

Particularism and the Structure of Reasons

Christian Piller
University of York
Department of Philosophy
York, YO10 5DD, UK
cjp7@york.ac.uk

Abstract: I argue that particularism (or holism) about reasons, i.e. the view that a feature that is a reason in one case need not be a reason in another case, is true, but uninterestingly so. Its truth is best explained by principles that govern a weaker notion than that of being a reason: one thing can be ‘normatively connected’ to something else without its being a reason for what it is normatively connected to. Thus, even though true, particularism about reasons does not support the particularist’s general idea that the normative domain is not governed by principles.

Keywords: particularism, principles, reasons, rationality, Dancy.

Particularism is a group of views about evaluative and normative modes of assessment. The particularist denies that having assessed a particular case, we can simply transfer our assessment to other, similar, cases. Such a transfer would rely on the availability of principles, which would pick out the relevant similarities along which evaluative and normative assessment could travel. Central to particularism is the denial of any such workable principles. Not that anything goes: the particularist, in making his case, will actually be quite conservative when it comes to concrete examples of evaluative and normative assessment. For example: That a comment was funny might well have been what made it worth making in one situation (at the party), but this does not show, the particularist points out, that its funniness would make a comment worth making in a different situation (when delivering bad news). Note that no one ever thought everyone should always be funny. The excitement, which particularism stirs up, has to be philosophical. According to the particularist, our everyday evaluative practices are not governed by principles. Although this does not challenge our practice of evaluation, it might well disturb our common-sense view of the nature of this practice. In this essay, I discuss normative particularism, which denies that principles are able to capture our views about what is a reason for what. In the voice of its most prominent defender, it claims that ‘a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another’ (Dancy: 2004: 7).¹

I will argue that it is indeed correct that features, which are reasons here need not be reasons there, but this fact itself, I want to show, is true because of normative principles. These principles, I will suggest, govern a weaker normative notion than that of being a reason for something. Particularism, I said, is not out to change our evaluative practices, and, I will argue, it should also not change our philosophical views about evaluative and normative reasoning, namely that such reasoning is, in the end, governed by principles.

Let me start with a fact everyone can agree upon: It is not always rational to go to Rome. Rome is very nice, so if the opportunity arises, and other matters have been taken care of, it might well be a good thing to head for Rome. However, given a normal schedule, taking a vacation is the exception and, thus, often you must not leave for Rome, you rather have to stay at home. Let me distinguish between the following two doctrines:

Particularism about Rationality: An action that is rational in one set of circumstances need not be rational in other circumstances.

Generalism about Rationality: An action that is rational in one set of circumstances must be rational in all circumstances.

Most of us are particularists about the rationality of actions. In fact, our particularistic leanings are so strong that the question 'Is going to Rome rational?' prompts the immediate response 'Rational for whom?' What is rational, we think, depends on an agent's circumstances. Only when we know these circumstances, which inform us about an agent's reasons, can we meaningfully engage in normative assessment. What we think is rational to do, will vary with the reasons, which we take agents to have. Going to Rome is rational for some people in some circumstances and not for others. We explain the variability of an action's rationality in changing circumstances by the variable applicability of reasons and the idea that reasons determine rationality.

I said that everyone agrees that it is not always rational to go to Rome. Does not this fact alone refute generalism about rationality? Not yet, as we can enrich the conception of what an action is. The generalist can agree that what she would call 'acts', like going to Rome, are sometimes rational and sometimes not, but an action, properly understood, is not merely an act.²

Aristotle guides us towards such an understanding of actions when he says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (book 2, chapter 9) that it is hard to be excellent. 'Giving and spending money is easy and anyone can do it; but doing it to the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way is no longer easy, nor can everyone do it. Hence [doing these things] well is rare, praiseworthy and fine (1109a26-30).'

Going to Rome is easy and everyone can do it, but going to Rome, and I simplify matters here, for the right end is not so easy. Going to Rome simply in order to enjoy a good pizza is eccentric; going to Rome when one's family needs one at home is, to say the least, not very nice; but going to Rome in order to enjoy the liveliness of the city and to try to absorb its history and culture, when one has arranged things such that all other business has been taken care of, is, given one's schedule, indeed hard, and may well be praiseworthy and fine. Aristotle's point is that an action is the whole thing: what one does, how one does it, and to whom or to what, in what way and for what result. These are the particulars, Aristotle tells us, which an action consists in.

One can find a similar thought in Kant.³ In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant (1785, 30) argues that the maxim 'from self-love I make as my principle to shorten my life when its continued duration threatens more evil than it promises satisfaction' fails the Categorical Imperative Test: to kill oneself out of self-love is

always wrong. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, however, Kant mentions the following case: ‘A human being who had been bitten by a mad dog already felt hydrophobia coming on. He explained, in a letter he left, that, since as far as he knew the disease was incurable, he was taking his life lest he harm others as well in his madness (the onset of which he already felt)’ (Kant 1797, 178). Kant leaves it open whether killing out of concern for others would also be wrong. The distinction between acts and actions explains the difference in Kant’s assessment of these cases. Suicides are acts but suicide out of self-love is a different action from suicide out of concern for others.

Particularists and generalists about rationality agree that it is not always rational to go to Rome. They account for this fact in different ways. The particularist about rationality finds an explanation of the variability of rationality in its structure. Reasons determine rationality and their variable applicability in varying circumstances explains why what is rational here need not be rational there. He moves, in a manner of speaking, a level downwards from rationality to the level of reasons. The generalist resists this downward move. Seen from the particularist’s perspective, he brings reasons up to the level of actions: the reasons for which one acts are integral parts of what one does. Korsgaard defends this view:

The reason for an action is not something outside of or behind or separate from the action. Giving a description or explication of the action, and giving a description or explication of the reason, are the same thing. [...] The demand for justification can easily take the form: *what are you doing?* or more aggressively *what do you think you are doing?* as it can *why are you doing that?* (Korsgaard, forthcoming)

Generalism about rationality, if correct, would provide us with principles on the level of actions. For example, never kill yourself out of self-love. How do particularists, like Dancy, object?

The worry, of course, is that the Categorical Imperative appears to function entirely on the overall level. It tells us that it is overall wrong to act on a maxim that cannot be appropriately universalized. However, it seems impossible to convert this so that it acts as a test of whether a consideration is morally relevant, in the sense of being a moral reason for or against doing the action proposed. Nor can it tell us that we have some reason to do the action but more reason not to. Nor can it tell us that there is more than one reason to do this action, and that the separate reason for doing it are together, but not separately enough to make it a duty. (Dancy 2004, 68)

The first of Dancy’s three complaints – the generalist does not have an independent notion of a reason, which would determine what one ought to do – describes rather than objects to generalism. He has argued earlier ‘that certain predicaments can only be understood if we retain the idea of contributory reasons, and that the conception of a defeated reason is required if we are to make sense of regret and residual duties’ (Dancy 2004, 29). This earlier point illustrates his second complaint: without the idea that there can be reasons for and against doing something, some of which will be on the weaker side and, thus be defeated by other reasons, we cannot account for regret or guilt, which are responses to defeated reasons. There can be regret, even if one has done what, overall, one ought to have done.

Korsgaard said that *the reason* for an action is an integral part of it; she does not talk about a conflict of reasons. We can, however, easily extend her account to appease

Dancy's legitimate worry. Consider the following dialogue: 'You went to Rome because you thought it was the right thing to do. So why do you feel bad about it and tell me that now you have to apologize to your family? Was it not the right thing to do after all?' Answer: 'No, no, it was the right thing. I really had to go because two men came to my house the night before and said that they would make my little life quite uncomfortable if I did not go and I believed them. I went to Rome and did what I have been asked to do in order to prevent these people from messing up my life. I went, despite my family urging me to stay and, you know, I could not tell them about these men, as I did not want them to worry even more. This is what I did'. The agent did A in order to achieve B despite C. The whole thing *doing A in order to achieve B despite C* was his action. If we allow in-order-to clauses, which specify ends, we should also allow despite-of clauses, which mention reasons to the contrary, as parts of an action's description. They naturally account for conflict.⁴

I have only covered some moves in the debate between generalists and particularists about rationality – and, as it stands, generalism is still a viable option. The main concern of my paper, however, is particularism about reasons. The point of starting with reflections on rationality is to understand some general features of the debate by highlighting its structure. We start by observing variability on some level of normative assessment: the same action, we think, can sometimes be rational, while irrational in different circumstances. The question arises how to account for this variability. Should we move downwards to a deeper conceptual level to explain the variability of what is on the surface level or can we bring what explains the variability up onto the surface, thereby showing that the variability was only apparent? Both positions agree on the normative phenomena and both respect that variability, be it only apparent or real, calls for an explanation.

Particularism, I have said earlier, has aroused philosophical interest as it denies that the normative domain, or some particular part of it, can be captured by principles. As such, it has found some fervent opponents. Hooker (2000, 15) calls the view 'startling' and 'highly counterintuitive', Crisp (2000, 34) suggest that particularism threatens not only the rationality of ethics, but also 'rationality, and its exercise in enquiry as a whole'. When applied to particularism about rationality such a reaction seems rather out of place. There is nothing startling or threatening about the idea that it is not always rational to go to Rome, though sometimes it is. Variability in itself is not threatening and, on the level of rationality, particularism looks benign. Even if it is true, it might be uninterestingly true, because in explaining variability on the surface level we might appeal to principles on a deeper level. Fulfilling the duties of one's job is more important than the joy of eating a pizza in Rome. It looks as if the constancy of this relation is a necessary ingredient in a successful explanation of why it can be rational to go to Rome only if one has taken care of the duties that come with one's job. A view, which would justify the strong reaction by Hooker and Crisp not only points to variability in our normative and evaluative assessments, but also leaves such variability unexplained. Imagine a view according to which it was simply a brute fact that going to Rome is rational here and not rational there. Normative facts would pop up here and there without any underlying pattern, and nothing would explain the occurrence of these facts. On such a view, normativity would be unintelligible. Even positing a quasi-perceptual faculty, an eye for what is rational, would not lift but only deepen the mystery, as its working would be miraculous, if the normative realm itself were patternless and its structure could not be captured by principles.

It is important to recognize the distance between the variability on some level of normative assessment and the idea that the normative realm is not governed by principles. True, the explanation will lie on a deeper conceptual level, so that particularism, i.e. the denial of principles on the level where variability is found, is true. Its truth, however, should fail to stir up either philosophical resentment or excitement, if the explanation of variability on some level refers to principles on a deeper level. The case of rationality illustrates how big the step is from variability to a general denial of principles. The idea that principles structure the normative realm will survive the fact that it is not always rational to go to Rome, though sometimes it is.

II

Particularism about reasons is the claim that what is a reason in one case need not be a reason in other cases – it might even count against what it once favoured. Generalism about reasons is the view that if something is a reason here, it has to be a reason everywhere. Rome is an attractive city and, suppose, this is a reason for me to go there. However, it need not always be such a reason: if, for example, I have to punish myself, then nothing speaks in favour of going to Rome, where it is so nice, and I will have good reason to go to Franz Joseph Land instead. Whenever we switch to a context of self-punishment, considerations that spoke for doing something will have their normative force reversed. Thus, the variability of reasons will be a widespread phenomenon. Other examples are easy to find. Having promised is often a reason for doing what one has promised, but my promise to go to Rome, given to the two Italians who visited me, was not a reason to go, as I did not give it freely. Even for thick ethical concepts, a particularist might argue for variability: kindness seems irrelevant in a context that demands that justice will be done, and considerations of justice are at least not the basis on which to build intimate relationships. For my purposes, it does not matter whether variability affects all reasons or not. We will find a good deal of it and, if the normative domain is intelligible, such variability demands an explanation.⁵

How can it be that a reason loses its normative force – and thus ceases to be a reason – or changes its normative direction? Dancy (2004) distinguishes between two relevant relations: one is to favour something, and that is what reasons do, but then there is another relation, the relation of enabling, and enablers enable things to do the things they do. Assuming that I can only have a reason to do what I am able to do, my ability to help you enables my promise to help you to favour my helping you. Similarly, the fact that I do not have to punish myself enables Rome's attractiveness to be a reason for me to go there. Favouring and enabling are different relations. Abilities, which enable other features to be reasons, usually do not themselves favour their own exercise.⁶ Considerations that favour something in one context might cease to be reasons in another context: it all depends on the presence and absence of appropriate enablers. Dancy argues that the enabling relation is not restricted to the normative domain and he quotes Plato's *Phaedo* (99b) in support: 'Fancy not being able to distinguish between the cause of a thing and that without which the cause would not be a cause' (Dancy 2004, 45). Besides favouring and enabling, Dancy mentions a third category of normatively relevant considerations, which are strength-affecting considerations: The fact that I am the only person who is in a position to

help you, for example, will intensify the reason provided by my promise to help you without itself being a reason to help you.

The favouring/enabling distinction explains the variability of reasons. It is, Dancy says, central to the particularist approach (Dancy 2004, 73). This distinction, I want to suggest, reminds us of something quite familiar. Reasons can be defeated in different ways. One reason might outweigh another and so, if they are the only ones applying, one ought to follow the stronger reason. Reasons can also be undermined. The difference between outweighing and undermining is that in the first case, but not in the latter, the reason retains its normative force. An outweighed reason still favours the opposite of what one ought to do, but an undermined reason has ceased to favour anything, at least if it has been undermined completely. Furthermore, an outweighing reason has to be a reason, whereas an undermining consideration need not be a reason at all. In *Practical Reason and Norms* (1975), Raz talks about overriding and cancelling instead of outweighing and undermining, and he gives the following example: 'The need to take an injured man to hospital at the time I promised to meet a friend at Carfax is a reason for not keeping the appointment which overrides the promise which is a reason for keeping it. The fact that my friend has released me from my promise is a reason for nothing at all and yet it cancels the reason to go to Carfax created by the promise' (Raz 1975, p. 27). If every enabler, in Dancy's terminology, is nothing but the absence of an undermining consideration, then what is central to the particularist approach is simply the familiar fact that reasons can be undermined.

Raz introduces another distinction: he distinguishes operative reasons, like my promise to help you, from auxiliary reasons, which come in two kinds: strength-affecting reasons, which we have already met, and identifying reasons. If there are two ways in which I can help you, the fact that one way of helping you is considerably more burdensome for me diminishes my reason for helping you in that way. The fact that calling you now is a way of helping you is an identifying reason, as it identifies a particular course of action that is of the type I have reason to do. Strength-affecting and identifying reasons are auxiliary reasons, because they depend on the presence of operative reasons. Had I no reason to help you, knowing what would help you and how much, would not be relevant considerations.⁷

Particularism, we have heard its critics say, is highly counterintuitive and threatens the exercise of rationality as a whole. The fact that reasons can be undermined, I think, is not more exciting than the claim that it is not always rational to go to Rome. Normative particularism denies that there are any workable principles of what is a reason for what, on the basis that in the normative domain we deal not only with the favouring relation but also with the undermining relation. If, however, there are principles that determine what favours what in the absence of underminers, or there are principles that determine the undermining relation itself, then the normative realm will be structured by principles, it is just that these principles are not principles about the favouring relation.

III

As in the case of rationality, we should agree about the phenomena: for example, sometimes the attractiveness of Rome is a reason to go there and sometimes (when one has to punish oneself) it is not a reason to go there. In the case of rationality, the

generalist endorsed an upward move. Bringing reasons up to the level of actions, the generalist claimed, shows that the variability of rationality is only apparent. Once we have a proper understanding of actions, namely as containing their own reasons, constancy replaces the apparent variability. A similar move is available when we consider reasons. Reasons, properly understood, the generalist will say, do not change their normative force. In order to achieve such constancy, the considerations the particularist brings to bear as undermining reasons have to be included within the reason. The reason has to be expanded. It is not simply the city's attractiveness, rather it is the attractiveness and the fact that one does not have to punish oneself, which is to reason to go to Rome.

Dancy objects along the following lines: The fact that one does not have to punish oneself is, by itself, certainly not a reason to go to Rome – it does not favour going to Rome. Why, then, should we call the combination of this fact with the fact that Rome is attractive, a reason? What does the favouring is certainly the latter and not the former. Dancy insists, rightly in my view, on separating the following two questions: What favours an action? What has to be the case such that a favourer can do its job? Anyone who accepts the difference between the enabling and the favouring relation will answer these questions differently: reasons favour, but they can only do so if appropriate enablers are in place, i.e. if there are no considerations that would undermine these reasons.⁸

In general terms, Dancy's objection to the generalist about reasons is that they do not respect the structure of the normative domain, which the difference between reasons and enablers provides.⁹ The other idea we met when we discussed particularism about rationality was to move downwards a level. The idea is to explain variability on the surface level by reference to a deeper level governed by principles. Particularism about the items on the surface level would come out true, but its truth would lack philosophical interest, as the particularist's general project, which is to show that the normative domain as a whole is not governed by principles, would have failed. The move from the rationality of actions to reasons seemed natural – it uses the established concept of a reason to explain the variability of rationality. If, however, reasons themselves might gain or lose normative force, which deeper level could explain such a variability? In the remainder of this section, I will defend the idea that there is such a deeper level captured by what I will call 'normative connectedness'.

Suppose I believe in the existence of centaurs for the following reason: I am convinced that my neighbour owns one, after all, he told me he did. The content of my belief that my neighbour owns a centaur entails that centaurs exist. Thus, I have a 'conclusive reason' for their existence. Nevertheless, as I should have spotted that my neighbour was only joking, it is irrational for me to believe that centaurs exist. The belief that my neighbour owns a centaur stands in the right relation to my belief that centaurs exist; it is, so to speak, normatively in the right place. There is a normative connection between my belief about what my neighbour owns and my belief in the existence of centaurs, which does not obtain between my belief that, let us say, Rome exists and my belief that centaurs exist. Still, we would not say that in this case, I have any reason to believe in the existence of centaurs. This suggests a twofold condition on something's being a reason for me to believe that there are centaurs. First, I need to believe something that, normatively speaking, is in the right place to support my belief in the existence of centaurs. We need normative connectedness. Furthermore,

what is normatively connected needs itself to be in good shape, normatively speaking, in order to function as a reason. The guiding idea regarding this second condition is that something cannot transmit more normative force than it has itself. If this analysis is correct, the notion of being a reason and the notion of favouring something is not a simple notion. The idea of favouring presupposes, at a deeper level, the notion of normative connectedness. Otherwise, there would not be any difference between an irrelevant belief, such as that Rome exists, and a relevant belief, such as that my neighbour owns a centaur, which still fails to provide a reason for believing in the existence of centaurs. The notion of being normatively in the right place, i.e. the notion of normative connectedness, attempts to capture this difference in normative relevance.¹⁰

Another example: Something's looking blue is a reason for believing that it is blue. Not always, though. If I wear special lenses that make everything, even bananas, look blue, I have no reason to think that the banana in front of me is blue, even if it looks blue. Nevertheless, I want to suggest, there is some normatively relevant relation between looking blue and being blue. Looking blue is normatively connected to being blue, although, if I wear these special lenses, looking blue is not a reason for believing that a thing is blue. In the first example, something failed to be a reason despite normative connectedness for internal reasons – it was itself flawed, normatively speaking. Here it fails to be a reason because something else, my awareness of the special lenses, blocks its normative force. Nevertheless, my awareness of something's looking blue, in contrast to its looking red, seems to be, in virtue of its content, normatively connected to the belief that it is blue.

The notion of normative connectedness tries to capture the difference between 'a reason that does not work', because, for example, it has been undermined, and something that is not even a candidate for being a reason, i.e. something which lacks any normative relevance in the case at hand. In short, undermined reasons are different from non-reasons as undermined reasons are still normatively connected to what they would be reasons for, had they not been undermined.

We can compare the normative force of a reason to the illuminating effect of a light bulb on some surface. If the light bulb is broken, i.e. if the reason itself is normatively flawed, there will not be any illuminating effect. Still, there is something relevant we can say about the light bulb – it is in the right place. Another light bulb, one that is in Rome, could not have any illuminating effect here, whether it is working or not. The same happens if something blocks the light, i.e. if the reason has been undermined. There will not be any illuminating effect, but the light bulb is in the right place. If it were not for the black tape that covers it, it would illuminate the surface. Although we cannot see any effect, there is a real difference between there being light within the light bulb and its being dark even within it. Similarly, an undermined reason does not emit any normative force. Still, there is a real difference between an undermined reason and something that is no reason at all. An undermined reason is, so to say, in the right place. It is normatively connected with that which it would support, were there no undermining considerations.¹¹

Dancy objected to the upward move of expanding the reason by invoking the difference between favouring and enabling. The twofold analysis of favouring I have suggested – some consideration R favours a course of action A if and only if R is

normatively connected to A and R is neither internally flawed nor externally inhibited – takes Dancy’s point on board. An undermining consideration need not be itself a reason. Thus, the distinction between undermining and favouring is preserved. What I add is the insistence on some difference between undermined reasons and non-reasons, which I capture with the notion of normative connectedness.

IV

In this section, I consider an objection to my twofold analysis of favouring. My answer to this objection will lend further support to the idea that favouring is not a simple notion. The distinction between favouring and enabling is central to Dancy’s defence of particularism about reasons: Reasons vary in accordance with the presence or absence of their enablers. When I presented Dancy’s view simply as the idea that reasons can be undermined, I made use of the following equivalence between enabling and its opposite, disabling: a consideration U undermines R’s being a reason for a course of action A if and only if the absence of U enables R to be a reason for A. It does not seem to matter whether we say that my not having promised freely undermines the normative force of my promise or, alternatively, that having promised freely enables my promise to be reason for doing what I have promised.¹² Based on this equivalence, one can object to the idea that there is any interesting weaker notion than that of being a reason and, thus, reject the downward move, which is to explain the variability of reasons by reference to normative connectedness.

I claimed that an undermined reason, despite having lost its normative force, is still normatively connected to what it could have been a reason for. In order to make claims about normative connectedness non-trivial, I have to distinguish between things that are normatively connected to something from things that are not. If we can move freely between enabling and disabling, then, it seems, everything is normatively connected with everything else. Consider the example from above: The fact that something looks blue, I said, is normatively connected to the belief that it is blue, even if I wear lenses that make everything look blue. Wearing these lenses undermines the usual support which looking blue provides for being blue. Using the enabling/disabling equivalence, we can switch from undermining-talk to enabling-talk and express the same thought by saying that looking blue needs an enabler, namely not wearing blue lenses, in order for it to be a reason for the belief that it is blue. Looking red, in contrast to looking blue, is, I wanted to claim, not normatively connected to being blue. There are, however, circumstances – for example when I wear blue-red inversion lenses – in which looking red is a reason for the belief that whatever it is that looks red is actually blue. Thus, there is no substantial difference between the normative connectedness of looking blue and looking red to the belief that it is blue. Looking blue is enabled to be such a reason by the absence of lenses that make everything look blue; looking red is enabled to be such a reason by the wearing of red-blue inversion lenses.

Let us apply the same idea within the practical domain: Rome’s pleasant climate is a reason for going there, but only if it has been appropriately enabled, for example by the absence of a need to punish oneself. There being an even number of leaves on my tree can also be a reason for going to Rome. Obviously, it needs an enabler, for example that I promised to go if and only if the number of leaves is even. Thus, given

the enabling/disabling equivalence, both are normatively connected to going to Rome – as, in the right circumstances, is anything else.¹³

To me this looks like a trick: the fact that going to Rome is the keeping of a promise does the real normative work, facts about the number of leaves play some role too, but this role is somehow accidental. How can we expose the idea that anything might become a reason as resting on a trick? Remember Raz's distinction between identifying reasons and operative reasons. The former are auxiliary reasons because they depend on the presence of the latter. The fact that going to Rome is, in the circumstances of our example, when the number of leaves is even, a keeping of one's promise is an identifying reason. Its force as a reason depends on the fact that one has a reason to keep one's promises, which is the operative reason. Every reason for doing something seems to have these two aspects: it points to a normatively relevant feature and it identifies the thing it is a reason for as exhibiting this relevant feature. Consider the following example: '... that there will be nobody much else around is sometimes a good reason for going there and sometimes a very good reason for staying away' (Dancy 2004, 74). Nobody being around points to some feature like peace and tranquillity if it is a reason for going there, and it points to something like the danger of being without any source of help, when a need for help might well arise, when it is a reason for staying away. We only understand the claim that something is a reason for something else by identifying a course of action as exhibiting a relevant feature. It is true that we can imagine any fact playing a certain identifying role. We can imagine the number of leaves on a tree becoming relevant by helping to identify a course of action as exhibiting a relevant feature. What we cannot imagine is that the number of leaves on a tree is an operative reason for going to Rome. Even if we construct a case in which the number of leaves on a tree is influenced by our going to Rome – and, consequently, we could understand it as being a feature of going to Rome that the number of leaves will be this or that – we cannot make sense of the idea that the number of leaves is a reason for going to Rome, without a background story in which the number of leaves identifies some other feature of going to Rome, which is antecedently recognized as normatively relevant, say in terms of promise-keeping.¹⁴

The particularist denies that principles determine what is a reason for what: anything can, in the right circumstances, become a reason and anything can, in the right circumstances, cease to be a reason. Once we distinguish between operative and identifying reasons, we realize that each of these claims is only plausible for one set of reasons. It is true that any fact can play, in the right circumstances, a role in identifying something as a reason, but it is not true that anything can become an operative reason. We can imagine a world in which the number of leaves shows that some act is a promise breaking or a world, which is set up such that the colour of my socks indicates danger, but we cannot imagine a world in which the number of leaves or the colour of socks has independent normative significance. Operative reasons can be undermined, and then they cease to be reasons. Identifying reasons, in contrast, which simply state some fact, such as that some action A has feature F, cannot be undermined. The equivalence thesis between enabling and disabling is a direct consequence of neglecting the feature regarding the structure of reasons provided by the distinction between operative and identifying reasons.

There are independent reasons for rejecting this equivalence. In general, there is a difference between needing help in order to achieve something and being able to

achieve something on one's own if nothing prevents one from achieving it. The fact that something could prevent me from achieving something does not entail that I need help and cannot achieve it on my own. For example, I do not need your help to open the door, I can do it on my own, but still you might be in a position to be able to prevent me from opening it. Similarly, the fact that something might undermine a reason's normative force does not entail that such a reason needs to be enabled. Operative reasons can be undermined, but they need no substantive enablers.¹⁵

This removes the one obstacle to talk in a non-trivial way about normative connectedness. Whether something is a reason or not may change from situation to situation because of the emergence or disappearance of undermining considerations. I argued that this variability is, like the variability of rationality, a surface phenomenon. As we explain the variability of rationality by differences in applicable reasons, we explain the variability of reasons by differences in applicable underminers. One person had more important things to do than going to Rome, thus it was not rational for her to go; another person had arranged things so that she could go. One person promised freely so her promise gave her a reason to do what she promised to do; another person was coerced into promising, so that this promise did not give her any reason. The variability of rationality strikes us as trivial and unsurprising because we assume that the constancy of the normative significance of reasons and their variable applicability explains this variability. Similarly, we are not surprised about the variability of reasons because the constancy of normative connectedness and the variable presence of underminers explain why something that is a reason here may not be a reason there.

V

Have I shown that if some consideration R is normatively connected to a course of action A, in one set of circumstances, then it remains normatively connected in any other circumstances? First, no reason has been offered to doubt such principles. When I claim, for example, that promising to do some action A is normatively connected to doing A, what I am saying is that promising is a reason for doing what one has promised to do *unless* it has been undermined. What would an example look like that could possibly challenge this claim?¹⁶ Secondly, assume the opposite, i.e. assume that there are no principles of normative connectedness. Then a consideration R would sometimes be a reason for a course of action A and sometimes not, but we would have lost the option of explaining such variability in terms of undermining. Unexplained variability would pose a real danger as it threatens the intelligibility of the normative domain. Accepting principles that govern normative connectedness – and there is no reason not to do so –averts this danger.¹⁷

References

Audi, R. 2004, *The Good in the Right*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Crisp, R. 2000, 'Particularizing Particularism', in: B. Hooker and M. Little, *Moral Particularism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 23-47.

Dancy, J. 2004, *Ethics Without Principles*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hare, R.M. 1972, 'Principles', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 73, repr. in his *Essays in Ethical Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1989, 49-65.

Herman, B. 1993, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, Cambridge/Mass: Harvard University Press.

Hooker, B. 2000, 'Moral Particularism: Wrong and Bad', in: B. Hooker and M. Little, *Moral Particularism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-22.

Kant, I. 1785, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. by JW Ellington, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981.

Kant I. 1797, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. By M Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Korsgaard, C. (forthcoming), 'Acting for a Reason', in *Studies in Practical Reason*, edited by V. Bradley Lewis, Catholic University Press.

McNaughton D., Rawling P. 2000, 'Unprincipled Ethics', in: B. Hooker and M. Little, *Moral Particularism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 256-275.

Piller, C. 2001, 'Normative Practical Reasoning', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. Vol. 75, 195-216.

Raz, J (1975), *Practical Reason and Norms*, reprinted, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Sinnott-Armstrong, W. 1999, 'Some Varieties of Particularism', *Metaphilosophy* 30, 1-12.

¹ We can sort particularist views along several dimensions. First, according to the domain of our assessment, we can distinguish between moral particularism, the denial of moral principles, and normative particularism, which is the denial of principles of reasons. (We could make normative particularism more fine-grained by distinguishing between particularism about reasons for beliefs and about reasons for actions.) Particularism about aesthetic evaluations is another version of particularism on a domain-based categorization, and I will introduce particularism about rationality as yet another application of the particularist's denial of principles. Secondly, we can distinguish between metaphysical or conceptual versions of particularism and epistemological versions. According to the first group of views the rejection of normative or evaluative principles is to be understood as a claim about the nature of, for example, moral rightness, whereas epistemological versions restrict themselves to negative claims about, e.g., moral knowledge, namely that moral principles play no role in acquiring moral knowledge. More minimally, particularism can also be a methodological claim about how best to approach questions of evaluative and normative assessment. I will understand normative particularism as a claim about the nature of reasons. Besides domain and status, strength is a third dimension along which we can distinguish different versions of particularism. In its strongest form, particularism would claim that the whole domain in which it applies has to be understood in particularist terms, e.g. no moral truth, not even those, which relate thick to thin ethical concepts, has its source in moral principles. What I, following Audi (2004, 70), call 'normative particularism', Dancy (ibid.) calls 'holism about reasons', as he reserves the term 'particularism' for what I call 'moral particularism'. Though Dancy will be my philosophical target, I prefer Audi's terminology as it clearly marks the close connection between different forms of particularism, a connection, which, despite his terminological choice, Dancy, obviously, endorses: '... I see ethical particularism as merely one expression of an overall holism in the theory of normative reasons' Dancy 2004, 132). The

particularist's opponent I call 'the generalist', whereas Dancy uses the term 'atomist' to make the same distinction. One more preliminary remark: A particularist denies principles; but what is a principle? Hare (1972) usefully distinguishes between the universality and the generality of principles. A universally quantified prescription like everyone ought to *fi* in a situation *S* can be more or less general, depending on how specific *S* is. If our description of *S* contains all non-evaluative features of the situation, supervenience of the evaluative on the non-evaluative alone guarantees the existence of principles, though they would be highly specific. A particularist can accept supervenience and, thus, will use a notion of principle stricter than that of a universally quantified prescription. Dancy, for example, mentions that they must be capable of functioning as guides and they must be learnable (see Dancy 2004, 116f).

² In drawing this distinction between acts and actions, I follow Korsgaard (forthcoming). Dancy (2004, 68) attributes a similar view to Herman (1993).

³ Again, I follow Korsgaard (forthcoming).

⁴ Dancy's third complaint can be answered along the same lines: doing something to achieve A&B is different from doing it only to achieve A. This difference may well explain differences in our normative assessment of these two actions.

⁵ Mc Naughton&Rawling (2000) exempt thick ethical concepts from their particularist view: although there are no principles connecting the non-moral with the moral domain, thick ethical concepts like justice will always count in favour of doing what is thus described.

⁶ Unusual abilities, like ear-wiggling or psycho kineses, might be different in this respect.

⁷ For more details, see Raz (1975, 15-48).

⁸ Expanding the reason to what is then called a 'complete' or an 'ultimate' reason is a move we find in Crisp (2000, 37), Hooker (2000, 11), and Raz (2000, 59). Dancy's main point against this general strategy is the following: 'The process of complication [i.e. the process of expanding the reason] is grounded in the agglomerative thought that if the consideration *c* is a reason only under the condition that *p*, the 'real' reason in the case is not *c* but *c+p*. But this is a fallacy. It involves failing to distinguish from other possible relations the specific normative relation of favouring – a relation in which *c* can stand to our action when *c+p* does not. Whatever relation *c+p* stands to the action, it will for certain be different from the one *c* stands in' (Dancy 2004, 127). See also Dancy (2004, 45-49).

⁹ This objection, in my view, is less successful when applied to the Aristotelian and Kantian view of action, which I discussed in section I. Arguably, the action of going to Rome to enjoy the city when one has taken care of all other business whilst one needs to punish oneself is different from the same act without the punishment addendum. One can bring all relevant considerations up to the level of actions, without any commitment to a questionable merger of enablers and reasons. See also Sinnott-Armstrong (1999, 6) for a related point

¹⁰ One practical analogue of the example above is the following: A crazy desire does not justify acting on it. In the theoretical case, I appeal to the idea that entailment between belief-contents must be of some normative relevance. As even a belief, which is entailed by the content of other things I believe can fail to be supported by any reason, the notion of normative relevance has to be weaker than that of a reason. In the practical case, the principle I appeal to is that desiring to do something is normatively relevant for doing it. In Piller (2001, 197f.) I make a similar point. There I talk about the notion of standing-in-the-being-a-reason-for relation to something else by which I mean the same as normative connectedness. In light of example like the one above, John Broome weakens the notion of reason in a different way to what he calls 'normative requirements', see Broome (1999).

¹¹ Thanks to Mark Brown for this example.

¹² In Dancy (2004, 41), he endorses this equivalence: 'There are favourers and disfavourers, and if there are enablers, there must be such things as disablers; trivially, the absence of an enabler will disable what would otherwise be a reason.'

¹³ 'Holism maintains that anything whatever might make a practical difference, or provide a reason, if the circumstances were suitable. It sees no difference, apparently, between such features as being very damaging to one's health and the number of leaves on a tree. [...] If there are differences between these things, it can only be that one of them matters more often than the other.' (Dancy 2004, 111)

¹⁴ Reasons, I claim, are such that in claiming that *R* is a reason for *A*, *A* is identified as exhibiting some relevant feature *F*. Thus, there are two ways in which such reason claims can go wrong: *A* might not be *F*, and, in the circumstances at hand, *F* might not be normatively relevant. The first claim, namely that *A* is *F*, is what Raz calls an 'identifying reason'. The second claim, namely that *F* is normatively relevant, asserts that its being *F* is the operative reason. Here is how Raz illustrates this point: 'Consider the inference: I want to help him. Lending him £400 will help him. Therefore, I have a

reason to lend him £400. The first premise states an operative reason, the second states an identifying reason. It transmits, as it were, the force of the operative reason to the particular act of lending him £400' (Raz 1978, 34f). We understand each other well enough, to make it unnecessary always explicitly to state the operative and the identifying reason. If his reason for running is that the train is about to depart, then running is taken to be such that it increases the chances of catching the train and one wants, for whatever reason, to catch the train and, thus, wants also to increase the likelihood of catching it.

¹⁵ In a recent talk 'Defending the Right' (Bled, June 2005) Dancy himself has rejected the enabling/disabling equivalence thesis on these grounds. He claims there that what he calls 'default reasons' need no enablers, though they can be disabled. If what I argue above is correct, all operative reasons turn out to be default reasons in this sense, i.e. they 'arrive switched on' as he puts it, or, in my terminology, they are normatively connected to some things but not to others. Let me add that there is an innocuous enabling-relation which can be introduced on the basis of the undermining relation. Such a notion applies only to operative reasons. Thus, it will not serve the purpose of showing that anything can be a reason for anything else.

¹⁶ Sure, someone might doubt that promising ever creates a reason. Remember, however, that I am only talking to someone who has already agreed that promising is normatively connected to doing what one has promised to do in a particular case. The claim I am defending is only a conditional claim: if promising is normatively connected to doing what one has promised here, then it bears the same normative connectedness everywhere.

¹⁷ Thanks to Jonathan Dancy, Steve Holland, Anthony Price, and Tom Stoneham for discussions and comments.