

Wittgenstein and Ethical Supervenience

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Abstract

In this, paper, I am going to present an argument in favour of generalism and criticise the particularistic position in moral reasoning... According to generalism which is associated with supervenience, the way in which a morally relevant feature contributes to the moral evaluation of different contexts is patternable. However, a particularist like Dancy utilizes the very idea of resultance instead of supervenience to give an account of how a non-moral feature behaves in different contexts. An account drawn from Wittgenstein with regard to the nature of concepts is presented here to criticise the particularistic position while endorsing the very idea of supervenience and the generalistic position with regard to the extent of the patternability of the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature in different contexts .

Key words: Wittgenstein, Ethical supervenience, generalism, particularistic

Introduction

What can we say with regard to the extent of the patternability of the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature in different ethical contexts? The main issue between generality and particularity in moral reasoning concerns the existence of patterns in use of moral vocabulary that would permit the formulation of general statements governing the applicability of

that vocabulary. Particularism challenges an intuitive notion of generalism. There are general patterns to which the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant non-moral property in different contexts is responsive and this is the main issue in evaluating arguments of particularism and generalism. It concerns the way in which a morally relevant feature contributes to the moral evaluation of different cases. The subject can be formulated using the idea of supervenience, according to which if two concrete ethical situations are relevantly similar with respect to their non-moral (descriptive) properties, their moral (evaluative) properties would be the same. Suppose we are confronted with a concrete ethical situation, in which a moral property F supervenes on non-moral properties G and H. According to the generalist, should we come across a similar ethical situation in which G and H are combined together, the ultimate moral evaluation of the case would be the same —F would apply. So, subscribing to the existence of supervenience leads to approving the existence of general patterns to which the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant non-moral property can fit. In other words, with the aid of such patterns, we can see how a morally relevant non-moral property contributes to the moral evaluation of different cases .

According to generalists who subscribe to the notion of supervenience, the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature in different cases is generalisable in the sense that its reason-giving behaviour is answerable to patterns of word use. But a particularist like Dancy prefers to talk about the idea of resultance with regard to the way in which non-moral properties are related to moral properties in ethical contexts. According to him:

Resultance is a relation between a property of an object and the features that 'give' it that property. Not all properties are resultant; that is, not all properties depend on others in the appropriate way. But everyone agrees that moral properties are resultant. A resultant property is one which 'depends' on other properties in a certain way. As we might say, nothing is just wrong; a wrong action is wrong because of other features that it has...Supervenience, as a relation, is incapable of picking out the features that make the action wrong; it is too indiscriminate to be able to achieve such an interesting and important task (2004, 85-88).

According to this view, there is no such thing as a general pattern which summarises the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature and we cannot see how a morally relevant feature contributes to the moral evaluation of different cases by appealing to supervenience. Supervenience deals with the behaviour of a morally relevant feature in different ethical contexts, the way in which moral properties supervene upon the class of non-moral properties. In contrast, resultance concerns the way in which a moral property results from non-moral properties in a specific ethical situation. So, a particularist who claims there is no metaphysical account available of generality in moral reasoning, emphasises that the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature and its contribution to moral evaluation can vary from case to case as a result of combining with other features in many different ways. So, the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature is not generalisable to say, its relevance for reasoning in different cases is not answerable to general patterns of word use. Rather, the reason-giving behaviour results from the way in which different morally

relevant features are combined together in a specific moral situation. Therefore, according to Dancy, the idea of resultance, unlike supervenience, can better systematise our common sensical intuitions with regard to the way in which several morally relevant features are combined together in different ethical contexts .

Now I outline the particularist's answer with regard to the extent of the patternability of the reason-giving behaviour of morally relevant features in different contexts which is associated with resultance while undermining supervenience .

1- The Particularists' Answer

According to the particularists' standpoint, moral principles are strongly context-dependent in the sense that the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature is not answerable to general patterns .

The main argument in support of particularism draws on the idea of holism about reasons for action. According to holism, morally relevant nonmoral properties are highly contextual, and may change their reason-giving behaviours from case to case where they are compounded with other morally relevant non-moral properties, so that what makes an action wrong in one case may make it right in another case. In other words, the deontic valence of a moral consideration (such as one's duty to fulfil his promise to someone else) is not constant, and may vary from case to case . Dancy's argument in favour of holism about reasons for action is an application of holism about normative reasons in general. Dancy claims that normative reasons for belief are obviously and non-controversially holistic (highly contextual), and that it is very odd to account for reasons for action as non-holistic. But

how could normative reasons for belief be holistic? Dancy's argument for this claim is as follows: suppose that something is in front of me, and I experience it as a red pencil. Experiencing something as a red pencil is a justified reason for me to believe that a red pencil is in front of me. Again suppose that, as a thought experiment, I have taken a pill which makes blue things seem red to me. In this case, experiencing something as a red pencil is a reason that justifies me in believing that a blue pencil is in front of me. Therefore, it is not the case that experiencing something as red always justifies me in believing that there is something red is in front of me. Conversely, it can justify me in believing that there is something blue is in front of me. Dancy says :

It is not as if it is some reason for me to believe that there is something red before me, though that reason is overwhelmed by contrary reasons. It is no longer any reason at all to believe that there is something red before me; indeed, it is a reason for believing the opposite 2004, p.74.

This means that reasons for belief behave holistically, and the way in which they are combined together and contribute to ultimate justification can vary from context to context. In other words, they have no intrinsic and invariant valence outside context, for their valence can change as a result of reacting to other reasons.

2. Criticising the Particularistic Position: Wittgensteinian account of normativity

In order to criticise Dancy's constitutive and metaphysical claim concerning the way a morally relevant feature contributes to the

moral evaluation of different contexts, I draw on the account from Wittgenstein with regard to the nature of concepts .

Suppose we want to articulate and define the concept 'game'. On the face of it, it seems that in order to do this we need to state common properties of games with which we have been confronted, such as: basketball, handball, snooker, chess, boxing, wrestling etc. On the basis of the common properties obtained, we would say that:

If x meets the condition $g_1, g_2, g_3 \dots g_n$, x is a 'game.'

This view supposes that there is something in common which needs to be articulated and categorised to arrive at the definition of the concept 'game'. It suggests that there is something in common among different kinds of games. By utilising the obtained general rule, we can say whether or not a new phenomenon can be regarded as a game. In this model, the general pattern acts as the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words.

However, Wittgenstein rejects the existence of such a common property in different kinds of games; something which can be articulated as an essence of the concept 'game'. The whole idea of 'family resemblance' in *Philosophical Investigations* is concerned with the denial of such an approach to defining a concept like game. There is nothing in common among different games which can be articulated. For instance, if someone says that losing and winning can be regarded as a common feature of different games, we can show him other games in which there is no such thing as losing and winning like the child who builds a house using Lego. Moreover, if we want to consider equipment such as a ball, goal, net, racket etc. as a common feature or features of different games, one can show other games such as:

boxing, wrestling etc. in which these items not used. So, it seems that there is an open-ended list of game-making features which forms the different games with which we are familiar. So, it seems that we cannot arrive at what the concept 'game' is through articulating a feature common to different games. Nevertheless, we, as language-users use the word 'game' in our communication meaningfully. In other words, although there is an open-ended list of game-making features, we cannot regard anything we like as an example of the concept 'game'. It seems that there is a normative constraint that requires us to see whether or not the phenomenon with which we are dealing can be regarded as a game. Wittgenstein attempts to show that the normative constraint that we are talking about cannot be put into words. Rather, it can only be grasped through ongoing practice of seeing the similarities and dissimilarities. There is nothing beyond seeing the similarities which can do this job. He states: What does it mean to know what a game is? What does it mean, to know it and not be able to say it?... Isn't my knowledge, my concept of a game, completely expressed in the explanations that I could give? That is, in my describing examples of various kinds of games; showing how all sorts of other games can be constructed on the analogy of these (1953, §75)

According to Wittgenstein, it is not the case that I know what the concept 'game' is before being engaged in the practice of seeing the similarities. Rather, what we see within practice is all we have about the concept 'game'. This results in the denial of the pre-existing concept of game. However, the more we are engaged in the practice of using the word, the more clearly we see what a game is. This is an open-ended process. To grasp the

meaning of a concept such as game, all we have is seeing the similarities: this is a game, that is a game, this is not a game etc. and this is not ignorance. Being engaged in practice is not a halfway and second hand explanation of what a game is. This is all we have at hand and it does not mean that any phenomenon can be regarded as an example of the concept 'game'. Rather, there is a normative constraint which lies in the way in which we are engaged in seeing things as similar. In other words, it is not the case that regarding a new phenomenon as a game is a matter of taste and can be done arbitrarily or at random. Rather, there is a normative constraint which can be seen within practice. There is an account which can be given with regard to whether or not the new phenomenon is a game. The account becomes clearer to the extent that we are engaged in the practice of seeing things as similar. There is no such thing as a pre-existing and abstract pattern which can be utilised in order to see whether or not the new phenomenon is a game. Rather, there is an account with regard to the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words which is associated with the way in which we are engaged in seeing the similarities. The crucial thing at this stage is that there is an account with regard to a normative constraint which can be given. In fact, in place of the notion of the pre-existing source of normativity, there is a normative constraint which can be seen merely within practice .

To the extent that we are engaged in the activity of seeing things as similar, we can see what the concept 'game' is. We have a role in shaping the concept. In other words, the concept 'game' emerges following our ongoing practice of seeing the similarities. Moreover, the concept 'game' is extendable. The more we are engaged in the practice of seeing similar games, the

more the concept is extended. Practice has an indispensable role in the extendibility of the concept 'game'. So, we can say that there is some generality in the concept 'game', albeit one that emerges .

What follows from the Wittgensteinian story is that the reason-giving behaviour of the word 'game' in different contexts is answerable to general patterns of word use. This is the constitutive and metaphysical claim with regard to the existence of patterns of word use .

Considering Wittgensteinian account of patternability and the way in which the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature is answerable and responsive to patterns of word use, it seems that Dancy's claim about the very idea of supervenience is implausible. According to Dancy - as there is no such thing as an exactly similar ethical situation - to say that the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature would be answerable to general patterns in other ethical contexts is useless .

But as we saw in the example of the concept 'game', although several game-making features are combined together in different ways, they are not responsive to general patterns of word use: Answerability to general patterns is not necessarily associated with the existence of exactly similar situations. As far as an emerging pattern is concerned, there is no such thing as a finite list of features which make the pattern. Nevertheless, there is such a thing as a normative constraint which can be seen to the extent that we are engaged in practice. So, we can subscribe to the idea of supervenience, according to which moral properties supervene upon non-moral properties in the sense that the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature in different context is answerable to patterns without resorting to phrases

like ‘exactly similar situation’. In other words, the modest-generalist can agree with a particularist like Dancy in criticising the idea of a pre-existing and fixed pattern according to which a new phenomenon has to be subsumed under a determined and rigid pattern. Such an account of pattern requires the new phenomenon to be exactly similar to the components of the pattern. But the modest-generalist can appeal to the idea of open-endedness to give a constitutive account of patternability without appealing to pre-existing and determined pattern .

To summarise, Dancy’s claim with regard to the way in which the reason-giving behaviour of a non-moral feature contributes to the moral evaluation of different cases can be reconciled with the generalistic Wittgensteinian position which deploys the idea of patternability and answerability. It follows from this that still we can stick to the very idea of supervenience, as far as the reason-giving behaviour of a morally relevant feature in different contexts is concerned .

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