

Practical Reasoning and Normative Relevance:

A Reply to Ridge and McKeever

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The central concern of McKeever & Ridge's paper is with whether or not the moral particularist can formulate a defensible distinction between default and non-default reasons. [McKeever & Ridge 2004] But that issue is only of concern to the particularist, they argue, because it allows him or her to avoid a deeper problem, an unacceptable "flattening of the normative landscape". The particularist ought, McKeever & Ridge claim, to view this corollary of his or her position as a serious embarrassment. Unpacking the metaphor somewhat, the putative problem is that certain moral reasons seem, at their face value, directly to exhibit their relevance to moral decision and others, equally clearly, do not. Examples of the former class are, for example, the fact that an action

would inflict pain seems directly to indicate that this is a reason against carrying out the action. McKeever & Ridge cite as an example of an implausible candidate for direct moral relevance the fact that a person's shoelace is a certain colour. [Little 2000, p. 291] They explain direct relevance as dependent on the *content* of a moral reason. It is the triviality of the content of this reason, namely, the fact that the colour of a person's shoelaces is a certain way that makes it seem utterly implausible as a moral reason. McKeever & Ridge further argue that, "there surely is an important difference between considerations of shoelace colour and considerations of pain, pleasure, promising and the like." [McKeever & Ridge 2004 p.2] They approvingly cite Lance & Little's observation that an aspect of moral wisdom is that a morally wise person understands "that there is a deep difference in moral status between infliction of pain and shoelace colour". [Lance & Little, forthcoming]

I will argue, in contrast to both Lance and Little and McKeever and Ridge, that this problem is not a problem for the particularist *at all* even if one leading particularist, Jonathan Dancy, thinks otherwise. [Dancy, this volume] The flattening of the normative landscape is not an unacceptable consequence of a particularist's view but flows from an independently attractive conception of the nature of practical reasoning that we all have good reason to accept. My main focus in this short response will be on removing this perceived obstacle to the adoption of particularism.

1 Pragmatics, Relevance and Truth

It seems to me that the most helpful strategy is to begin from the claims that McKeever & Ridge do accept and to work from them to further, derived, assumptions that pose more

of a problem for their overall strategy. There is one solution to explaining why some reasons seem to carry their normative relevance on their face that they *are* prepared to countenance. [McKeever & Ridge 2004, section III] That is the pragmatic explanation that in ordinary conversation there are various governing pragmatic norms, covering presupposed conversational implicatures, such that when one cites a certain kind of ethical consideration one does not need to go on *further* to explain its relevance. However, if one cites other kinds of ethical consideration in support of an overall practical verdict one *does* need further to explain its relevance. A person who believed that the colour of person's shoelaces had a bearing on an ethical decision would presumably be under such an obligation further to specify that relevance in any conversational context in which that reason was put forward.

The central idea, here, then, is that of practical reasonableness. In spelling out our tacit understanding of conversational implicatures and our grasp of the relevance of certain evidential considerations, one is further substantiating the idea of the practical reasonableness of speakers. Conversational contexts, on this kind of view, contain more than a group of speakers standing in relations describable solely in terms of instrumental rationality. Practical reasonableness is expressed in various forms of intentional action, including speech acts, and I think that McKeever & Ridge's discussion of the reasonableness of speech leads naturally to a larger question, namely, what constitutes practical reasonableness on the part of an agent more generally? I think that is a good place to begin to address the question of normative relevance, but that it also suggests an explanation of that aspect of particularism that most troubles McKeever & Ridge,

namely, the “flattening of the normative landscape” that is at odds with their view that the particularist faces any kind of problem here.

A practically reasonable agent can be characterized in terms of her grasp of various norms of good reasoning including, as McKeever & Ridge emphasise, non-monotonic and defeasible reasoning about values. I also think we need to presuppose, as has been argued by Richard Miller, that such a practically reasonable agent has a grasp of what Miller calls various “topic-specific truisms” about the subject matter of any given enquiry. [Miller 1988, pp. 10, 219 - 222; Thomas 2006 chapter 7] A reasonable enquirer has to be interpretable as holding various truistic beliefs about the subject matter of the enquiry in order to *count* as substantively rational and in order to count as engaged in enquiry, in trying to find something out. I will return to the relevance of this point to particularism below.

A reasonable agent of this kind engages in various kinds of rationally appraisable action of which speech acts form a particular kind of intentional action. [Searle 1983] Both intentional mental states and speech acts possess two aspects: a psychological mode with which one thinks a representational content and a content in the first case and the force of a speech act and its embedded content in the second. Following the lead of John Searle, I would argue that mental states simply are intrinsically intentional states whereas speech acts are intentional actions expressed by physical manifestations that are not intrinsically intentional. [Searle 1983 chapter 3] A speech act, being an intentional action, in that respect has intentionality “twice over” as Searle puts it: it expresses an intentional state but also does so by implementing an intention (because it is an action). This basic idea of an expression of an intention, or practical plan, in action leads directly to the

question of what constitutes the practical use of one's capacity to reason in the direction of one's action generally. That is the most general issue of which considering whether a person is a reasonable interlocutor in a conversation is merely one aspect.

There are two main approaches to the characterization of practical reasoning. One approach seeks to characterize it as reasoning over thought contents that comes as close to action as thought can be. Another approach takes its practicality to lie precisely in the fact that it concludes not in a thought content but in an action. Aristotle, and those that he has influenced including G. E. M. Anscombe, opted for the second (minority) view. On either view, we need a sample piece of practical reasoning on which to focus. Consider the Aristotelian practical syllogism that runs:

I want to eat suitable food.

[I express this desire as my first premise.]

I reason "If I eat dry food then I will have eaten suitable food".

So I form the intention to eat this dry food,

or I actually eat the food.

(I thereby eat this).

In her very insightful discussion of such reasoning in *Intentionality*, Anscombe argued that practical reasoning is a way of calculating what to do where that involves "what is capable of turning out variously". [Anscombe 1963, p. 60] In that which she called a "practical syllogism proper", she argued that a "conclusion is an action whose point is

shewn by the premises, which are, so to speak, on active service”. [Anscombe, 1963, p. 60; Enç 2003, pp. 152 - 153]

What it is for the premises of an argument to be on “active service”? It seems to me that there are two promising interpretations of this idea, both with some bearing on particularism and on McKeever & Ridge’s paper. The first focuses on the fact that the conclusion of a piece of practical reasoning is not a thought, but an action; this explains the “active” part of “active service” relationally in terms of what concludes a piece of reasoning. While this seems to me an attractive and plausible argument and a direct form of support for a particularist position, I will not discuss it at any length here as it depends on a prior claim that is itself controversial, namely, that practical reasoning terminates in action. The standard objection to this claim is that practical reasoning is, rather, that form of reasoning that is as close to action as reasoning can get while not itself actually *terminating* in action. I happen to agree with Anscombe that this objection is misguided but evaluating this claim would go too far beyond the scope of this paper, although I have given some reasons for accepting it elsewhere. [Thomas 1996] I conclude that the development of this first argument must await another occasion and I will not further pursue it here; I will focus on a second argument derivable from Anscombe’s reflections. This is the claim that practical reasoning is a form of abductive reasoning, in particular, a form of inference to the best explanation. That also seems to me a very plausible claim but one that entirely undercuts McKeever & Ridge’s problem with the “flattening of the normative landscape”.

This claim, that practical reasoning is a form of abductive inference, was first put forward by Anthony Kenny in his paper ‘Practical Inference’. [Kenny, 1966] The basic

idea is that, abstracting from Kenny's linguistic formulation and talking of intentional mental states, we can contrast intentional states in terms of the contrast between an embedded representation and a direction of fit. (States that are thereby apt to be expressed by Kenny's and Hare's devices of "tropics" and "phrastics".) Practical reasoning operates over intentional states with the direction of fit characteristic of practical plans or projects. What governs this reasoning is what Kenny calls the "logic of satisfactoriness". The term of appraisal for practical plans, projects or their expression in action is being "satisfactory" in the global sense of "best serv(ing) our purposes and gratify(ing) our desires". [Kenny, 1966 p.72] Here is how it works: suppose that one desires a final end, "for its own sake" and plan to bring it about. What plan actually best brings it about is not up to us, nor is the fact that a plan best implements that purpose the final matter for us as a practical reasoner as we may have several settled purposes directed towards different final ends. But what practical inference guarantees is the feature of being "satisfactoriness preserving" relative to a particular purpose. A practically reasonable agent is guaranteed, in observing the rules of practical inference, not to proceed from a satisfactory plan to an unsatisfactory one. The overall goal of practical reasoning is to find a way of satisfying one's basic purposes in a way that is consistent with one's other purposes. This conception of practical reasoning fits in with an attractive psychological characterization of the role of planning in thought and agency. Practical reasoning is, on this conception, nonmonotonic and defeasible reasoning and is, in fact, a form of abductive reasoning to the best explanation. [Enç, 2003]

The bearing of these considerations on McKeever & Ridge's arguments is, I think, twofold. First, it clearly seems to them that it is not *enough* to identify a general

class of relevant evidential considerations. They want to say more about how this relevance is invariant for some general classes of consideration, such as, for example “causing pain”. They want to say that there are some general considerations that carry their relevance to practical reasoning at face value, as it were. Second, it seems to them highly implausible that a trivial or not ethically relevant consideration, such as the colour of one’s shoelaces, could ever figure as a *directly* relevant consideration. My response to these two claims is that it is, indeed, plausible to argue that a competent reasonable moral agent has to be committed to some obvious truisms about the subject matter to hand, as Miller argues. But that has no bearing on the truth or falsity of particularism. There is little point discussing the morality of keeping zoo animals with a person who regards even higher primates, such as chimpanzees, as essentially complex biological machines whose behaviour can be given an entirely behaviouristic input/output analysis. You are not going to convince this person that a caged bear can, for example, clearly exhibit, through its actions, psychoses (as, for the record, it seems to me that they clearly can).

But mastery of this set of open-ended set of truisms is a condition of interpreting an interlocutor as a practically reasonable participant in an enquiry. It is not the identification of some set of basic ethical reasons whose bearing on deliberation is carried at face value. I agree with the ethical generalist to this extent: namely, that we need an explanation of why it is that, in our imagined dialogue about zoo animals, a competent interlocutor has to understand the relevance of the fact that animals can feel pain and “higher” forms of psychological distress. But the explanation that such truisms constitute a precondition of enquiry undercuts the claim that they are basic ethical considerations whose bearing on practical deliberation is, as it were, to be taken at face value. I think it

is very plausible to argue that we apply substantive, and not merely formal, criteria to whether we take a person to be practically reasonable. Part of that reasonableness is grasp of what he or she takes to be the “relevant facts” bearing on the practical question to hand. But it is incorrect to infer from this that being practically reasonable involves grasping that some putative reasons are always reasons. In short, the features that McKeever & Ridge identify as refuting particularism has a competing explanation in terms of which it has no bearing on the particularism versus generalism issue at all. It is simply a different issue.

My second response to McKeever & Ridge’s argument is to address, directly, the fundamental worry about “flattening the normative landscape”. Their worry, recall, is that too many things could feature in reasons that have direct ethical relevance and that this fact leads to the equally (to them) implausible consequence that the direct bearing on ethical decision of certain general classes of consideration is itself overlooked. However, it seems to me that if practical inference is a form of defeasible nonmonotonic inference which is basically a form of abductive reasoning, then I cannot see any a priori circumscription of what could count as an ethically relevant consideration. It seems to me that, for this reason, the normative landscape *ought* to be flat.

Consider, by way of analogy, the theoretical use of abduction. Sherlock Holmes, that leading exponent of abductive inference, claimed in *The Six Napoleons* to have solved the complex Abernethy murder case on the basis of noting the depth to which parsley had sunk into butter on a table on a hot day. The idea that *this* fact could have a bearing on a particular theoretical hypothesis seems to me just as implausible as the claim that the colour of person’s shoelaces could have any bearing on the deliberations of a

practically rational agent. But I think that simply proves that one's intuitions about plausibility are particularly hostage to fortune in the case of abductive inference. Because these inferences are nonmonotonic you cannot prevent any arbitrary addition of new information to the set of premises having a bearing on the validity of one's conclusion, even one's practical conclusion. The key word here is "arbitrary". Given that this is what nonmonotonicity consists in, one can hardly hope to classify certain ethically relevant considerations as "central" or "peripheral" independently of any given particular pattern of inference and the bearing of that evidence on the conclusion drawn from that inference. I conclude that an independently attractive conception of practical reasoning, the normative landscape ought to be flat and that the particularist ought not to be troubled by this objection.

I ought, at this stage, to consider one line of objection to the argument presented here, namely, that what is true of practical reasoning is not true of *moral* reasoning.¹ That does not seem to me a helpful line of response: the concept of a moral consideration as a class identifiable from amongst ethical considerations generally seems to me beset by vagueness and indeterminacy. There is undoubtedly some point to picking out a class of narrowly moral considerations. But that point is tied in to the social nature of aspects of the ethical and to the function of a certain broad class of reasons, those that concern "what we owe to each other" as Scanlon puts it. [Scanlon 1999 pp. 6, 171-178, 270-271] Scanlon himself squarely faces up to the indeterminacy of the class of considerations picked out in this way, but it is not his aim to *identify* that class of considerations with another class independently picked out as having some further feature qua reasons, such as (for example) being "peremptory" as opposed to "enticing". [Dancy 2004b] I agree

entirely with Richard Norman's suggestion that identifying a class of reasons who bear their normative relevance on their face in this way is bound up with misconceptions as to how they operate. [Norman, 2004] Having made this insightful point, Norman then goes on to muddy the waters by identifying moral reasons as a class of reasons that silence other practical considerations. As Bernard Williams pointed out, this suggestive metaphor of "silencing" itself runs together two issues, one about deliberative priority and one about importance, that are best kept apart. [Williams 1985, pp. 182 - 183] Putting them together in the metaphor of "silencing" is, once again, tacitly to presuppose that moral considerations can, as a class, be identified in terms of their content in such a way as establish that they are always of the highest deliberative priority, but whether those two features necessarily co-incide is the very point under dispute. It is characteristic of that which Williams identified as "the morality system" to argue that they always do, but I take it we have sufficient reason to be suspicious about *that* claim. [Williams 1985, chapter ten; Taylor 1995 pp. 133-134]

But, independently of Norman's claim about "silencing", one can accept his point that what makes a reason "move" one is precisely its importance, which is in turn derived from its content in any particular case and that is not, I would argue, derivable from any general idea of a class of distinctively moral reasons. It seems to me that we have little independent reason to distinguish a class of moral reasons whose function and content are different from those of practical reasons in general, save in the vague and indeterminate ways that I have already described.

I conclude, then, that given certain of its features practical reasoning can plausibly be construed as a form of abductive inference. That has indirect bearing on the issue of

particularism in that it suggests to me that a “flattening of the normative landscape” is something that follows from a correct characterization of practical reasoning, not, in particular, something forced upon us as an unwelcome consequence of being a particularist. It is no objection to particularism that it represents the normative landscape as flat as this is simply a corollary of an attractive and plausible conception of practical reasoning that we all have good reason to accept.²

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¹ Jonathan Dancy raised this objection to my argument in his response at the conference 'Moral Particularism', University of Kent, December 16, 2004.

² [Acknowledgements]