He is not entitled to say that promise keeping behaves here as a right-making feature, and behaves somewhere else as a wrong-making feature. That would require atomism and the atomistic approach to the combination of morally relevant features in different context.

In order to reject the first horn of the dilemma, one might make a distinction between individuating a feature like F and individuating its contribution to the moral evaluation of different cases. In other words, although feature F remains unchanged in different ethical contexts, its contribution can vary from case to case. That is, the particularist can stick to the idea that the behaviour of a morally relevant feature can vary from case to case, whereas the morally relevant feature remains as it is in different contexts. For instance, although a morally relevant feature like causing pain remains unchanged in different contexts, metaphysically speaking, its reason-giving behaviour can change from case to case. In other words, causing pain is just that – the feature of causing pain. But, whether it has moral significance depends on context, how it fits with other features.

Now, I have to say that this sounds plausible as an account of Dancy. One can read Dancy and other particularists who subscribe to holism in such a way. In response, I have to say that, firstly there is no textual evidence for such a distinction in the literature. In other words, the way in which Dancy and other particularists put forward the idea of holism is not based upon such a metaphysical distinction.

Secondly, if the distinction between the feature and its contribution to moral evaluation is upheld, the position is counter-intuitive, e.g. it removes any scope for saying causing pain is a bad thing in itself, or is *prima facie* bad. In other words, if the feature and its behaviour can be distinguished and what is crucial is the behaviour of a feature rather than *the* feature, why does this feature have to be regarded as a feature which is related to the case which we are talking about? If that is his position, how can we say that causing pain is a morally 'relevant' feature at all? What can be said with regard to its moral relevance? Perhaps Dancy would accept

such a metaphysical distinction. It makes sense of his metaphysics, but at a high price. In other words, if a particularist like Dancy subscribes to such a distinction, he owes us a metaphysical account with regard to the idea of moral relevance.

Thirdly, the distinction between a morally relevant feature and its behaviour sounds redundant. We can give an account of how a morally relevant feature behaves in different ethical contexts without resorting to such a strong metaphysical distinction. If we combine a morally relevant feature like causing pain and its behaviour, we can give an account of how a morally relevant feature like causing pain contributes to the moral evaluation of different cases without resorting to anything else. For instance, we can say that causing pain contributes to the moral evaluation of this case in such-and-such way and so on. What follows from this is that if we can give an account of how a morally relevant feature contributes to the moral evaluation of different cases without supposing such a metaphysical distinction, why should we appeal to it? We can get along well without any appeal to such a metaphysical account.

2.2. The Second Horn of the Dilemma: The Holist's Etaphysical Account Is Vague and Unclear

If a particularist like Dancy accepts the first argument which holds that individuating the contribution of a morally relevant feature to the moral evaluation of different cases leads to atomism that he denies in the first place, then the particularist is confronted with the second horn of the dilemma.

I now turn to the second horn of the dilemma, according to which the particularist puts forward a vague and unclear account of the way in which several morally relevant features are combined together in different concrete ethical situations.

The particularist subscribes to the holistic approach with regard to the nature of the combination of different morally relevant features. Consider the case in which several morally relevant features such as fidelity, gratitude and giving pleasure are combined together. If one asks the particularist about the metaphysics of combination in a concrete ethical situation in which giving pleasure, fidelity etc. are joined together, the particularist would say that they are combined together in such a way that the ultimate outcome would be such-and-such. He cannot say that

fidelity, for instance, is a right-making feature in this case, or is combined with giving pleasure in that way. So, what can the particularist say instead? He can only say that the metaphysical status of the case overall is either this or that. However, this cannot be regarded as a lucid metaphysical account. If we ask the particularist about the behaviour of a morally relevant feature F in a concrete case, he cannot tell us clearly what is going on there. All he can say is that F is joined with other morally relevant features and the result is such-and-such. Moreover, as the particularist rejects any account of generality in the realm of morality, looking at similar cases to assess the overall metaphysical status cannot help us. All we have is *this* concrete ethical situation. We have to keep looking at this case to arrive at a holistic metaphysical point, according to which morally relevant features, in this context, are combined together in such a way. We are not offered any more detail. It seems that the metaphysical account which is offered here is imprecise and mysterious. In other words, we are not offered an account according to which the metaphysical status of each case can be explained. All we can do is to look at the case over time to arrive at the ultimate outcome of the combination of several morally relevant features of the case. So, it follows from the second horn of the dilemma that the particularist's account with regard to the way in which several morally relevant features are combined together in different cases is untenable, or, at least, vague and mysterious.

To recap, the particularist who subscribes to holism is confronted with a dilemma. According to the first horn of the dilemma, to be regarded as a holist regarding the contribution of a morally relevant feature to the moral evaluation of different concrete cases, one has to reject the existence of a morally relevant feature which can be examined on its own and outside the context. To be classified as an atomist with regard to the contribution of a morally relevant feature to the moral evaluation of different cases, one has to subscribe to the account of morally relevant features which can be examined on their own and outside the context. So, the holist who claims that the contribution of a morally relevant feature to moral evaluation can be changed from case to case, disregards what he says concerning the nature of morally relevant features. Consider the following quote by McNaughton:

...I take my nephews and nieces to the circus for a treat. They enjoy it. I have done the right thing. Why? Because I succeeded in giving them pleasure. Because the fact that my action gave pleasure was here the reason for its being right, does it follow that, whenever an action gives pleasure, we shall have reason for thinking it right? No. ...Whether the fact that an action causes pleasure is a reason for or against doing it is not something that can be settled in isolation from other features of the action. It is only when we know the context in which the pleasure will occur that we are in a position to judge (1988, p. 193).

On the face of it, it looks like McNaughton is trying to make an epistemological point at this stage. However, if this is not the case and he is dealing with a metaphysical notion here, it seems that his account of holism is incoherent and leads to atomism. Let me give more detail to make the point clearer.

According to McNaughton, giving pleasure as a morally relevant feature can contribute to the moral evaluation of a number of concrete ethical situations in different ways. In some cases, it contributes as a right-making feature, while in others it contributes as a wrong-making feature. According to McNaughton, one is not authorised to talk about the contribution of giving pleasure to the moral evaluation of different cases in advance.

The whole issue according to the generalist is that if it is the case that *the* contribution of a morally relevant feature like giving pleasure can be changed from context to context, there is something which has its specific and definite metaphysical characteristics and can be investigated on its own. Otherwise, how can we say that the contribution of a morally relevant feature like giving pleasure to moral evaluation cannot be settled in isolation of other relevant features? If it is the case that giving pleasure can contribute to moral evaluation in different ways in several contexts, then there has to be a distinct metaphysical character of a morally relevant feature like giving pleasure. Let me give an example to make the point clearer.

Consider the case that some sugar, some coffee and some milk are combined together in a glass. The sugar contributes to the causal outcome of the case according to its intrinsic structure, and the way in which its atoms and molecules are combined together. The ultimate causal outcome depends on the intrinsic structure of

the sugar, the coffee and the milk. Consider again the case in which some sugar and some hot water are combined together in a glass. It seems that the sugar contributes to the causal outcome of the case according to its structure, and the final causal outcome depends on the structure of the sugar and the hot water. Now, if we want to apply the particularistic account in this case, we would have to say that the contribution of the sugar to the causal outcome of the first case differs from the contribution of the sugar to the causal outcome of the second case. In fact, as the situation is changed in the second case, the sugar's contribution to the causal outcome of the case can vary. But, as we have seen, the contribution of the sugar to the causal outcome entirely depends on its intrinsic structure and the way in which its atoms and molecules are combined together. A causal particularist would have to say that the contribution of the sugar to the causal outcome of the second case can differ from the first one. It follows from this that the intrinsic structure of the sugar in the second case is different from the intrinsic structure of the sugar in the first case. In other words, the sugar in the second case is different from the sugar in the first case. But, how can that be possible? Would it be the case that the characteristics of the sugar in the second case is different from the first case? It seems that the causal particularist is confronted with a dilemma at this stage. According to the first horn of the dilemma, if the thing which we are talking about in the second case is not sugar, we are not authorised to say that the contribution of the thing to causal outcome can vary from context to context, because we are talking about two different things which have different causal outcomes in different cases. According to the second horn of the dilemma, if the particularist says that the thing which contributes to the causal outcome of the second case is sugar, his claim sounds counter-intuitive and implausible. How could it be the case that the sugar contributes to the causal outcome of different cases differently?³

In order to do that, the intrinsic structure of the sugar has to be changed. In such a situation, the thing with a different intrinsic structure which we are talking about is no longer sugar. So, either the thing which contributes to the causal outcome of the cases is sugar with a specific atomic and molecular structure, or it is not sugar and has another atomic and molecular structure. If the thing

is sugar in both cases, it has to contribute to the causal outcome of the cases in the same type of way because of its intrinsic structure. Otherwise, in the second case we are confronted with something which is not sugar, has another intrinsic structure and contributes to the causal outcome of the case differently. It would be impossible for a thing to be regarded as sugar with different atomic and molecular structures concurrently.⁴

Having considered the sugar example, we can say that the particularist's claim that there is no metaphysical account available of how several morally relevant features are combined together is counter-intuitive. In fact, if there is no account available of how several morally relevant features are combined together, it follows from this that none of these features can be selected and examined on its own, because they are strongly combined with other relevant features to the extent that one cannot detach them from each other.

Therefore, it seems that the particularist who puts forward an argument in favour of holism needs to subscribe to a minimal form of atomism, according to which the individuation of a morally relevant feature has to be taken into account; otherwise he cannot talk about the alteration of the metaphysical status of a morally relevant feature like giving pleasure.

The second horn of the main dilemma is this. As the particularist has to disregard the individuation of each morally relevant feature in order to give a holistic account of how several morally relevant features are combined together in different contexts, his metaphysical account of the way in which different morally relevant features are combined together sounds vague. In other words, according to the particularist, each case has to be considered on its own, regardless of similar cases. So, we have to focus on the case to arrive at the way in which different morally relevant features are combined together. At the same time, the holist is not allowed to talk about the individuation of each morally relevant feature and its contribution to the moral evaluation of the case. Consequently, the metaphysical account of the combination of features which we are offered is a vague one, according to which there is no account to be given regarding the way in which several morally relevant features are combined together in different contexts.

Notes

1. Dancy puts forward the idea of holism and the way in which a morally relevant feature contributes to the moral evaluation of different cases as a metaphysical point. Whether or not we know the behaviour of a morally relevant feature in each concrete ethical situation is an epistemological issue. Now, if the particularist wants to say that we cannot know what the behaviour is of each individual morally relevant feature in concrete ethical situations beforehand, the modest-generalist can subscribe to his point. But the point which is offered by the particularist at this stage is epistemological rather than metaphysical. In other words, if the particularist is going to regard the notion of individuating morally relevant features as an epistemological point, the modest-generalist can endorse his point. However, it does not follow from this that the critique of individuating morally relevant features can be regarded as a metaphysical claim.
2. Again, if the particularist means an epistemological point by mentioning that there is no account available of how morally relevant features are combined together, the modest-generalist has no problem with it. But, as we know, the main discussion at this stage is a metaphysical issue rather than an epistemological one.
3. Of course, given other ingredients the sugar can produce novel effects, e.g. be the catalyst for an explosive reaction. But although this shows how its individuation as a feature can be distinct from its behaviour in a context, it still seems right to insist that its behaviour systematically results from its essence as individuated. Anyway, in the moral case, separating behaviour from the individuation of the feature results in an account of, e.g. pain producing, that has no prima facie wrong-making power. And that seems counter-intuitive.
4. If one says that the relation between moral effect and essence of feature is unlike that of causal effect and essence of feature in the sugar case, in response, I have to say that as the moral particularist accepts that there are moral properties which are part of the furniture of the world (as he is a realist), there is a causal account regarding the occurrence of moral properties and the way in which they supervene on non-moral properties which can be given.

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