The Humanism of Particularism:  
Reconciling Dancy and Sartre in a Rational-Existential Ethics

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Many universities today include an ethics course as a degree requirement. However, the standard approach in such classes is to introduce students to a variety of different moral theories, a kind of ethical “sampler” course. Of course, the obvious problem with this is that different theories often conflict. Some contemporary thinkers think this approach is actually harmful to students’ moral decision-making. Annette Baier describes the problem well:

The obvious trouble with our contemporary attempts to use moral theory to guide action is the lack of agreement on which theory to apply. The standard undergraduate course in, say, medical ethics, or business ethics, acquaints the student with a variety of theories, and shows the difference in the guidance they give... We produce relativists and moral skeptics, persons who have been convinced by our teaching that whatever they do in some difficult situation, some moral theory will condone it, another will condemn it… In attempting to increase moral reflectiveness we may be destroying what conscience there once was in those we teach. (Baier 207-8)

In my own experience, I have also recognized the complexities of moral education. After having taken applied ethics courses in public policy, economics, law, the environment and others, I agree that no single moral theory I have encountered ably provides certain answers to every ethical dilemma. So, in light of worries of giving students the rhetorical tools with which to justify or condemn actions as they see fit, I want to argue that this situation can prompt us to ask a new question: Is there an alternative for understanding moral decision-making?

Such was the question that began my interest in this project. With some research, I came across one thinker, Jonathan Dancy, who claims that, if this situation is to be improved, perhaps a deviation from the current prominence of moral principles is in order. In fact, Dancy thinks that moral philosophy that relies on a methodology of principles to deliver the correct moral answer is detrimental to moral decision-making insofar as such theories are inclined to overlook important concerns relative to a particular situation. In my own interpretation, I speculate that theorists who argue for such a strongly principled framework have been inspired by the language of mechanical strategies and natural laws found in the natural sciences. In this way I characterize principled ethics as analogous to methodical science.

In Dancy’s alternative, he claims that when talking and acting ethically, we should focus on the subtleties of a particular situation and avoid worrying about legitimizing our actions with principles, “Moral judgement can get along perfectly well without any appeal to principles, indeed there is no essential link between being a full moral agent and having principles.” (Dancy 1) Dancy’s language of the moral agent or moral person is interesting because it would seem that his intention is to refocus the subject matter of ethics from actions to actors. However, his thesis specifically targets particular actions and their particular reasons, hence the name of his theory, “Moral Particularism.” This debate between principles and particulars and the rightness and wrongness of actions has a long and rich history, and in my own analysis, I make sense of
Dancy’s position, and the debate as a whole, as moving away from treating ethics as a methodical science of action and toward developing a skill of judgment.

However, before I proceed, it should be noted that Dancy thinks that the vast majority of persons already accept a more logically structured, “scientific” method,

We are accustomed to think that the moral person is the person of principle. We have learnt that an unprincipled person is one not to be trusted… we have also come to think that without principles there could be no such thing as morality at all—no difference between the right and the wrong. (Dancy 1)

Further, if there is any doubt that principles dominate the common-sense understanding of ethics, a basic dictionary definition reveals that three of the four interpretations explicitly refer to principles or rules:

1. a system of moral principles: the ethics of a culture.
2. the rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular class of human actions or a particular group, culture, etc.: medical ethics; Christian ethics.
3. moral principles, as of an individual: His ethics forbade betrayal of a confidence.
4. that branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions. (“Ethics”)

It is this last definition that Dancy is most closely aligned with. In fact, he defines Moral Particularism as “… a view in moral metaphysics: it is a view about the ways in which actions get to be right and wrong.” (Dancy 140) However, it is also important to note that Dancy’s position is a reaction against traditional principled moral thinkers who define moral principles as moral rules based on reasons.

To better explain, Dancy claims that the majority of moral principles rely on what he names atomism in the theory of reasons, which amounts to the claim that “a feature that is a reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity, in any other.” Against this, Dancy defends what he calls holism in the theory of reasons, i.e. that “a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another.” (Dancy 7) Interestingly enough, in explicating his position, Dancy refers to a scientific analogy. He gives an example of under what conditions a match can and can not be lit to explain how different contexts can wholly change a scenario:

• If I strike this dry, well-made match, then it will light. \((p \rightarrow q)\)
• If \(p\) and the match is in a very strong electromagnetic field, then it will not light. \((p \& r) \rightarrow \neg q\)
• If \(p\) and \(r\) and the match is in a Faraday cage, then it will light. \((p \& r \& s) \rightarrow q\)
• If \(p\) and \(r\) and \(s\) and the room is evacuated of oxygen, then it will not light. \((p \& r \& s \& t) \rightarrow \neg q\) (Dancy 106-7)

This example from physics details how the validity or strength of reasons is context-dependent. Likewise, Dancy claims that moral reasons work in the same way. For example, a common ethical rule is that (for whatever reasons) it is good to keep one’s promises. However, breaking a promise may be good if the other party had lied about
what the promise entailed, such as refusing to give my friend a ride to the bank when I discover that he plans to rob it. Further, keeping a promise may be good even if it was made under a lie, such as agreeing to lend my friend money so he can eat, even though he originally told me that it was for a book to save embarrassment. As I see it, this is the basis of Dancy’s MP and the heart of his rationale for why he cannot accept the assumption that moral principles are fundamental to moral decision-making – because if we’re creative enough, we can give a reasonable counterexample to almost any rule. Thus, the problem with teaching ethics seems a problem with ethics itself – it’s complicated.

But is this true? Are moral reasons really this inconsistent? Are there no invariant moral reasons? Dancy replies with a new analogy, this time to art:

There are two categories of reasons that have often been thought special: the aesthetic and the moral… It is undisputed that a feature that in one place adds something of aesthetic value may in another make things worse… Painterliness seems to me a quality that can sometimes be out of place; symmetry too… Perhaps then there are some invariant aesthetic reasons, but I know of nobody who has ever suggested that one could erect a principle-based structure for aesthetic judgement in the sort of way that almost everybody thinks one can do for moral judgement. (Dancy 75-6)

From this it is obvious that Dancy places a great deal of importance on his analogy to art. Personally, I agree that reasons for ethical or aesthetic judgments should not automatically be considered invariant. Just as the initial suggestion of harming innocents is unpalatable, sometimes it is permissible, such as when a child has a splinter removed or when a police recruit is subjected to pepper spray before being allowed to carry it herself. Aesthetically speaking, a good general rule may be not to use clashing colors, but in some cases it may prove tasteful.

So, if this is the case, what would Dancy claim are the good general rules for ethics? In an interview in April I was able to ask this question. Dancy admitted that for him, moral judgment does require regularities from which to work. He called these “default reasons” and referenced W.D. Ross, a moral philosopher well known for his moral realism and scientific approach to ethics,

The moral order...is just as much part of the fundamental nature of the universe (and...of any possible universe in which there are moral agents at all) as is the spatial or numerical structure expressed in the axioms of geometry or arithmetic. (Ross 29-30)

To arrive at these moral truths, Ross put forth seven deontological duties that he thought could logically deduce the answer to any ethical dilemma: duties of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, self-improvement, reparation, gratitude, and promise-keeping.

Of course, Dancy disagrees with this strongly principled approach, as he thinks that the values of these duties change per relevant context. Instead, his claim is that these duties ordinarily serve as fine guides for ethical behavior – such as generally being kind and promise-keeping – but that certain exceptional situations may call for other actions. To recognize these exceptional situations, Dancy calls on moral judgment, defined as,

…a skill of discernment, not knowledge of a set of true general propositions discovered by thinking about previous cases and applied somehow to new ones… But knowing this is just being able to tell the differences made case by case, in a way that is informed by one’s past experience
but not articulable in propositional terms. The competent judge is not the person in command of
general truths about the behaviour of reasons, all extracted from experience. She is a person who
can tell a difference when she comes across it. (Dancy 142-3)

In other words, Dancy is arguing for a return to casuistry, or a careful case-by-case
reasoning, in order to develop a skillful moral judgment. In this way, he views ethics as a
kind of art to be practiced or prudence to be developed.

Additionally, Dancy doesn’t mean to say that we can acquire a kind of ethical
expertise simply by reading his book. In fact, he gives such a disclaimer at its beginning:

The book I have not written would really be an investigation of the subtleties of our moral thought
and the actual complexities of life. The book I have written is about how to understand the way in
which reasons work, and deals largely with theories about reasons rather than with life. As you
can see, I would like to have been able to write the other book, the one about life, but this one is
all I could manage. To write such a book, one would presumably have to give more and more
subtle and delicate descriptions of complex moral situations, and show that no matter how
carefully one tries to frame one’s principles, there will always be a situation about which those
principles would generate the wrong answer. (Dancy 2)

So, to take the alternative route, I would like to provide one sufficiently complex
situation that I think cannot be reconciled with principles. Suppose I’m confronted with a
burning house and there are no other persons, emergency personnel or otherwise, in sight.
Further, suppose I hear cries coming from inside the building. Immediately, we can
identify a number of options: rush into the building and try to save those in mortal
danger, call 911, panic and do not act, or leave the scene hoping that a trained firefighter
will arrive soon. The scientific analogy fails here if we consider that none of these
options are impossible to act on, unlike the restrictions of natural laws. Though I cannot
choose to defy gravity, I must choose in this case.

Moral instinct or default moral reasons (such as try to do good or prevent harm)
may urge me to make my way through the house, but a number of considerations may be
important. For example, suppose I’m wheelchair-bound. Then the option to go into the
building and rescue the endangered persons may be a poor choice, as my chances of
success are low and the likelihood that I will lose my own life is high. In this case, my
physical ability is a deciding factor. Or, suppose I am normally abled, but I am driving by
the house while rushing my pregnant and laboring wife to the hospital. Alternately,
perhaps I find myself in this situation with no other pressing obligations, but I recall
hearing from a firefighter that attempting to enter a burning building without the proper
equipment or expertise can actually bring more harm than good to the situation. As such,
I may decide only to call 911 and report the situation.

However, in this latter case, suppose I did not know that advice, or perhaps I
knew it and chose to ignore it, but I end up saving a person’s life before any emergency
personnel arrive. Moral approval in this case is ambiguous; I may be applauded as a
brave and selfless person or chastised as foolhardy and lucky. In every scenario, a wide
range of factors reasonably affects my decision-making, including intentions, intuitions,
anticipated consequences, promises/obligations, familial roles, responsibilities, abilities,
and occupation/expertise, to name a few. Further, many of these factors are actually
person dependent. Thus, when Dancy refers to “moral judgment” over moral principles, it
is necessary to ask, Whose judgment?, while keeping in mind that several possible goods
exist behind every legitimate option.
Of course, at saying this, I expect the common accusation of “moral relativism.” However, I find it hard to believe that any person today denies the relativity of moral roles, responsibilities, and circumstances. To do so seems to confine ethics to a science—a study that expects invariant rules to guide its answers. Instead, I think that ethics teachers today would do well to admit to some moral tolerance, not in the sense of ethical egalitarianism or “all-actions-are-equal,” but rather by recognizing the existence of value pluralism. To expand on this point, I find a quote from William James to be especially helpful:

No one of the measures [of goodness] that have been actually proposed has, however, given general satisfaction (...) The various ideals have no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals. No single abstract principle can be so used as to yield to the philosopher anything like a scientifically accurate and genuinely useful casuistic scale. (James)

In other words, if, after having adopted the “scientific” approach and pursued the question What is the right thing to do?, we discover that several valid options exist, then the debate ought to proceed from attending to ethical actions to ethical actors/judgment. Even more, the need to turn inward becomes more urgent than ever, raising questions about how one is caring about the situation, what good one wishes to accomplish, what ideal one is to represent, and what capacities one has available. Further, after the deliberation and decision-making process, I find that an important phenomenon that is seldom spoken about in ethical circles may occur, regret.

For lack of a better definition, I refer to Dancy’s: “The sort of regret I am thinking of here is the regret we feel when, though what we did was the right thing to do, still there were strong reasons to do something else. I name this phenomenon ‘regret,’ in the sense of knowing there were good reasons for acting otherwise.” (Dancy 4) However, I would differ from Dancy’s semantics by arguing that given value pluralism, we feel regret in the sense of knowing that, though what we did was a right thing to do, still there were strong reasons to choose otherwise.

Still, the point is the same: Within a methodical system of ethics geared to produce the ethical choice, a hierarchy has been established that orders certain goods over others. However, if I can admit that aesthetic taste exists in both Impressionism and Cubism and, similarly, that ethical goods exist in both options to donate my inheritance to charity or to use it for tuition and a home, then no matter the choice, perfect peace of mind may not be possible. However, I don’t mean to mention this “regret” feeling as if it were a detriment to one’s emotional health or moral decision-making, as if I ought to always lament the action I choose. Rather, I interpret it as a check that one sufficiently struggled with a situation by recognizing the legitimate alternatives.

On this theme, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a related essay in which he spoke to the relationship of freedom and ethics, “The one thing that counts is knowing whether the inventing that has been done, has been done in the name of freedom.” (Sartre 59) In my view, regret reminds us that we were free to act otherwise, that other good actions were available, but we could choose only one and we now have a responsibility for that choice. Or, in the words of Sartre, “In choosing his ethics, he makes himself, and force of circumstances is such that he can not abstain from choosing one.” (Sartre 56)

In short, by making one choice I ought to understand that I am foregoing all other possible choices. Though Sartre may not explicitly make the claim, I think some feeling of regret demonstrates that I have recognized the validity of these other choices but that I
have committed myself toward only one. Of course, this raises a question of temporality to our choices: For how long am I involved with my choice? Or, can’t I just as well decide to recant on one choice in favor of another?

Certainly one could, justifiably so even, but, referring back to the analogy to art, I do not think a fulfilled artist could be one that is continually scrapping paintings after one brush-stroke, “What counts is total commitment, and it is not by a particular case or particular action that you are committed altogether.” (Sartre 50) I agree: commitment is important if one aims to succeed in one’s endeavors. If I wish to master painting, practice beyond one trial is necessary; if I desire a meaningful relationship with a person, I should exercise routine acts of care toward them; likewise, if I aspire to be a successful businessman I ought to involve myself with trade and commerce.

Ultimately, I cite Sartre in my study of Moral Particularism because I think that his analogy to art better accommodates value pluralism than does Dancy’s. While Dancy claims that, by dissecting the reasons for action, we can better apprehend the correct choice in a moral dilemma, Sartre claims that in at least certain situations, it is inappropriate to speak in such a way; several possible routes exist. In other words, after laying out the facts of a situation (what is the case), Dancy has difficulty giving guidance in how to use moral judgment to help decide action¹, aside from defining it as the ability to discriminate the value of reasons in a particular situation.

Contrastingly, Sartre attempts to cross the so-called “is-ought gap,” not so much by providing a framework within which moral decisions should be made, but by arguing that, after one considers all the potential risks, consequences, and relationships relevant to the situation at hand, the person still must choose:

In making a decision [we] can not help having a certain anguish… That doesn’t keep [us] from acting: on the contrary, it is the very condition of [our] action. For it implies that [we] envisage a number of possibilities, and when [we] choose one, [we] realize that it has value only because it is chosen. (Sartre 39-40)

Further, if value pluralism is included in this understanding, then every actor is responsible for choosing which bridge to cross and what kind and caliber of “artist” they wish to be. Yet, Sartre is mindful that “the existentialist will never consider man as an end because he is always in the making.” (Sartre 61) Thus, even if I am succeeding in my goal, whether I be painting beautifully, possessing a joyful and long-term relationship, or being wealthy and reputable as a businessman, it may be inappropriate to say that I am the final fulfillment of any of these activities; I am always capable of choosing to drop my paintbrush, relationship, or occupation in pursuit of another action or commitment. Yet, insofar as I do not, I take on the responsibility of choosing not to drop my commitment; at every opportunity I choose to renew my initial decision.

So, as I mentioned in the introduction, some concerns exist today about how to teach the complexities of ethics. However, this has always been difficult. In fact, some two-and-a-half thousand years ago Aristotle remarked on this same trouble:

How one should order one’s own affairs is not clear and needs inquiry. [This] is confirmed by the fact that while young men become geometricians and mathematicians and wise in matters like these, it is thought that a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found. The cause is that such

¹ Though, this is a difficult task for any ethics and reflects my original question in this study.
wisdom is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar from experience… (Aristotle 1142a7)

Again, the sciences are mentioned alongside ethics. However, here Aristotle is contrasting the two disciplines and even arguing that ethics is an art requiring of more patience and practice. Indeed, in my conversation with Dancy, he also admitted that he views himself in the Aristotelian tradition by trying to analyze what exactly defines the “Good.” Thus, in the way that Dancy calls on moral judgment to discriminate the relevant differences case by case, I reminded of Aristotle’s phronesis. Moreover, I am especially interested in this casuistic strategy from my experience with professional ethics courses; the “Good” seems to take many different forms depending on the context in question. Thus, I think that if the pursuit and teaching of the “Good” really is in need of theoretical guidance, the best beginning would be to understand morality as “being careful in providing someone with a better time.”\(^2\) (Zanardi and Shute 35) This definition may be objected to as being too vague, but it ought to be at first, as careful semantics will be needed when addressing the complexities of particular situations.

However, I also anticipate a further question: What is it for an action to be immoral? This seems to be a somewhat overlooked question in modern moral philosophy, but I think it is essential. Reflecting on my own experience with using the word “wrong” in a moral sense, I generally judged so according to the rationale that the actor in question was not considerate in his or her moral decision-making. That is, a moral action was recognized, but disregarded. In light of this negative insight, I think I may be able to re-develop Dancy’s intuitive moral sense as “care.” Thus, in my formulation, being careful in one’s moral decision-making, by paying close attention to all of the relevant details in a situation would define the proper attitude of a moral actor.

Of course, the objection could be said that many situations demand immediate decision. In such a case, one may not be granted the time necessary to carefully weigh and consider all of the relevant factors. Dancy admits this much,

Competent moral judges do not need to be aware of everything that just might make a difference in order to determine whether it does or not; they don’t even, I would claim, need to be aware of everything that does make a difference, any more than the competent chess player needs to be aware of all the indefinitely ramifying contributions of the different aspects of the position in front of her in order to reach a responsible judgement about what move there is most reason to make. We don’t have to know everything before we can make a start at all.” (Dancy 142)

Still, I think this issue deserves more attention. Dancy alludes to a kind of moral judgment which can be improved with training, but I think that this idea can be supplemented by incorporating a virtue ethics approach. According to this tradition, persons can develop virtuous characters by routinely choosing moral goods, such as honesty, trustworthiness, and bravery and thus habitually become honest, trustworthy or brave persons themselves. I think this is a promising direction to take in order to understand how moral decisions can be made in situations which lack available time to weigh all of the important factors. That is, with routine practice with ethics, we may be able to develop virtuous orientations, so that similar cases can be more efficiently identified and acted on. Still, I heed Sartre’s warning to recognize that our quest for being is a pursuit, a becoming; that we are never complete because we are ‘always in the

\(^2\) I am much obliged to Dr. Zanardi for helping me to understand the meaning of this definition.
So said, my desire to be an honest and caring person begins today, but continues tomorrow.

References

———. Personal interview. 10 April 2010.