

The Philosophical Quarterly

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Ethics Without Principles. BY JONATHAN DANCY. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004. Pp. x + 229. Price £27.50.)

In his preface, Dancy introduces his book as ‘the culmination of twenty-five years’ work’ (p. vii), and it is a fitting testament to that philosophical lifetime that Dancy can present his case for the theory of particularism which he has championed with the tables turned on his old foe, generalism. Dancy not only attacks the view that ‘the very possibility of moral thought and judgement depends on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles’ (p. 7), but asks why, once we have given the matter some thought, we should even be tempted to think that it does. Generalism is forced to question its *raison d’être*.

The book is highly personal; and such a first-personal statement, with its dry humour, its wry reflections on the path that has led the author to this point, and its perspectival declarations on the state of knowledge and debate, is far more engaging to read than an impersonal ‘things are thus and so’. It is clear, thoughtful, and closely argued with force and honesty.

The book is in three parts. Part I considers the theory of reasons. This is because, Dancy claims, most errors of generalism stem from errors in the theory of reasons. He defends a theory of contributory reasons, features that ‘make a case for acting’ in a particular way, but which can combine with other such features to strengthen the case (p. 15). Such reasons, he argues, cannot be understood as derivative from what we have ‘overall reason’ to do; instead, the latter is simply a ‘verdict’ on how the contributory reasons lie in the particular case. Contributory reasons must therefore be understood in their own terms, which is that of ‘favouring’: a reason for an action is a feature that ‘favours’ doing that action. No one can give an explicit account of favouring, but Dancy seeks to convince us that we already have a good grasp of the concept, and then to argue that any meta-ethical theory which cannot make good sense of contributory reasons is in trouble.

His aim, developed in part II, is to use his theory of contributory reasons to defend a very strong form of holism about reasons, *viz* that ‘a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another’ (p. 7). It is the additional clause ‘or an opposite reason’ which has caused a great deal of fuss, for this type of holism goes a long way towards establishing particularism. In a matter of five pages (pp. 73–8), Dancy sets out the heart of the argument that the clause is correct – from practical examples, the holistic functioning of theoretical and aesthetic reasons, and the lack of need for invariant reasons. Generalism, however, must be committed to rejecting it, since principles require reasons that are invariant. If the principle ‘Lying is wrong’ is right, then it must be because I *always* have reason not to lie. Whatever makes lying wrong will always make lying wrong. If the *very same*

considerations can sometimes favour lying and sometimes disfavour it, depending on context, it would be impossible to establish the principle. The longer argument for holism takes the form of two chapters, one a response to criticism, the other an attack on the alternatives. Together they present an admirable survey of the contemporary debate and represent Dancy's most forceful statement of why he, holism and therefore particularism are right.

Holism does not make principles or invariant reasons impossible, but the boot is now on the other foot: having accepted holism, we not only need some argument for thinking that we could have such a set of principles that would cover a sufficiently wide-ranging number of cases to form the core of morality, we also need an argument as to why we should set off in search of them. Dancy considers and rejects a number of such arguments for the necessity of principles, from the theoretical requirements of non-cognitivism to social cohesion. Critics will no doubt continue to produce further reasons to believe in generalism, and can continue to appeal to a number of arguments which Dancy dismisses rather rapidly. For example, he considers Roger Crisp's defence, that the unity of the virtues entails that reasons stemming from the virtues, e.g., being merciful, just, benevolent, will be invariant (p. 124) – mercy cannot make an act wrong, since such an act would not be properly merciful. A good part of Dancy's response is simply to reject the unity of the virtues.

However, he holds out to generalism the olive branch of a 'default reason', 'a consideration which is reason-giving [with the same polarity] unless something prevents it from being so' (p. 112). This sugars the bitterness of particularism for those who have not yet acquired the taste. It captures such truth as there is in moral generalizations; and it is employed against all those who want to say 'Surely F [e.g., justice, or causing unnecessary pain to unwilling innocents] is always a reason in favour of/against an act'. Such invariant reasons are not impossible; but they are very much the exception rather than the rule, are not invariant in *structure* even if they are in each case so far, and their invariance is unnecessary for moral thought.

Without principles, Dancy needs a robust theory of judgement, and the last chapter of part II and much of part III spells out this theory, while applying particularism to the theory of value. The central claim is that what a competent judge of reasons knows is a type of know-how: it is the knowledge of the 'sort of differences' which reasons make to the situations in which they appear. In terms of concepts, 'to grasp the practical purport of a [practical] concept ... is to grasp how its applicability in a given case affects what one ought to do' (pp. 191–2). As this can differ from case to case, one must know the *sort* of difference it can make to be a competent judge (this connects back to the idea of a default reason). But 'the sort of difference' is not something that can be articulated, and Dancy is further tempted to say that 'our sense that something is a reason is absolutely underivative and immediate' (pp. 160–1).

Let this inarticulate intuitionism is too threatening to contemplate, Dancy finds a convincing and more widely accepted 'companion in guilt' in the theory of meaning. He draws on Stanley Cavell's work to argue that our competence with meaning does not require that words or sentences have invariant meaning, nor that meaning is rule-governed, nor that we infer the meaning of greater wholes from

lesser parts. The book ends, to the delight of anyone who has found the dictates of rational choice theory quite alien to the practice of making rational choices, with a critical discussion of a number of shibboleths regarding the rational requirements on valuing alternatives.

The support for generalism which will live on, I suspect, is that Dancy's theory of judgement simply does not make our evaluative practices sufficiently 'rational'. But it will be a challenge to state why we should or could expect more of 'reason' without begging the question against particularism. As Dancy explicitly notes, his is a theory of reasons that can apply across the board. We have been presented with a closely worked theory of what human rationality is. It will be essential reading for all those working in meta-ethics and the theory of reasons more generally.

Heythrop College, University of London

MICHAEL LACEWING