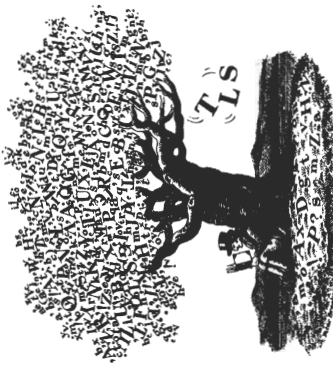


Review of Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*

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In the balance

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Jonathan Dancy

ETHICS WITHOUT PRINCIPLES
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Weigh a lump of butter, then another one, then both together. You are likely to find that the weight of the two equals the sum of the weights of each. Findings of this kind can be assembled into the claim that the weight of butter is “additive”. Next, put aside any lump of butter you like, get your hands on various assortments of lumps of butter, and weigh each assortment twice, with and without the lump you put aside. Since the difference the extra lump makes to the overall weight turns out the same every time, you are safe to conclude that the weight of an individual lump does not vary from context to context. In that sense, the weight of butter is “atomistic”.

Does value behave like butter? Can we calculate the value of a whole by adding up the values of its parts, with the value of each part remaining constant, no matter which whole it is part of? The same questions arise for duty and for reason: how do the various duties and reasons that obtain in a given situation jointly make up what a person in that situation ought to do, or has reason to do, all things told? The “kitchen-scales model”, as Jonathan Dancy dubs it, answers these questions by treating the weight of good like the weight of food. The normative domain, it claims, is indeed additive and atomistic.

Dancy has his doubts about this model. Previously confined in three chapters of his book *Moral Reasons* (1992), these doubts and their implications have now grown into *Ethics without Principles*. Let us suppose that you find pain bad, but pain for murderers good – so good that you prefer a world with murderers in pain to a world with murderers at ease. Let these values of yours be “intrinsic” in that they do not

depend on further considerations, such as the expected deterrence effect of punishment. In a case like this, Dancy suggests, kitchen scales are of no use. If pain always counts as negative, then adding its value to the value of murder will hardly amount to anything positive, and will thus fail to capture the positive value you ascribe to pain for murderers.

Dancy offers an alternative account. In many contexts, the intrinsic value of Mary’s being in pain is negative. But in a situation in which Mary has murdered Jim, this fact switches the intrinsic value of Mary’s being in pain from negative to positive. The murder is an “enabler” of the positive intrinsic value of Mary’s pain. This account is “holistic” as opposed to atomistic; it has the intrinsic value of one and the same state of affairs – Mary’s being in pain – change from context to context.

But before handing the laurel to Dancy’s values in flux, make sure you have seen the best that persistent values can do. Dancy mentions only late and briefly that atomists can welcome complex facts among their evaluative atoms. The overall value of a combination, they can say, equals the values of the things combined plus *the value of their being combined in that way*. The overall value of the-murder-and-the-pain would thus equal the value of the murder (say, -10) plus the value of the pain (-2) plus the “combinedness value” of the-murder-and-the-pain (+3). This adds up to -9, whereas the overall value of the-murder-and-not-the-pain would be just the first summand, -10. We thus find room for gestalt value while keeping the story both additive and, in the sense that Dancy is concerned with, atomistic: no state of affairs changes its contributory value from context to context. At the same time, the story preserves every single claim of the value structure we were out to capture: that pain is intrinsically bad and that pain for murderers is intrinsically good – so good that the overall intrinsic value of punished murder exceeds that of unpunished murder. The prospects for the kitchen-scales

model are not that grim after all.

If punishment serves as our test case, and both atomism and holism can accommodate it, we may begin to hope for a translation theorem. Perhaps the quarrel between the two camps will have to cease or to switch gears. Accusations of being unable to express certain structures would give way to accusations of expressing them, for instance, less naturally. But which is “more natural”? To say that the negative value of pain is outweighed by the positive value of punishment, or to say that it is reversed by the murder?

While the bulk of *Ethics without Principles* expounds Dancy’s doubts of the kitchen-scales model, his ultimate targets are principles. Ethics, he proposes, does not need them. That is “particularism”, Dancy’s main message. The message emerges from the doubts because the atomism of the kitchen-scales model has “features carry around their practical relevance from place to place”. This sameness across situations would allow for the generality that is the hallmark of principles. Provided that we conceive of a principle as saying “once and for all” how important something is, principles say what atomists claim to be sayable. Hence Dancy’s strategy: if I show that we might be able to do without atoms, I am almost done showing that we might be able to do without principles.

The modal modesty of these claims – “we *might* be able” – is the official line. With noticeable effort of will, Dancy limits his ambition to showing that, as far as their logic is concerned, duties, reasons and values *could* vary from context to context. That they do is a stronger claim and would require an extra argument. Dancy longs to write, but is under no illusion of having written, that “other book, the one about life”.

Life comes within eyeshot when Dancy asks how a moral agent gets to grips with a situation she finds herself in. The particularist moral agent spends less time retrieving and aggregating elements from her stock of basic normative judgements and more time forming new basic normative judgements on the occasion – basic, but contextual. The computing of normative data loses some ground to the art, or mystery, of judgement. More than once, Dancy compares moral to aesthetic judgement. Surely, he asks, we would not endeavour to compute the artistic value of a concerto from the artistic value each note has on its own? Indeed not. But some of the uncodifiability of artistic value may be due to the fact that novelty itself has a value in art that it does not have in morality. Painting the same picture every day is problematic in a way in which alleviating the same amount of suffering by the same means every day is not. In any event, we have already encountered the enlightened additive atomist. She can handle concertos. While not allowing for judgements that are basic and vary from context to context, she does allow for judgements that are basic and *concern* complexes.

Riding on a roller-coaster can be fun even though you want to live with your feet on the ground. In much the same way, Jonathan Dancy’s treatise will enrich even those minds that do not share, and do not end up sharing, its perspective. The book is high-octane philosophy. The structure is clear, the writing elegant, the argument peppered with outlooks into other areas of philosophy. Whatever may or may not change in your picture of duties, reasons and values, having a grand master of the discipline help you to try out a new way of seeing things, and listening to the strongest case that can be made for it, is a formidable experience.