

DISCUSIONES

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MORAL POINT OF VIEW THEORIES*

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Moral Point of View Theories (MPVT) came into being during the hey-day of the most restrictive forms of metaethics. They were a sharp reaction against these accounts and against much of their common conception of the proper way to do moral philosophy.

The main players here were Stephen Toulmin, Kurt Baier, Kai Nielsen, Paul W. Taylor, and W.K. Frankena with A.E. Murphy, Stuart Hampshire, John Rawls (in his early writings), and Marcus Singer developing views that had some affinity with MPVTs. Trenchant critiques of it from inside analytical philosophy came from Henry D. Aiken, W.D. Falk, Alan Gewirth, R.M. Hare, John Mackie, James Thornton, and D.H. Monro.

Stephen Toulmin's *The Place of Reason in Ethics* (1950) was the trailblazing MPVT and together with Kurt Baier's *The Moral Point of View* (1958) they are the central paradigms of MPVTs. Toulmin argued that all the standard metaethical accounts collapsed before the same objection:

* Since some thirty years ago I was one of the moral point of view theorists, a view which I am more ambivalent about now than I was then, but still a view which I think it is important that it have a new hearing, I eccentrically refer to myself in the third person.

they failed to provide an account of what is a good reason in moral deliberation about what to do or be. The task of ethical theory is only incidentally to give an account of the meanings or uses of moral terms or the logical status of moral utterances. Rather its central task is to give an account of sound moral reasoning. To get a proper grip on this, he argued, we need to start in moral philosophy by asking what is the point or purpose of morality —why do societies have a morality, any morality at all, and what roles do moralities play in our lives? Working with this, we will be led to an understanding of what the moral point of view is and how it differs from other points of view, e.g., aesthetic, scientific, military or religious. When we become reasonably clear about these things, we will come to appreciate that moral reasoning is a distinct mode of reasoning and that just as there is a distinction between good and bad reasoning about matters of fact so that there is a distinction within morality between good and bad reasoning. And just as good inductive reasoning is distinct in certain important respects from good deductive reasoning, so good moral reasoning is distinct in certain important respects from both as well as from legal reasoning, purely prudential reasoning, or the reasoning deployed in military planning.

There are many modes of reasoning, each with its own reasonably distinct rationale: each with its own criteria for what is to count as good and bad reasoning within that activity (that form of life). Moral philosophers should recognize that their central task is to give a perspicuous representation of what criteria we actually use in distinguishing good and bad reasoning in our actual moral lives. What criteria do we appeal to in deciding whether something is a good reason in ethics? We can say in general that reasoning of any type has for its purpose the giving of an argument, through valid lines of reasoning, such that the conclusion

it yields is worthy of acceptance. But whether it is worthy of acceptance or not will depend on the particular kind of argument, whether moral, scientific, purely prudential, religious, for which it is designed to yield a conclusion. The criteria of valid reasoning (some formal features aside) will be of a kind that is appropriate to that distinctive mode of reasoning. We discover the criteria appropriate to a distinctive type of moral reasoning by carefully examining, in the live contexts of its use, paradigms of moral reasoning (Baier 1954, p. 122). It is there where we discover what criteria are actually employed and why. There is, on such an account, no standing outside of the mode of moral reasoning and determining what the correct criteria are.

In trying to determine what are good reasons in ethics it is necessary to determine what it is to reason from the MPV. But what (if anything) is *the* moral point of view? Why does it have the centrality given to it by MPVTs? And are they justified in giving it such centrality? Is it a reification and is there in reality just the different moral points of view of the different moralities of different societies past and present?

Baier tells us that we are adopting the moral point of view “if we regard the rules belonging to the morality of the group as designed to regulate the behaviour of people all of whom are to be treated as equally important ‘centres’ of cravings, impulses, desires, needs, aims and aspirations; as people with ends of their own which are entitled *prima facie*, to be attained” (Baier 1954, p. 123). Working with the MPV so characterized, we can, Baier has it, distinguish moral deliberation from other kinds of deliberation, moral rules from other kinds of rules, ascertain rules of differentiation and priority which will enable us to sort out in moral conflicts where the weight of reason lies and what reasons are genuinely good reasons for moral decisions and commitments. The moral point of view, according to Baier,

is the point of view “of an independent, unbiased, impartial, objective, dispassionate, disinterested observer” (Baier 1958, p. 201). A moral conviction is justified, on this account, if and only if it is a conviction that would be agreed to by all who honestly take the MPV and are clearheaded, logical and fully knowledgeable about the relevant kinds of facts. We justify in this way such different things as acting in particular ways, practices, rules and principles. Moral rules, moreover, are meant to be for the good of everyone alike and moral principles “are binding on everyone alike quite irrespective of what are the goals or purposes of the person in question” (Baier 1958, p. 195). And with this goes an egalitarianism in which, from the moral point of view, the life of everyone is to count and to count equally.

Most critics of MPVTs have taken it as evident that such a characterization of the moral point of view (whatever the author’s intentions) is not a characterization of “the moral point of view” (if there even is such a thing), but a characterization of, broadly speaking, the liberal moral point of view of modern morality (Mackie and Monro). It was not the moral point of view of Aristotle or Nietzsche or of the Greeks, the Medievals or Icelanders of the Icelandic sagas or, indeed, of many cultures past and present. And it is not the moral point of view of all conservative thinkers or postmoderns today. To claim, as Baier, Taylor and Frankena all do, that it is a necessary condition for someone’s taking the moral point of view that they have “an attitude of equal respect for all persons or a belief in their having equal intrinsic worth (or having equal basic rights)” is clear enough evidence that in speaking of “the moral point of view” they are speaking of a restricted cluster of moralities and of liberal moralities preeminently and not of all those things and only those things that are moralities (Frankena 1983, p. 60).

It could also be argued that the very idea of the MPV rests on a mistake. The MPV is reification and in reality there is no such thing but just differing, sometimes conflicting and sometimes incommensurable moral points of view. MPVTs, of course, resist this. They say that to take a PV, moral or otherwise, is to take a general approach, perspective, stance or vantage point from which to proceed in making judgements of a certain sort, e.g., moral ones, religious ones, scientific ones. It involves adopting a general outlook that is supposed to be adopted by anyone trying to reach conclusions in a certain domain. All MPVTs think there is a distinct and definable PV “which may appropriately be called the MPV, and which is a single PV and not somehow a plurality or family of them” (Frankena 1983, p. 43). But it is just here where the charge of reification has at least *prima facie* force.

The reification challenge denies that there is anything general that just is constitutive of the domain of morality. There is nothing, that is, that gives it its essence for there is no essence to be had. There is nothing general of the sort we have seen Baier attempting to set out that constitutes the domain of the moral. However universalistic his intentions, what in fact Baier is doing is to characterize what is the moral point of view for a restricted cluster of moralities and most paradigmatically for liberal morality. It is a point of view which, by the very way it is characterized, is inescapably committed to regarding the “moralities” of slave societies, of caste societies, Nietzsche’s conception of master morality and his conception of slave morality and (Nietzsche aside) the conception of morality held by Plato and Aristotle as not being opposing moralities all taking the moral point of view, but as not really being genuine moralities at all. The other MPVTs are similarly ethnocentric. But that certainly seems at least to be a *reductio* of MPVTs (Taylor 1963).

A MPVT could accept this criticism and, biting the bullet, say the MPV they seek to characterize is just the MPV of liberal societies. As John Rawls has moved to a political conception of justice which is meant only to include modern liberal societies, so MPVTs could be rationally reconstructed as attempting to give an accurate characterization of the core general features of liberal moralities. Could we not reasonably say that just as Rawls does not seek to show how his liberal principles of justice are superior to those extant in illiberal societies—say, hierarchical societies with established and mandated social estates— or even apply to such societies, so MPVT could assert that it is not concerned to so characterize the moral point of view so that it could include Medieval Icelandic moralities, moralities sanctioning ethnic cleansing or widow burning or severely fundamentalist Jewish, Christian or Islamic moralities. They are not moralities that are taking the MPV characterized as encompassing all and only liberal societies. However, as Rawls's theory, as Amartya Sen has argued, pays a price for such a restriction, similarly MPVTs would pay a price as well (Sen 1992, pp. 75–79). But it would, as such a restriction does for Rawls, also have its gains. It could spell out clearly the general features of what liberals are committed to morally, the underlying rationale for having such commitments, what good reasons in ethics are for people living in approximately liberal societies and to show how this all hangs together in a reasonable way. As Rawls tells us, what political justice looks like in liberal societies and for liberal societies, so a MPVT could tell us more generally what morality looks like in liberal societies and what its underlying rationale is for people living in such societies.

Some have thought that MPVTs do not push questions of justification deeply enough (Paton 1952). We need not only to understand what it is to reason in accordance with

the moral point of view, but we need as well to be able to justify being moral: justify, that is, the very taking of the moral point of view. Suppose we try to ask what some have thought to be the ultimate or most fundamental question of ethics, namely, “Why be moral?” “Why take the moral point of view?” or “Why, even if there is no such thing as *the* moral point of view, take *any* moral point of view at all?” MPVTs have split over this question, if indeed it is a genuine question. Toulmin, like H.A. Pritchard before him, regards it as a pseudo-question (a question which cannot be answered because nothing could logically count as an answer to it). For him “Why should we be moral?” and “Why should I be moral?” is like asking “Why are all emerald things green?” If the “should” in the two putative questions is a moral “should” then the question cannot arise for, given the very meaning of “should” here, being moral is just what we must do, if we can. If, by contrast, the “should” in these questions does not have a moral force, but is a purely prudential “should”, then again the so-called question cannot arise. We are asking for a self-interested reason for our doing what is not in our self-interest (Thornton 1964).

By contrast Baier, Frankena, Nielsen and Taylor, though they construe what is involved differently, have sought to give the putative question a construal such that “Why be moral?” or “Why take the moral point of view?” is not a pseudo-question. It is important, however, to be clear that all MPV theorists, including Toulmin, agree that the question is not a *moral* question to be answered from the moral point of view, but (if a genuine question at all) a non-moral, but still normative, question intended to put in question the very authority and invariable overridingness of morality with its alleged, everything considered, autonomy.

Baier believes this “ultimate question” of morals can be given a decisive and objective answer. He argues in some

detail that we have sound reasons for being moral and adhering to the moral point of view. Frankena and Nielsen by contrast argue that in circumstances where a person is reasonably safe, there is no *decisive* reason which would commit him or her to the moral point of view. A free rider need not be irrational or even less rational than the most rational of morally committed persons. Frankena argues that MPVTs cannot “show that it is irrational not to be moral” (Frankena 1983, p. 73). Some MPVTs, he continues, “may have established a basis for answering questions about what is morally right or good, but it still would not have given us an answer to the question of what we finally should do” (Frankena 1983, p. 73). Frankena, and Taylor as well, believe that when we press hard the why-should-I-be-moral-question, we sensibly should be taking it as the question of how one would choose to live if one were free, clear-headed, logical and had a vivid imagination and a complete knowledge of the world. Taking “how it is rational to live” in this way, Frankena remarks, “I must now admit that neither I nor any other MPV theorist can show that being moral is actually part of the rational life. . .” (Frankena 1983, p. 74).

Nielsen, by contrast, thinks that what has not been shown is that rationality *requires*, quite independently of what a person’s dispositions or attitudes happen to be, that a rational agent must be moral: be, that is, a morally good person as distinct from just being a person of good morals, something a thorough amoralist could be. He argues that philosophers such as Baier and David Gauthier have shown, hardly surprisingly, how people can without any failure in rationality be morally good persons. But what is in *accordance* with rationality is one thing, what rationality *requires* is another. Baier and, more fully than anyone else in recent history, Gauthier (who is not MPV theorist) have tried to show that a fully rational person *must* be moral. Nielsen

has argued that they fail, but, unlike Frankena, he does not think that this shows that being moral is not part of the rational life. This is so because not being *required* by rationality does not show morality is not part of the rational life, though not being *compatible* with rationality plainly would. But it has not been shown that morality is incompatible with rationality, only that it is not required by it. That we cannot show that all thoroughly intelligent and rational persons must also be morally committed persons does not show that morality is not part of a rational life. In many circumstances there is no reasonable alternative for us but to do what morality requires, but there are perhaps other circumstances, or at the very least there could be other circumstances, where, if we push our deliberations far enough, we will just have to decide what sort of persons we want to be. However, Nielsen is quick to add that this, if we look at it soberly, should not provoke any great existential anxiety, conjuring up pictures of our moral lives just being something where we are constantly faced with stark choices without any recourse to reason. In almost all circumstances in reasonably stable societies being reasonable is *both* the decent thing to do and in accordance with our rational self-interest. Sometimes in particular circumstances this is not so and there we do, if we are being guided *solely* by considerations of rationality (as if this were ever the case for anyone recognizably human), just have to decide how we are to act. And here our choices cannot but affect the kind of persons we are and aspire to be. We face this where things are coming apart in a society and we are confronted with the horrors of war and such like situations. We also face this in particular situations in stable, more or less decent societies where prudent free riding and the like would in some particular situation be to our advantage. In both situations we may, as far as reason is concerned, just have to decide what sort of persons we want to be. The

morally wrong course here, unfortunately, need not be the irrational course. But we should not go from the fact that this is *sometimes* the case to the belief that this is *always* or even *usually* the case and to extravagantly conclude from this false generalization that we are mired in the arbitrary (Falk 1986, pp. 256–260).

It is important to distinguish between the question “Why should I be moral?” and the question “Why should we be moral?” In the above discussion we have been concerned principally with the first question. Baier, in an extended discussion (Baier 1958), has discussed these questions and even if, as Frankena and Nielsen believe, he has not given a satisfactory answer to the question “Why *I* should be moral?” it is still plausible to believe that he has given a satisfactory answer in the tradition of Hobbes to the question “Why should *we* be moral?” or “Why should we have an institution of morality in the world in which we live?” The answer is Hobbes’s answer: otherwise life would be nasty, brutish and short. Even if determined free riders need not be irrational or even rationally at fault, this does not destabilize, let alone refute, the Hobbesian answer Baier gives to why *we* should be moral (Baier 1958, pp. 257–320). Baier remarks “moralities are systems of principles whose acceptance by everyone as overruling the dictates of self-interest is in the interest of everyone alike, though following the rules of a morality is not of course identical with following self-interest” (Baier 1958, p. 314). This is right on the mark and is fully integrated into taking the MPV. The moral point of view and the point of view of rational self-interest are distinct points of view and, though an individual’s rational self-interest may for her on occasion override her commitment to morality, it is in the interest of everyone alike that the moral point of view prevail in society.

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