

Dancy, Jonathan, *Practical Shape: A Theory of Practical Reasoning*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 208. \$40 (cloth).

Forthcoming in *Ethics*

*Practical Shape* addresses foundational questions about the nature of reasoning. Perhaps its central and most striking claim is a version of the thesis, standardly attributed to Aristotle, that action can be the ‘conclusion’ of practical reasoning. As Dancy puts it, actions can stand in much the same relations to the considerations adduced in reasoning as beliefs and intentions can.

Dancy defends this thesis by showing how it results from a general account of what reasoning is, and of what makes it good. The heart of the book (chs. 2-7) elaborates this general account, and shows how it applies to particular species and subspecies of reasoning, including practical reasoning (chs. 2 and 3), theoretical reasoning (ch. 4), moral reasoning (ch.5), and instrumental reasoning (ch.7). Two subsequent chapters contrast Dancy’s account with two influential accounts which reject the Aristotelian thesis: Joseph Raz’s view, on which the closest that reasoning can get us to action is a belief about what we have reason to do (ch.8), and John Broome’s view that the closest that reasoning can get us to action is to an intention (ch.9).

Dancy’s book is an important contribution to the small but growing literature on these general questions about reasoning. It provides the first sustained defence of a highly natural and attractive view, on which reasoning is essentially a matter of responding to reasons. It is refreshing – and I think salutary – in its emphasis on the structural similarities between practical and theoretical reasoning, its warnings of focusing too much on very special forms of reasoning, such as deductive reasoning, or reasoning from an end to a necessary means, and more generally in its approach of

seeking a unified general account of reasoning. It contains a host of worthwhile discussions of issues both directly and indirectly related to its central themes. Above all, it is consistently stimulating: full of observations, suggestions, and arguments which are well worth pausing over. In these ways, it has the qualities which are characteristic of Dancy's many contributions to normative philosophy.

What, then, is reasoning, according to Dancy? He begins with the case in which things go well. You are considering what to think or what to do – perhaps you are wondering what to do this evening, or what to think about the latest political developments. You consider the situation, note the relevant factors and then respond in the way that is called for. When things go well, then, reasoning – with a qualification to be discussed below – is simply a matter of responding appropriately to one's situation.

This is a very abstract – at one point, Dancy calls it a 'minimalist' – account of reasoning (5). It is fleshed out by describing some of the ways in which factors in one's situation can be relevant to how to respond. Here Dancy discusses, as he has done elsewhere, the distinctions between reasons (considerations which favour a response), enablers and disablers (which allow a consideration to favour a response or prevent it from doing so) and intensifiers and attenuators (which affect the force with which a consideration favours a response). The relevant factors in a situation constitute what Dancy calls the 'shape' of the situation (hence the book's title). For Dancy, reasoning is thus a matter of responding appropriately given the shape of one's situation. The task, which takes up much of the book, is then to show how the different species and subspecies of reasoning exemplify this general structure.

We need not get into these details, though, to see that Dancy's picture makes clear how both practical and theoretical reasoning are species of the same genus: both are ways of responding appropriately to the situation, given the reasons and other relevant considerations in play. We can also see the way in which reasoning can lead to action:

just as we can respond appropriately to a situation by forming a belief or intention, we can respond appropriately by acting. Dancy holds that other writers have failed to see this because they have begun, not with a general picture of reasoning, but by focusing on special cases – in particular, with inferential theoretical reasoning. This has led them to take idiosyncratic features of such cases to be essential to reasoning as such.

So far we just have a story about when reasoning goes well. But reasoning does not always go well. Reasoning often leads us to respond in ways that are not called for by our situation. There are various ways this can happen: for instance, your reasoning might begin from false beliefs, or unworthy goals, or from considerations which, though they obtain, do not support, or do not adequately support, your response. Reasoning can also go wrong in other ways – you might, for instance, fail to respond appropriately to your situation because you get distracted or confused while considering what to do or think.

These points suggest to many that we need an account of the nature of reasoning which is at least to some extent independent of our account of what makes for good reasoning. To take the most prominent recent account, John Broome tells us that reasoning is a matter of following certain kinds of rules for revising your beliefs, intentions, and perhaps other attitudes (*Rationality Through Reasoning*, [Oxford: Blackwell, 2013]). Since these rules need not be rules of good reasoning, Broome's account of reasoning is independent of his account of good reasoning. Dancy takes a very different approach. He holds that the cases in which reasoning goes less than fully well are to be understood in terms of their relation to the cases in which it does go well. A process counts as reasoning, for Dancy, if it is 'sufficiently relevantly similar' to an ideal case. What counts as 'sufficiently relevantly similar'? This is left 'up to judgment' (105).

I think there is much that is appealing in Dancy's picture. And there is much that is worth examining in the details of how he develops and defends the view, and in his discussions of rival views. But in what follows I want to raise three fairly general issues.

Since I have discussed the sort of account of good reasoning which Dancy offers elsewhere (Conor McHugh and Jonathan Way, ‘What is Good Reasoning?’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96 [2018]: 253-74), I will focus on issues about the account of reasoning as such.

The first issue concerns the suggestion that non-ideal cases of reasoning are to be understood in terms of ideal cases. As is probably already clear, Dancy’s view here is unconventional. We can bring this out further by noting that it is akin to the view that to believe is to be in a state which is sufficiently relevantly similar to ideal belief – which is perhaps knowledge – or that to act is to do something which is sufficiently relevantly similar to ideal action – which is perhaps morally worthy, or fully rational, action. These suggestions are not without precedent but they certainly run against the grain of much work in the philosophy of mind and action – although they are closer to influential ‘disjunctivist’ views in the philosophy of perception. The proposal about action is also counter to Dancy’s own views about the nature of action, which are briefly discussed in §1.8.

Dancy defends his approach in part by clarifying what he call his ‘focalist’ methodology. This involves three stages: ‘First, we identify certain cases as focal... Second, we determine a similarity relation between the focal cases and any peripheral cases. Third, we identify a dependence relation that holds between the focal and the peripheral cases’ (105-6). Dancy is certainly right that this is a viable and interesting methodology. Still, I am not sure that his application of it is satisfactory. The problem is that almost all of his efforts are devoted to the first stage; he says very little about the other stages. Here I will focus on what he says about the second stage.

Dancy makes two remarks about the similarity relation between ideal and non-ideal reasoning. The first is the one I have already quoted – that it is a matter for judgment. The second comes in his discussion of his methodology. Here he says that the

nature of the similarity 'is given by the material theory of Chapter 3' (106). However, I don't understand what he means by this. The discussion he is referring to concerns the distinctions between different ways in which considerations can be relevant in a situation – for instance, as favourers, enablers or disablers, intensifiers or attenuators. I don't see how this discussion can help us understand why non-ideal cases of reasoning might nonetheless count as cases of reasoning. When one is reasoning badly, one might be responding to considerations which are not relevant in any of these ways; thus cases of bad reasoning need not be similar to ideal cases in virtue of featuring similarly relevant considerations.

It is also not clear what Dancy could say about similarity. This is because the minimality of Dancy's account of the ideal cases means there just aren't very many dimensions of similarity to appeal to, in giving an account of non-ideal cases. Suppose you form a belief by affirming the consequent, or applying the gambler's fallacy. You could clearly be reasoning. But what you are doing might have none of what Dancy takes to be the defining features of ideal reasoning: the considerations you reason from might offer no support at all to the conclusion you reach. By contrast, there are other cases in which you do come to believe in a way which is favoured in your situation, but in which you do not reason – free association, wishful thinking, or some brute causal process might result in you believing something which is well-supported. It is not obvious what resources Dancy has to explain why such processes are less relevantly similar to the ideal cases than certain cases of bad reasoning.

The second issue concerns the qualification to Dancy's view which I alluded to above. Dancy does not take all cases of responding appropriately to one's situation to count as reasoning. There is a difference, he says, between acting for a reason and acting from reasoning. In his example, I might get off the bus because it is my stop; I thereby respond to a reason, but I need not have reasoned: 'I do this without thinking much'

(10). There is also a more general difference, I take it, between responding to a reason and responding from reasoning.

Dancy says that this difference lies in ‘the complexity of what one is responding to’ (11). This is, I think, surprising. Indeed, Dancy’s own description of his example suggests that the difference lies not in the complexity of *what* one is responding to but in the complexity of one’s thought.

Dancy sometimes suggests (e.g. 3) that complexity in one’s situation will, when things are going well, be mirrored by complexity in one’s thought. But I am not sure this is right, or that it fits well with other aspects of his view. If ‘thinking’ is a matter of conscious deliberation, then it is not clear that, the more complex one’s situation, the more complex one’s conscious deliberation will be. Dancy plausibly insists that we can be sensitive to what our situation calls for without conscious deliberation. If that is right, then it is not clear why we could not sometimes exhibit such sensitivity in complex situations, or that doing so would be problematic. If ‘thinking’ is instead a matter of simply registering the facts of your situation, then there also need not be a significant difference in the complexity of one’s thinking between simple and complex cases. Normatively complex cases need not be descriptively more complex than simple ones, and – as Dancy also plausibly argues – responding appropriately to normatively relevant facts does not require beliefs about their normative relevance.

In any case, it is not clear that complexity – of thought or situation – is what marks the difference between reasoning and merely responding to a reason. As Broome and others have recently emphasized, it is plausible that reasoning is in a special way active. When I reason to a belief I am active in a way that I am not when my beliefs update ‘automatically’ – though such updating may still involve responding to reasons. If this is right, then the difference between responding to a reason and reasoning cannot be the difference between simplicity and complexity. A piece of deductive reasoning might

be simple – when I reason deductively from known facts, I might be responding to facts which conclusively and straightforwardly favour my response (cf. ch.4). But it might for all that be active.

The third issue concerns Dancy's way of understanding the Aristotelian thesis that reasoning can lead to action. I take it that a defence of this thesis that is worthy of the name must make it a distinctive and contentious claim. It is natural to wonder, though, whether Dancy's gloss on the Aristotelian thesis does this. As we have seen the core of the thesis, for Dancy, is the idea that actions can be appropriate responses to normatively complex situations. But this does not seem particularly contentious; those who have denied the Aristotelian thesis have not, I think, wished to deny this.

There is more though. Dancy also insists that actions can be direct responses to what is called for by one's situation. In particular, they need not be mediated by beliefs about what we have reason to do or intentions to act. This point removes one source of temptation for thinking that when you act appropriately in response to your situation, your reasoning only takes you as far as belief or intention. And Dancy has plausible things to say in response to those who insist on such mediation.

This then is a distinctive and contentious position. But it is still not clear that it gets to the heart of what might have been thought to be at issue. One way to see this is to note that even if we did think that actions could be responsive to circumstances only via such a mediating attitude, there would still seem to be a question about whether the step from this attitude to action could count as reasoning. Another is to note that, if this is all that it takes to count as reasoning, then it also immediately follows that we can reason to emotions. For one's anger, guilt, admiration, or gratitude may be an appropriate response to a normatively complex situation, one that is unmediated by a belief about how one has reason to feel or an intention to feel a certain way.

I do not mean to rule out the possibility of reasoning to emotions. But it does seem surprising that the possibility of such reasoning could be secured quite so easily. (In a passing remark, Dancy leaves it open whether we can reason to emotions (23); if the above is right, it is not clear that he can do this).

Now perhaps what Dancy's arguments show is that there can be no further issue; as it turns out, there is indeed very little difference between reasoning and other ways of responding to reasons. Perhaps any temptation to think otherwise results from focusing too much on specific forms of reasoning, which are not in fact representative. I am not sure whether this is right, partly for the reasons discussed here. At the very least though, Dancy's powerful and engaging presentation of his views in this book serves as an important challenge to anyone inclined to think that there is more to reasoning than his picture allows.<sup>1</sup>

Jonathan Way

Murphy Institute, Tulane University and University of Southampton

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Jonathan Dancy, Alex Gregory, and Benjamin Kiesewetter for helpful comments on a draft of this review.