

John Dewey and the Possibility of Particularist Moral Education

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Moral particularism, broadly understood, is the position that morality resists codification into a set of rules or principles.¹ Jonathan Dancy, particularism's main contemporary proponent, maintains that there are few, if any, true moral principles, and that moral reasoning and judgment do not require them. Instead, acts are justified by elements of situations themselves, their *salient features*, and moral reasoning requires attunement to these features. In rejecting a rule-bound picture of morality, particularists also reject accounts of moral education emphasizing knowledge and application of rules. While Dancy articulates a competing view of competence, his explanation of the possibility of moral education is inadequate, leaving a lacuna in the case for particularism. However, John Dewey articulates a view of competence familiar to contemporary particularism and confronts a similar educational challenge. Here, I contend that Dewey's response provides resources for contemporary particularists.

Below, I outline Dancy's view of particularist moral reasoning and his sparse comments regarding education. While particularist moral reasoning requires discerning a situation's salient features, Dancy does not offer an account of moral formation explaining this sensitivity, inviting skepticism about the possibility of particularist education. In response, I call attention to Dewey's recognition of the problem of appreciating salience, the problem of a "mental perspective." Finally, I argue that Dewey's account of habits and their development in traditions enables an account of the possibility of moral education compatible with Dancy's particularism.

This sketch offers a key component in particularism's defense. If particularists cannot make sense of the possibility of moral education, that would constitute a serious objection to the view.² Because of this potential shortcoming, particularists ought to be eager to draw on a Deweyan framework regarding education.

Particularist Moral Reasoning: Justification is Narrative

Before proceeding to offer a Deweyan avenue for the possibility of particularist education, we need an idea of the goal of this process. As intimated above, Dancy conceives of moral competence differently than his princi-

ple-focused counterparts. In *Moral Reasons*, Dancy rejects a *generalist*, principle-bound, account of morality, arguing that, “Moral justification is therefore not subsumptive in nature, but narrative” (1993, p. 113). Generalists distinguish between reason-giving practices, offering descriptions of a situation and what it calls for, and the structure of moral justification (Dancy, 1993, p. 111). According to Dancy, generalist moral justification “can only consist in the subsumption of this case under some general principle which commands rational support in some way or other” (1993, p. 113). But when one offers a description of a situation, one does not offer a principle under which an action is subsumed. In description, one tries to get another to see a situation as one does, to notice what one notices. Description is thus distinct from justification on a generalist picture.

Particularists, lacking principles under which an action could be subsumed, reject this distinction between moral description and moral justification. Rather, “to justify one’s choice is to give the reasons one sees for making it, and to give those reasons is just to lay out how one sees the situation, starting in the right place and going on to display the various *salient features* in the right way” (Dancy, 1993, p. 113). Particularism collapses the distinction between our practices of description and justification. When we describe how we perceive a situation, we are offering our reasons for action. As a consequence of this collapse, Dancy maintains that the structure of moral justification is narrative.

If one perceives accurately, one’s description includes the various salient features of the situation. But, more than just having a list of all of the relevant features, “... *a full view of circumstances will not only see each feature for what it is but will also see how they are related to one another*. Such a view will grasp the *shape* of the circumstances” (Dancy, 1993, p. 112). This metaphor of “shape” is central to Dancy’s account of justification and rationality. Moreover, this shape is narrative in structure: “What we are doing [in moral reasoning] is telling the story of the situation” (1993, p. 112). Attunement to salient features thus requires more than the skill to determine that a feature is salient. One must also discern the relationship these features bear to each other.

Thus, Dancy rejects a generalist picture of moral competence in the image of the person of principle, replacing it with the image of the person who “sees” an appropriate description exhibited by a situation—its shape. Instead of a picture of moral rationality wherein one applies principles to actions, particularists like Dancy suggest that moral reasoning is more akin to listening to and appreciating a story (1993, p. 144).

Given this account of moral reasoning, particularist accounts of education should explain how one begins to perceive, without the aid of uni-

versal moral principles, salience and shape. As discussed below, Dancy appeals to a successful moral education to furnish this ability, but he does not provide an account of that education itself. The question of the possibility of particularist moral education is a puzzle that Dancy ignores but Dewey confronts.

Hooker's Assertion and Dancy's Quietude

Particularists require an account of education informed by this picture of moral competence. However, much of the literature defending particularism focuses on Dancy's work on the nature of reasons and justification. The lack of attention to moral education invites skepticism from generalists. For example, Brad Hooker, in "Moral Particularism: Wrong and Bad," dismisses the *possibility* of particularist education: "I think particularists won't be able in the end to give an adequate account of moral education" (2001, p. 15). While he does not elaborate, one might imagine difficulties. Particularism requires an account of education that explains appreciation of salience without reference to rules.

Dancy exhibits a problematic quietude regarding moral education; he writes,

To have the relevant sensitivities just is to be able to get things right case by case. The only remaining question is how we might get into this enviable state. And the answer is that for us it is probably too late [we've been corrupted by principles]. As Aristotle held, moral education is the key; for those of us past educating, there is no real remedy. (1993, p. 64)

And what does this enviable person have that others lack? Dancy maintains that "There is nothing that one brings to the situation other than a *contentless ability* to discern what matters where it matters, an ability whose presence in us is explained by our having undergone a successful moral education" (1993, p. 50). But the question is not whether it is too late for us. Rather, we want to know how anyone acquires this contentless ability. Dancy leaves questions of education unanswered in his central work on particularism.³ To address this lacuna, particularists should find a sympathetic voice in Dewey, who affirms a similar view of judgment and recognizes its educational difficulties.

Dewey and a "Mental Perspective"

A morally competent individual, on the particularist interpretation, is able to see a situation's narrative shape, appreciating its salient features. Dewey

ey expresses sympathy for such a view. In *Moral Principles in Education* (1909), he affirms a picture of judgment resonating with Dancy's:

The one who has judgment is the one who has ability to size up a situation. He is the one who can grasp the scene or situation before him, ignoring what is irrelevant, or what for the time being is unimportant, who can seize upon the factors which demand attention, and grade them according to their respective claims. (MW 4:289)⁴

Judgment, on Dewey's view, is contextual, and a central feature of judgment is the ability of an individual to perceive salient features of a situation.

But this view faces the same problem that confronts particularism. How does one start to appreciate a feature's salience or a situation's shape? Dewey is concerned about educational programs that fail to develop these abilities. He voices the problem for particularists as a general challenge for educational institutions, reporting,

I have heard an educator of large experience say that in her judgment the greatest defect of instruction to-day, on the intellectual side, is found in the fact that children leave school without a *mental perspective*. Facts seem to them all of the same importance. There is no foreground or background. (MW 4:291)

This educator laments children's inability to appreciate salience. The metaphor of foreground and background approximates Dancy's "shape" imagery and shows that Dewey acknowledges the problem of recognizing particularity.

Here, he implies that recognizing salience and inertness requires a "mental perspective," and that a goal of education is to furnish such a perspective. I suggest that Dewey's analyses of habit and tradition explain this formation, enabling a response to the challenge of appreciating salience. Moreover, these appeals are consistent with the demands of particularism; habituation in tradition explains appreciation of salience without necessary reliance on rules.

Habit & Salience

In looking to explain the development of a mental perspective and how a situation might exhibit shape without reference to rules, I turn to Dewey's

concept of habit. For Dewey, habits give contours to experience.⁵ Habits develop through participation in “social life,” activities in which individuals share ends and goals. Dewey describes education as “a shaping into the standard form of social activity,” in which an individual “partakes in the interests, purposes, and ideas current in the social group” (MW 9:15). He explains this participation in terms of habituation; the method for forming a mental perspective is “by means of the action of the environment in calling out certain responses.”⁶ Before elaborating on habit-formation, I offer a synopsis of habit’s role in shaping descriptions of situations.

Broadly, Dewey conceives of habit as an acquired disposition to a particular mode of response in the face of certain stimuli (MW 9:32). In *Human Nature and Conduct* he writes, “All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self” (MW 9:22). He summarizes his conception of habit after acknowledging the strangeness of his use of the term:

We need a word to express the kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of the minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity. (MW 9:31)

Given these qualities, the concept of habit explains the perceived salience of a situation’s features. Habits order thought and experience as projective demands for an activity, organizing the “minor elements of action” to express that demand.

Dewey’s example of the habit of walking illustrates this claim. Even when the habit is not expressed overtly, it is expressed in “what a man sees when he keeps still, even in dreams” (MW 9:29). Habits are constantly operative, affecting interaction with, and understanding of, the world. To develop this example, the able-bodied and the wheelchair-bound encounter situations differently, construing different elements of a situation as distant or accessible. This habit directs the organization of a situation’s features in perception and thought around the end of walking, rendering some features salient. Here, habit explains salience without appeal to a principle.

In moral education, Dewey emphasizes the role of social activity to elicit habituation and develop a “mental perspective.” One’s description of a situation, the practical shape one sees, is a product of the organizing

of habits formed in experience; Dewey maintains, “The results of prior experience, including previous conscious thinking, get taken up into direct habits, and express themselves in direct appraisals of value” (LW 7:266). Steven Rockefeller further explains, “For Dewey all education is a social process... education is a product of communication and shared experience” (1991, p. 250). Shared experience requires activity, forming habits that account for salience.

On Dewey’s account, to inculcate those habits that afford organization of a situation in accordance with moral concepts an individual requires experience of various values realized in situations. Dewey writes, “a youth who has had the repeated experience of the full meaning of the value of kindness towards others built into his disposition has a measure of the worth of generous treatment of others” (MW 9:243).⁷ Experiencing the meaning of kindness forms a disposition, a habit. The habit of kindness, as a projective demand for activity, imbues experience with a narrative structure around the demand for the realization of that value. In Dancy’s language, this habit gives shape to a situation, explaining certain features’ salience in moral perception.

Crucially, the experience of “the value of kindness” requires action. In the walking example, one acquires the ability to perceive a situation as a walker through the activity of walking. Likewise, habits enabling moral perception, such as kindness, develop through action. A youth participates in an act requiring organization of materials (features) in a situation to produce this kind of experience. This activity engages others in a community. Through such engagement, others can affirm or contest one’s descriptions and actions in relation to the concept of kindness. The responses of these partners in activity contribute to one’s own action, re-shaping a description that culminates in the experience of a value. In this activity, one forms a habit that can explain salience, in relation to kindness, in further situations. Thus, habits constitutive of a mental perspective form in conjoint activity.

Here’s an example of this kind of formation: My daughter participates in variety of community projects at our church. In one, children raise money to purchase livestock for families in need. With adults facilitating, they identify needs, animals that might address those needs, and carry out fundraising activities. They participate in a social activity, making the goal established by the small community their own. The children organize elements of their situation around that goal, engaging with one another to do so. Finally, they have an experience of the value of charitable activity, which can be employed in further actions. Habits like charity are projective, emphasizing and de-emphasizing features of the situation to produce a narrative wherein that value is realized.

In social activity, participants experience the “meaning” of a value as a culmination of action. This value organizes the activity, the “minor elements of action,” forming habits so that one might see salience organized around that value in other situations. Just as the habit of walking structures experience, without reference to a rule, relative to the satisfaction of a demand and is the product of prior action, so kindness is a product of activity that organizes experience without necessary reference to rules. Through habituation, one develops a “mental perspective” that explains salience. Thus, habituation provides an avenue for particularists to articulate the possibility of moral education.

Habits, Traditions, and Consistency with Particularism

The analysis of habit enables an explanation of salience and shape consistent with Dancy’s rejection of principles. However, since a Deweyan account of habituation requires reference to the social environment in which habituation occurs, and many traditions affirm rules and principles, there is an apparent tension with particularism. Here, I suggest that appeal to communities and traditions need not raise a problem for particularists.

In habituation, the environment eliciting action is a social environment constituted in part by traditions and institutions. In *Art as Experience* Dewey argues,

... The materials of his [an individual’s] thought and belief come to him from the others with whom he lives. He would be poorer than a beast of the fields were it not for traditions that become a part of his mind, and for institutions that penetrate below his outward actions into his purposes and satisfactions. (LW 10:275)

Here, Dewey provides a reply to the educator’s lament; a mental perspective forms through an individual’s relationship to traditions and institutions embedded in their communities. Habit is central to Dewey’s conception of tradition: “each great tradition is itself an organized habit of vision and of methods for ordering and conveying material” (LW 10:270). Sensitivity to salience forms through conjoint activity informed by traditions.

One may usefully think of traditions, on Dewey’s view, as active tendencies in a social environment to respond to stimuli. In part, these tendencies inhere in individuals’ habits in communities. Through the submission of one’s descriptions of situations to others embedded in those communities, one develops the habits necessary for further construals. When individuals actively engage others, they participate in a community

with already operative habits of organization, insofar as other members' salience-explaining habits are manifest in responses to one's descriptions and acts. In the kindness example, individuals contesting or affirming one's descriptions and actions re-shape one's own appreciation of a situation. Thus, one way individuals participate in traditions is through engagement with other individuals in a community.

Appeal to traditions-as-habits is consistent with Dancy's account of competence. There, Dancy argues that particularists deny that a feature is salient or important in virtue of its being "picked out" by a principle. Traditions do not provide salience in virtue of identifying that some feature *must* have a certain moral import. Rather, conceived as a community's habits of organization, traditions function as partners in activities that provide organization to a situation. It is a partner insofar as it is embodied in community members' and institutions' tendencies. Thus, no universal principle needs to be referenced; instead, the habits formed by shared experiences in traditions give contours to experience as demands that organize a situation's elements, giving shape to a situation.⁸

Conclusion

Particularists like Dancy can make use of Dewey's account of habituation and tradition to explain the possibility of moral education. In the foregoing outline, habits formed in traditions explain the salience of features and give shape to situations without necessary reference to invariant moral principles.

The foreground and background of judgment, a mental perspective, thus does not require principles to give shape to a situation. In education, rather than developing facility with moral principles and acquisition of mental content, one seeks to develop competent particularists by engaging in conjoint activity in a community. By doing so, one develops habits that enable a narrative appreciation of situations. Habits, formed by interaction in tradition, afford salience without necessary appeal to rules. Thus, Dancy-inspired particularists can articulate the possibility of moral education. And, by developing the pragmatist framework for education sketched here, particularists might hope to bolster the plausibility of their view.⁹

Notes

¹ In the context of my discussion of Jonathan Dancy, I will follow his work and use “rules” and “principles” interchangeably.

² Others have also noticed the problems this inattention raises for particularism. For example, David Bakhurst writes, “Most particularist writing is so preoccupied with tortuous metaethical disputes about the nature of reasons that it is difficult to discern what its truth would mean. Yet particularism, like any moral theory, will ultimately stand or fall to the degree to which it casts light upon our moral lives” (2005, p. 275). If particularism cannot account for salience without rules, then that would constitute a failure to cast light on the moral life.

³ One might object that the discussion of narrative rationality occurs only in the earlier work, *Moral Reasons*, and not in the later *Ethics Without Principles*, suggesting that perhaps Dancy no longer affirms this view of competence. But in a 2008 interview Dancy admits, “there are things in the first book that I regret not putting in the second. One is the notion of narrative justification and another is the notion of the normative shape of a situation” (Lind, 2008, p. 9).

⁴ Abbreviations refer to the critical print edition of Dewey’s works, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), published in three series: *The Early Works* (EW), *The Middle Works* (MW), and *The Later Works* (LW). So, (MW 4:289) refers to *The Middle Works*, volume 4, page 289.

⁵ He writes, “We bring to the simplest observation a complex apparatus of habit... otherwise experience is the blankest of stares” (LW 1:170).

⁶ He doesn’t use the word “habit,” at the particular point referenced in *Democracy and Education*, however, later in the same chapter he discusses habits as expressions of education (LW 9:50-54).

⁷ Rockefeller (1994, p. 254) also cites this example.

⁸ Dewey’s analysis of principles as “points of view” coheres with this analysis. In 1932 *Ethics*, Dewey maintains that principles, as opposed to rules, have an important function in moral deliberation. Principles are useful insofar as they provide a standpoint around which the features of a problematic situation might be organized, not as straightforward reasons for one course of action or another (LW 7:170-172).

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