Particularism and Individuation: Disappearing, not Varying, Features

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Particularism denies that invariant valence is always possible and that it is needed in sound moral theorising. It relies on variabilism, namely the idea that the relevant features of a given situation can alter their moral valence even across seemingly similar cases. An alternative model is defended (the “disappearing model”), in which changes in the overall relevance of complex cases are explained by re-individuation of the constituent features: certain features do not alter their relevance in consequence of contextual changes, but rather they disappear, either because they are embedded within larger complexes or are substituted by different features. This view is shown to be compatible with the main premises of variabilism and explanatorily superior to it. Nevertheless, it does not involve particularism, but rather a peculiar form of generalism.

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Particularism—at least as developed by Jonathan Dancy—draws a moral from the well-known frequent variations of our ethical reactions to similar situations, variations such as when pleasure caused by attending a musical performance is judged good, while the same pleasure if derived from a public execution, is considered bad. According to particularists, these variations should be taken at face value. This is not bad news, however. The fact that these variations occur do not diminish the soundness of our ethical thought at all. Sound ethical reasoning—particularists claim—does not require that aspects of the assessed situation invariably have the same ethical relevance. The ethical valence or polarity of the constituent features of cases and situation may vary, our reactions register these variations, but this does not threat the soundness of our moralising.¹ By contrast, generalists contend that the rationality of moral thinking can only be warranted by showing that certain features always keep their valence—at least in relevantly similar situations. Generalism claims that there must be some features with invariant valence.
Particularism reads our varying reactions using the following model:

a. **Contributory Factors Analysis:** the complex cases, to which we daily react, appear to be composed of distinct constituent features that perform a certain role in creating an overall moral significance. Torture is wrong as a whole in that it is composed by a number of constituent *wrong-making* factors—such as coercion and undeserved pain. Accordingly, our ethical reactions can be said to waver according to changes in constituent features of seemingly similar cases.

Variations in our moral thought, then, can be read according to the following picture of moral reality:

b. **Variabilism:** the *same* feature (pleasure, in the preceding example) may revert or lose its valence or polarity (i.e., its role in producing the overall relevance of the situation of which it is a constituent) due to even slight changes in context. This variation results in a variation in the overall relevance of the situation considered.

In other words, variabilism claims that those features of a situation counting in favour of, or against, action in a given case are not necessarily relevant in other—however similar—cases (Dancy, 2004: 7). Commenting on the preceding example, particularists would say that pleasure has negatively turned its moral valence in the second case, due to the presence of sadistic purposes.

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In what follows, a different picture will be presented, in which changes in our moral judgements are read as a sign of the fact that certain features that yielded goodness in the first case ("the pleasure ensuing to the musical performance") disappeared in the second case when they were substituted by different features that yielded badness ("the pleasure felt in viewing the execution").

The above model issues from a different view on how the constituent features of the situations we assess, features responsible for the situation’s relevance, may be individuated. Whereas variabilism holds that those features change their *role* as grounds for relevance but not their *individuation*, the proposed "disappearing model" combines producing relevance and individuation. Thus, it claims that when a given feature does not perform its alleged role as a ground for relevance, this is because it has disappeared from the cluster of constituent features responsible for the situation’s overall relevance. In other words, "the pleasure ensuing to the musical performance" disappears in the execution case, and it is substituted by a different item, "the pleasure felt in viewing an execution".