

Reason Holism, Individuation, and Embeddedness

Abstract:

The goal of this paper is to promote what I call ‘the embedded thesis’ as a general constraint on how moral reasons behave. Dancy’s reason holism will be used as a foil to illustrate the thesis. According to Dancy’s reason holism, moral reasons behave in a holistic way; that is, a feature that is a moral reason in one context might not be so in another or might even be an opposite reason. The way a feature manages to switch its reason status is by the help of a so-called enabler/disabler. The enabler in itself is not part of the reason, according to Dancy’s reason holism, for it can be either present or absent while the reason feature is present. To put the idea somewhat differently, Dancy’s reason holism presupposes what I call ‘reason individuation’, the view that features that function as reasons can be individuated from those that function as enablers. Yet, reason individuation cannot hold, or so I will argue, due to what I call ‘the embedded thesis’. According to the embedded thesis, the feature that serves as a moral reason in a context cannot be individuated independently from its embedded context (and thus the enablers) while still retaining its status as a reason. If I am right about the embedded thesis, this will take the wind out of the sails of Dancy’s reason holism. Moreover, it will constitute, I argue, a general constraint on how moral reasons behave.

1. Introduction

The issue regarding how moral reasons behave has aroused a lot of controversies in the scene of contemporary metaethics. The reason holists argue that they behave holistically¹, whereas the reason atomists argue that they behave atomistically². The keywords ‘holistically’ and ‘atomistically’ are subject to various interpretations³, and hence various forms of reason holism

¹ Dancy 1993, 2000, 2004; Darwall 2013; Schroeder 2011; Swanton 2001, 2003; Scanlon 2015; Bader 2016; McKeever & Ridge 2006; Väyrynen 2006, Lance & Little 2008. It is to be noted that Scanlon, McKeever & Ridge, Väyrynen, Lance & Little and arguably Schroeder hold that reason holism is compatible with the existence of principles of one form or another.

² Hooker 2000, Crisp 2000; Rawling & McNaughton 2000; Raz 2000, 2006; Audi 2008. It is to be noted here that Hooker, Crisp, and Rawling & McNaughton hold the view that although the non-moral considerations, when serving as reasons, function in a holistic fashion, the v-considerations (considerations that are couched in virtue terms), qua reasons, operate atomistically.

³ Brown 2007; Schroeder 2011

and atomism are available on the philosophical market⁴. For the purpose of this paper, we shall focus on one highly specific yet fairly representative version of reason holism, i.e. Dancy's reason holism (to be stated in section 2), and set aside reason atomism. This is essentially because by exposing a weakness of Dancy's reason holism, which is something I am going to do in this paper, I believe that we will be able to discover a significant constraint on the behaviors of moral reasons. As I have briefly gestured in the abstract, I call the constraint 'the embedded thesis' (which will be explained in due course). Dancy's reason holism, I will argue, violates the embedded thesis and is thus to be rejected. It has to be made clear though that the embedded thesis is what I regard as the chief contribution of this paper, the refutation of Dancy's reason holism the extra icing on the cake.

Here, it has to be also made explicit that this paper, though raising objections to Dancy's reason holism, is not meant to support any form of reason atomism.⁵ On my proposal, *if* any form of reason atomism violates the embedded thesis, it faces the same fate of rejection just as reason holism (though for reasons of space, this paper is not concerned to explore whether any form of reason atomism *really* violates the constraint). It bears emphasis that the main purpose of this paper is to bring into light a general constraint on how moral reasons behave, i.e. the embedded thesis.

The embedded thesis is significant in that if it is right, it poses a general constraint on any theories of how moral reasons behave, be they reason holisms and atomisms, if they are to have any plausibility. The embedded thesis is one of the laws, on my scheme of things, that govern the behaviors of moral reasons.

With the above understanding in place, the burden of this paper is to make attractive the embedded thesis. Apart from illustrating its intuitive plausibility by examples, we will do so by defending it against two seemingly powerful objections (section 5). Before we do that, we will elaborate on how we arrive at the embedded thesis and what it amounts to through a critical discussion of Dancy's reason holism (sections 2-4).

⁴ See Dancy 2000, Rawling & McNaughton 2000, McKeever & Ridge 2006 for instance for useful taxonomies.

⁵ Although it is not *meant* to provide support for reason atomism, some forms of reason atomism might be able to draw support from this paper. I leave open this possibility but do not want to insist on this, for the reason that reason atomism, like reason holism, has been understood differently by different philosophers in terms of its modality (can), quantification (all or some) or targeted features (e.g. primary/ultimate or secondary/non-ultimate features). Some forms of reason atomism might actually be incompatible with what I say in this paper. Figuring out which form(s) is compatible or incompatible will take us too far afield and would therefore have to wait for another occasion.