Do Particularists Have a Coherent Notion of a Reason for Action?*

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Selim Berker argues that particularists do not have a coherent notion of reasons for action because they cannot show that contributory reasons always contribute to overall reason or moral judgments in accordance with their valence. I argue that Berker fails to demonstrate that particularists cannot show this to be the case. He also wrongly assumes that they need to know this to be the case to legitimately speak of reasons for action. Furthermore, Jonathan Dancy's account of practical reasoning explains how particularists can legitimately speak of reasons for action while claiming that reasons sometimes make contributions contrary to their valence.

I. BERKER'S CASE AGAINST PARTICULARISM

Selim Berker argues in this journal that moral particularists do not have a coherent notion of a reason for action.[1] If Berker were right, it would be a severe blow for particularists, such as Jonathan Dancy, who defend their view mainly by appeal to the nature of reasons. However, as I will show in the following, Berker's paper does not achieve what it purports to achieve.

Let me first summarize Berker's case. His fundamental assumption is that the idea of weighing reasons is central to the particularist conception of reasons. Berker captures the commitments implied by this idea in what he labels the "generalized weighing framework." According to this framework, some of the nonnormative features of an action can give rise to contributory reasons in favor of or against the action, each with a

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1. Selim Berker, "Particular Reasons," *Ethics* 118 (2007): 109–39. Unless stated otherwise, page references in the following are to this paper.

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"metaphorical *weight* or *strength*" attached to them (114–15). To determine the overall moral status of an action one needs to balance the weights of these reasons against each other.

A further essential component of Berker's generalized weighing framework is the notion of a "combinatorial function." He states that this function "takes as input the valence and weight of all the reasons present in a given possible situation and gives as output the rightness or wrongness of each action available in that situation" (120). What he actually has in mind here is a combination of two functions. One of them (what he calls the "total reason function") yields for each action the "total reason in favor of the action" on the basis of the relevant contributory reasons (129). The second function determines whether an action is right or wrong on the basis of the total reason in its favor and the total reason in favor of alternative options. For instance, one's total reason function might tell one to add up the weights of all the reasons in favor of an action and subtract from this sum the weights of the reasons against the action. The second function, in turn, might specify that the right action is that with the highest amount of total reason in its favor.

Berker assumes that a given moral outlook must involve only one combinatorial function, which can be applied in all contexts (121). Yet he acknowledges the possibility that this function specifies different ways of determining the rightness or wrongness of an action for different contexts. He describes this as analogous to the way in which a mathematical function can involve different instructions for different values of its input variables. One example of his, to which I will come back below, is the following total reason function, which could yield the input to a combinatorial function. The term $r_1(\mathrm{X}, \mathrm{C})$ stands for "a real number representing the valence and weight of the reason, if any, provided by X's possessing feature F_1" in circumstances C (and analogously for r_2) (128). The term $t^*(\mathrm{X}, \mathrm{C})$ stands for the total reason in favor of action X in circumstances C.

$$t^*(\mathrm{X}, \mathrm{C}) = \begin{cases} r_1(\mathrm{X}, \mathrm{C}) + r_2(\mathrm{X}, \mathrm{C}) - 500 & \text{if } r_1(\mathrm{X}, \mathrm{C}) = 10, \\ r_1(\mathrm{X}, \mathrm{C}) + r_2(\mathrm{X}, \mathrm{C}) & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases}$$

Berker attributes to particularists a combination of two theses. The first one is holism about reasons, which Berker defines as the view that "for every nonnormative feature of an action that gives rise to a reason for/against action in one possible context, there is another possible context in which that same feature either gives rise to a reason of opposite valence

or else provides no reason one way or the other" (120).[2] The second one is what Berker calls "noncombinatorialism about reasons for action." He defines this as the view that "the combinatorial function for rightness and wrongness is not finitely expressible" (122).[3]

Berker's crucial claim is that being committed to both holism and noncombinatorialism leaves particularists with no coherent notion of a reason for action. First he shows that holism rules out what he calls the "isolation conception of a reason for action," according to which "the fact that action X would have feature F in circumstance C qualifies as a reason for performing X in C if and only if, in any possible situation in which F is the only morally relevant feature of the actions available to the agent, the actions possessing F are the right thing to do" (125). Next he shows that holism is incompatible with the "removal conception of a reason for action," which sees a reason for action as "a consideration whose removal would make the action in question less right, and a reason against action [as] a consideration whose removal would make the action less wrong" (126). In both cases Berker is in agreement with Dancy, who rejects these conceptions of a reason for action and endorses two alternative conceptions.

One of them is what Berker labels the "right-making conception of a reason for action" (127). On this conception a reason for an action contributes toward an action's rightness, that is, it makes an action right in a certain respect. The second is the "favoring conception," according to which a reason for an action is a consideration that counts in favor of that action (133). Berker parts company with Dancy in claiming that these two conceptions of a reason for action face problems too. It is this part of Berker's case against particularism which will be at the center of the present discussion. Although Berker focuses on the right-making conception, he thinks that his argument against the particularist can be run equally for both conceptions. Similarly, Dancy often speaks of right-makers and favorers interchangeably. The distinction will therefore not play a significant role in the remainder of this article.

Berker assumes that talk of an individual reason for an action makes sense only if the consideration in question clearly strengthens the total reason in favor of the action and makes the action more right overall (and analogously for a reason against an action). He formulates this constraint on the combinatorial function in the following way:

2. There is an issue here concerning how to most plausibly define holism and whether Berker is right in rejecting Dancy's formulation. But since holism is not at the center of our present inquiry, I will not go into that here.

3. Note that Berker's terminology is slightly misleading. Thus he does not take "non-combinatorialism" to stand for the claim that correct moral reasoning should not or does not need to follow a combinatorial function.

(i) Individual reasons always make discernible individual contributions to the overall rightness or wrongness of a given action.

(ii) The individual contribution made by a reason of positive valence always positively affects the total reason in favor of the action in question, and the individual contribution made by a reason of negative valence always negatively affects the total reason in favor of the action. (130)

Berker's discussion is largely concerned with contributions of reasons to the total reason in favor of an action and, hence, with condition ii. This condition is clearly met if the weights of individual reasons are added up to yield the total reason in favor of the action (where reasons for an action are understood to have positive weights and reasons against an action to have negative weights). However, particularists deny that practical reasoning consists in a simple adding up of reasons. In fact, accepting an additive total reason function would be a significant step toward endorsing a finitely expressible combinatorial function (which their noncombinatorialism rules out).

The particularist's rejection of a simple adding up of reasons does not automatically exclude the possibility that he can accommodate condition ii. Thus Berker suggests that for talk of individual reasons for action to make sense it is sufficient that a reason in favor of an action makes a positive contribution, and a reason against an action makes a negative contribution to the total reason in favor of the action. It is not necessary that a reason also contributes its exact weight. This is why Berker calls a combinatorial function that meets conditions i and ii "quasi-additive."

However, Berker's conclusion is that particularists cannot accommodate the requirement of quasi-additivity either. The problem is again their commitment to noncombinatorialism. As Berker puts it, "it is not clear what grounds particularists have to insist that, although we don't know enough about the combinatorial function to be able to write it down in finite form, we do know enough about it to know that it is quasi-additive" (130). Since Berker thinks that the combinatorial function has to be quasi-additive for talk of individual reasons for action to make sense, this consideration is sufficient for him to conclude that the particularist is left without a coherent notion of individual reasons for action.

In the following section, I will show that this part of Berker's argument is flawed. I will argue that Berker dismisses too quickly the possibility that the particularist might know the combinatorial function to be quasi-additive in virtue of knowing that the different subfunctions that compose the combinatorial function are quasi-additive. Moreover, I will question Berker's assumption that the particularist needs to know the

combinatorial function to be quasi-additive in order to have a coherent conception of an individual reason for action. In Section III, I will consider the fact that Dancy explicitly endorses breaches of quasi-additivity. I will show that the relevant remarks of Dancy's can be understood in such a way that they do not go against the spirit of Berker's requirement either.

II. DO PARTICULARISTS (NEED TO) KNOW THAT THE COMBINATORIAL FUNCTION IS QUASI-ADDITIVE?

A footnote discusses one way in which a particularist might try to defend himself against Berker's attack (131 n. 35). Berker suggests that the combinatorial function could be said to be made up of several quasi-additive combinatorial functions. The idea would be that although the quasi-additive nature of all these subfunctions is known, one cannot specify in finite terms what subfunction applies in what context. The combinatorial function is hence quasi-additive yet not finitely expressible.[4]

Berker rejects this response because he thinks that a total reason function is not automatically quasi-additive in virtue of consisting of parts that would each be quasi-additive if individually considered as a complete total reason function. To argue for this point he considers the total reason function t^*, which I presented as an example in the previous section. If one's total reason function consisted solely of either one of the parts of this function, then it would be quasi-additive. Yet t^* is not quasi-additive because, as Berker points out, t^* is equivalent "in the mathematical sense" to the following total reason function t^{**}:

$$t^{**}(\mathrm{X},\mathrm{C}) = \begin{cases} -49r_1(\mathrm{X},\mathrm{C}) + r_2(\mathrm{X},\mathrm{C}) & \text{if } r_1(\mathrm{X},\mathrm{C}) = 10, \\ r_1(\mathrm{X},\mathrm{C}) + r_2(\mathrm{X},\mathrm{C}) & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases}$$

According to Berker, function t^{**} is not quasi-additive because reason r_1 (X, C) makes a contribution contrary to its valence if it has a positive weight of 10 (its contribution is then $-49 \times 10 = -490$). This entails that function t^* is not quasi-additive either. The crucial point is that in t^* the reason r_1(X, C) seems to contribute to the total reason sum in accordance with its actual weight and valence even when it equals 10, yet this appearance turns out to be an illusion once one takes into account that only in this case one has to also subtract 500.

Although Berker's response seems convincing, the problem he points out occurs only with certain types of subfunctions. Yet these might not be what the particularist has in mind. For instance, the particularist

4. Although Berker formulates this objection in terms of combinatorial functions, what he actually focuses on in discussing this suggestion are total reason functions.

might only allow deviations from an additive total reason function that involve counting a reason's weight twice in certain situations. If this is the case, then he can know what contribution a feature makes in a given situation without knowing what contribution it makes in other situations. Hence the particularist could know that the total reason function as a whole is quasi-additive without being able to make a general claim regarding what subfunction applies in what context.[5]

Nonetheless, this defense might not be considered very helpful in connection with actual particularist views. A typical particularist such as Dancy is unlikely to explicitly commit himself to a total reason function consisting of a limited number of such quasi-additive subfunctions. He wants to allow for more variability and context sensitivity.

Yet the particularist could make another move. He could argue that he does not need to know that the combinatorial function is quasi-additive. This kind of defense could take various forms.

First, the particularist could claim that for his talk of individual reasons for action to be coherent it is sufficient that nothing in his position is incompatible with the requirement of quasi-additivity, which is indeed the case. Holism is irrelevant here because it concerns the relation between nonnormative features of situations and contributory reasons, rather than contributory reasons and overall moral or reason judgments. Moreover, noncombinatorialism is not incompatible with the requirement of quasi-additivity either. We just saw that total reason functions which are not finitely expressible can be quasi-additive. For instance, consider a total reason function which is made up of two subfunctions. One is a simple additive function whereas the other involves multiplying by two the weights of negative reasons before adding up one's reasons. Such a total reason function can be quasi-additive even if one cannot specify in a finite way which subfunction is to be used in what context.

Berker may accept that holism and noncombinatorialism as such do not exclude the possibility that the requirement of quasi-additivity can be met. Nonetheless he is unlikely to be convinced by this defense. He might take the requirement of quasi-additivity to be so fundamental that the particularist needs to have good reasons to believe that his view of moral reasoning satisfies it. It might seem insufficient to merely leave open the possibility that the combinatorial function is quasi-additive.

In response to this the particularist could strengthen his case. He could say that he has reason to believe that a total reason function is quasi-additive if it has behaved in a quasi-additive way in all situations he has considered so far. This kind of reply has force if what I just argued is

5. In the next section I will point out a further problem with Berker's response, namely, that Berker's use of mathematical functions does not do justice to Dancy's view of practical reasoning.

right and the particularist can indeed determine the contribution of a reason to the total reason sum in a particular situation without knowing the complete total reason function (which covers every situation). Similarly, he could argue that he has reason for taking the combinatorial function to be quasi-additive if it has behaved in a quasi-additive way in all situations he has considered so far.

If this response is open to the particularist, then he could even argue that Berker assigns too much weight to knowledge of, or beliefs about, the combinatorial function as a whole (i.e., of what it tells one to do in all contexts). The particularist could point out that the coherence of his notion of a reason for action in a given instance of moral reasoning can be determined on the basis of the subfunction which he uses in this situation. There is no problem with his conception of an individual reason for action as long as the subfunctions he uses are quasi-additive and cannot lead to the problem described by Berker.

III. DANCY'S DENIAL OF QUASI-ADDITIVITY

Berker might not be convinced that the responses discussed in the previous section can save the particularist conception of a reason for action. He might point out that particularists explicitly deny that moral reasoning needs to meet the requirement of quasi-additivity. An important example of such a denial is the following passage of Dancy's, on which I will focus in the discussion that follows.

> Contributory reasons are officially reasons capable of doing what they do either alone or in combination with others. But they can combine in peculiar and irregular ways, as we will see. There is no guarantee that the case for doing an action, already made to some extent by the presence of one reason, will be improved by adding a second reason to it. Reasons are like rats, at least to the extent that two rats that are supposedly on the same side may in fact turn and fight among themselves; similarly, the addition of the second reason may make things worse rather than better. Remember the joke about a New York restaurant: there are two things wrong with this restaurant—the food is terrible and the portions are too small.[6]

Dancy suggests here that a reason in favor of an action can weaken the overall case in favor of the action and that a reason against an action can strengthen the overall case in its favor. Yet such reasoning would breach the requirement of quasi-additivity. Does this mean that Dancy does not have a coherent notion of a reason for action after all, or can he show that moral reasoning does not need to be quasi-additive?

6. Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics without Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15–16.

Unfortunately, the example Dancy uses to illustrate his point is not very convincing. Dancy seems to understand this joke as follows. The fact that the food served in a certain restaurant is terrible speaks against going there. The fact that the portions there are too small also speaks against going there. However, if one adds this second consideration to one's picture of the situation, the overall case in favor of going to the restaurant is improved. It turns out that one only has to eat a small portion of terrible food, which is clearly better than having to eat a large portion of terrible food. The point is meant to be that the portions' being small is a reason against going to the restaurant but nonetheless strengthens the overall case in favor of going to the restaurant.

Note that to read the example this way one has to assume that one has to eat all one's food, for example, out of politeness toward the person who is paying for it. Otherwise the case in favor of going to the restaurant would not be strengthened by the consideration that the portions are small, for one could always choose not to eat the food. But even then Dancy's interpretation of the joke is implausible. Thus the smallness of the portions does not seem to be a reason against going to the restaurant at all in this situation. Given the low quality of the food, one does not mind at all that the portions are small. In fact, the joke works precisely because considerations that are introduced as two different flaws of the restaurant are actually not separate considerations speaking against the restaurant.

One could try to save the example by taking the portions' being small to be by default a reason against going to a restaurant, yet not a reason against going to this restaurant. But in this case we would not have a situation where a reason makes a contribution contrary to its actual valence in the situation. And I take it that this is what Dancy has in mind here. For similar reasons it would not help to point out that the portions' being small may be, or in fact is, a reason against going to a restaurant in other situations. In this case his remarks would simply amount to another assertion of holism.

The following example better illustrates Dancy's point. Imagine there is live music at bar A and no music at bar B. That there is live music at A favors the option of going there because we like having background music. Hence we tend toward going to A. Yet, as a result of finding out that the group playing at A are bad musicians, we change our minds and are now inclined to go to B. Things change again when we find out that the music played at A is folk music. The music's being folk also speaks against going to A because we do not particularly like folk music.

But this new bit of information also plays a further role in our deliberation. To see this we need to remember Dancy's distinction between intensifiers and attenuators of reasons. Intensifiers are considerations that increase the weight of a reason, whereas attenuators are

considerations that decrease the weight of a reason. In our example the music's being folk attenuates the reason against going to A that is given rise to by the badness of the musicians. Because of the nature of folk music and because we are not experts in folk music, we can endure bad musicianship in this genre. This second contribution of the new consideration is stronger than its first. Therefore, we are less disinclined to go to A than we were before finding out that the music being played is folk.

I take it that Dancy's aim was to give an example of a case where a reason against an action is at the same time an attenuator of another reason against this action. For this example to demonstrate his point it is important that both the bad musicianship and the music's being folk remain reasons against going to bar A, even once it is realized that the music's being folk reduces the significance of the bad musicianship. And this condition is met. The badness of the musicians is still a reason against going to the bar, but its weight has been reduced. Equally, the music's being folk is still counted against going to the bar, but its contribution is outweighed by the simultaneous attenuation of the reason given rise to by the badness of the musicians.

In a case like this, we can distinguish the contribution that a reason makes to the total reason in favor of an action in its role as a favorer or disfavorer (let us call this its 'direct' contribution) from the contribution it makes in its role as an intensifier or attenuator, enabler or disabler (its 'indirect' contribution).[7] Dancy's rationale behind his denial of quasi-additivity seems to be the following. What really matters in assessing whether one can coherently speak of an individual reason for action is a reason's direct contribution. As long as this is not contrary to its valence, the notion of an individual reason for action does not lose its rationale. It does not matter if there are breaches of quasi-additivity as a result of a reason's indirect contribution being stronger than its direct contribution.

Berker might not be convinced by this line of thought. He might think that attenuators only affect what weights one's reasons have whereas the really interesting question is how the weights of one's reasons are balanced against each other. That a fact giving rise to a reason also figures in one's reasoning in a different role (e.g., as an attenuator) is insignificant for his purposes. Therefore, all he talks about in assessing the particularist conception of a reason for action are direct contributions of reasons for action. Given that Dancy does not deny that such direct contributions need to meet the requirement of quasi-additivity, there may not seem to be any real disagreement between Berker and Dancy.

7. The distinction between enablers and disablers is another important aspect of Dancy's position. Thus Dancy thinks that some features of situations can enable other features to favor or disfavor an action or can prevent them from doing so.

However, there is an important point of disagreement. Berker and Dancy have different ideas of what weighing reasons in one's practical reasoning involves. According to Dancy, practical reasoning essentially involves the gradual determining of a situation's "overall evaluative shape."[8] Dancy's idea seems to be that one adds one consideration at a time to see how it affects the overall balance of reasons. He makes this especially clear in his paper "Practical Reasoning and Inference."[9] There he discusses an example where a person gradually obtains more information about a scene he observes and with each bit of information updates his view regarding what would constitute an appropriate response.

Berker's generalized weighing framework (especially his use of mathematical functions to illustrate his points) does not chime well with Dancy's incremental account of practical reasoning. The way in which Berker speaks of the combinatorial function suggests that one should first determine all the individual reasons one has in a situation, including their weights, and then look at how they balance out. Yet on Dancy's picture such balancing can take place with each new consideration that comes in view, and the weight one assigns to a reason may change over the course of one's reasoning. There are not two clearly distinct processes of determining one's reasons in a situation on the one hand and weighing them against each other on the other hand. This is one reason why Dancy denies that reasoning consists in a simple adding up of reasons. It is also why he is reluctant to make statements about instances of reasoning which merely consist in weighing reasons for and against an action against each other, without any consideration of attenuators, intensifiers, enablers, or disablers.

IV. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that Berker's requirement of quasi-additivity does not constitute a stumbling block to particularists' talk of reasons for action. The first part of my defense of particularism centered on Berker's claim that given their noncombinatorialism particularists cannot know that reasons for action meet the crucial requirement of quasi-additivity. I presented various responses which particularists could make to defend themselves. In the second part of my defense I showed that Dancy can coherently speak of reasons for action despite explicitly denying quasi-additivity.

8. Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 143.

9. Jonathan Dancy, "Practical Reasoning and Inference," paper presented at the second On-line Philosophy Conference 2007, accessed December 19, 2011, http://experimentalphilosophy.typepad.com/2nd_annual_online_philoso/files/jonathan_dancy.pdf.